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Rediscovering Sponge Activities: A Strategic Approach to Time on Task

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"The key to a successful sponge . . . is its integration into an overall standards-based lesson."

Good things, when short, are twice as good
(Baltasar Gracian)

INTRODUCTION

Sponge activities are one of several traditional strategies used in foreign language classrooms to increase student time on task and to provide the instructor with a point of departure for linking language and culture. We here offer a set of four interconnected examples, using the geography of Argentina, as a model for integrating the sponge into a larger framework.

As teachers, we often want to share our experience of that 'teachable moment' with others. In the communicative second language classroom, we are reminded that each moment should be an important time to reinforce acquired knowledge and provide students with further learning opportunities. Based upon the authors' 20 years of classroom observations of both pre-service educators and experienced language teachers, time is essential, and the instructor must make each moment count. While teachable moments can be of both long and short duration, the purpose of this article is to rediscover the importance of using sponge activities to soak up those moments of transition or warm-up, and place them into the context of a (larger) lesson or unit.

As do Lubiner and Lubiner (1990), we define sponges as a technique that augments the activities we devise to teach 'the main point' of the lesson. Their mnemonic device serves to remind us of the characteristics of an effective sponge:

- short, intense, vivid activities providing
- practice of learned material students can do
- on their own which accommodates
- new arrivals or early finishers by keeping the
- group involved and by being designed to
- elicit an immediate response.¹

While we agree, we go a step further, and take the sponge beyond this, to focus instead on a conceptual framework that is 'main-point connected'. The key to a successful sponge, we suggest, is its integration

into an overall standards-based lesson. As it maintains its strength as a force for review, the sponge should also provide a point of departure for focused elaboration of new materials or an expansion of the information at hand, in order to connect language-learning aspects with content-based, cultural information. In this article, we employ a thematic unit on Argentina as our framework, and thus utilize an adaptable, country-based concept that is appropriate for a first-year Spanish (or other language) course. We offer four sponge activities to illustrate our integrative view; each stems from a simple cultural artifact, the Argentine peso of the 1980s – a currency no longer in use whose value for the classroom is still a strong currency for negotiation – of meaning.

ACTIVITY 1: UN PESO ARGENTINO DE LA DÉCADA DE LOS 80

Materials: transparency of Argentine one peso note (see Appendix A). Procedure: the instructor shows the Argentine peso on a transparency. Students are given one minute to list the items as requested (Figure 1). The class then reviews their responses as a group.

Figure 1.

¿Qué asocias con este dibujo? ¡Escribe tus asociaciones en las dos categorías!

La naturaleza	Actividades / Deportes
1. el cielo	1. jugar al golf
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Reflection: the objective of this sponge is to assist students in reviewing vocabulary through the peso

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Figure 2.

¿Qué hay en el billete de un peso argentino?	¿Qué hay en ambos billetes?	¿Qué hay en el billete de cinco pesos argentinos?
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note. We point out that not all currencies are the same shape, color, or size. This artifact is useful in that it provides students with insight into one aspect of Argentine topography. The note could also stimulate a teacher-led discussion on stereotypes of what a Latin American nation looks like, or could serve as a contrast to a photograph found in a textbook. The following goals or targeted areas of the U.S. National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFL)² are addressed: 1.2 Interpretive Communication; 2.2 Products of Culture; 3.1 Making Connections; 4.2 Culture Comparisons.

ACTIVITY 2: CONTRASTES EN EL PAISAJE ARGENTINO

As shown in the next two activities, the instructor can expand the scope of the sponge by using the same peso to provide students with practice in comparing and contrasting (Activity 2) and as the basis for a brief written assignment (Activity 3).

Materials: handouts of two different denominations of the Argentine peso (see appendices A and B). Procedure: the instructor distributes handouts of two different denominations of the Argentine peso. Students are given two minutes to compare and contrast the features seen in the two pictures (Figure 2), using either a Venn diagram or a three column chart.

Reflection: the use of the peso notes allows students to compare and contrast two different regions in Argentina, the Andean region of Bariloche (one peso note) with the cityscape of Rosario (five peso note). This sponge also serves to introduce further discussion and elaboration of the cultural, social, and historical place of the two areas in Argentina today. The following NSFL targeted areas are addressed: 1.2 Interpretive Communication; 4.2 Culture Comparisons.

ACTIVITY 3: SALUDOS DESDE BARILOCHE

Materials: transparency of Argentine one peso note (see Appendix A). Procedure: students write a brief postcard (5-7 sentences) describing their weekend activities in Bariloche (Figure 3). Students then share postcards with one another for reading practice, then present to the class, which votes on the most popular activities mentioned in the postcard as something that they would have done as well (as a means of graphing responses).

Figure 3.

¡Hola! ¡Estoy bien! ¡Bariloche es lindo!
¡Un abrazo!

Reflection: the Argentine peso serves to stimulate a written response in the form of a brief postcard, and provides students with the opportunity to practice written descriptions in Spanish utilizing vocabulary that they know. The nature of the assignment encourages students to link language and culture to produce an authentic message. NSFL areas addressed are: 1.2 Interpretive Communication; 1.3 Presentational Communication; 2.2 Products of Culture.

ACTIVITY 4: BARILOCHE Y ROSARIO

Materials: transparency of partial sentences. Procedure: the instructor shows the partial sentences on a transparency (Figure 4). Students are given one minute to complete the sentences.

Figure 4.

Completa las oraciones de una forma lógica.

1. El lago se llama _____ . (Llao-Llao)
2. El distrito o la ciudad se llama San _____ de Bariloche. (Carlos)
3. En el lago se puede _____ . (nadar)
4. Hay muchas _____ en esta sección del país. (montañas)
5. El _____ es un deporte popular en el invierno en Argentina. (esquiar)
6. En la Plaza hay un monumento a la _____ de la Nación. (bandera)
7. La plaza está rodeada por edificios _____ . (altos)
8. La gente prefiere pasear por la plaza porque es como un _____ . (parque)
9. En las plazas de los países latinoamericanos, se ve _____. (árboles, vendedores, estudiantes, etc.)
10. Rosario es la capital de la provincia de _____. (Santa Fe)

“the assignment encourages students to link language and culture to produce an authentic message.”

Reflection: the objective of this sponge is to provide students with a brief review of the cultural information presented in related previous activities on Bariloche and Rosario. While this sponge is a rather traditional form of getting students to provide an oral or written response, its use assists the instructor in recycling and reintroducing the vocabulary from the previous parts of the unit's activities. Targeted areas of the NSFL that are addressed include: 2.1 Practices of Culture; 2.2 Products of Culture; 4.2 Culture Comparisons.

therefore, serve as an integrating force within the framework of a unit – be it on grammar or on geography. Together with other strategic approaches, such as a series of information-gap activities, the students take both content and form-focused learning in stride, and are able to articulate their responses to demonstrate their accountability for 'time on task'. In a future article we will examine the use of the same thematic unit as a means of developing information-gap exercises.

CONCLUSION

Sponge activities offer the foreign language instructor a strategic approach to increasing time on task. Such activities encourage active student participation in a broad range of communicative modes: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Sponges can also be used in the foreign language classroom to link language and culture, and

NOTES

- 1 Lubiner, E., and Lubiner, A. (1990) 'Sponge activities for the Foreign Language Classroom', *Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Newsletter*, 28, 8-10 (p. 8)
- 2 National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999) *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century*. Yonkers, New York (available through ACTFL, 6 Executive Blvd., Yonkers, NY 10701-6801 or www.actfl.org.)

"Such activities encourage active student participation in a broad range of communicative modes."

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B

