

Offering Challenges: A Motivating Teaching Strategy

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I'm sure that it would be hard to find a teacher who has not heard of the self-fulfilling prophecy or the Pygmalion effect. According to this prophecy, in the words of Rosenthal and Jacobson, changes in teachers' expectations bring about changes in students' achievement.¹

I'm equally certain that every one of us has gone through something similar to this; in our classes we have pupils who are not doing very well, who progressively get behind the rest of the group. We might remember our reaction. On occasions we might indeed have thrown in the towel, thinking that everything in our power has been tried and, therefore, it's now up to the students to make the appropriate effort to improve. On other occasions, however, one might believe that the students were capable of overcoming the difficulty. Accordingly, encouragements like "Keep trying, you can do it!" or "Excellent, well done!" was offered. When, toward the end of the course, students find their effort rewarded with success, as teachers we can feel rewarded ourselves. In this light, why don't we apply the positive Pygmalion effect to the way we conduct our classes? Should we not convey to students that they are capable of doing more than they think they can do? The question is, what is the best way to do this? My answer would be to offer challenges providing the students with a sense of achievement. When a person overcomes a difficulty, he or she becomes aware of their abilities. That, in turn, becomes a source of motivation, as against risking boredom by familiar routine.

Language classes, Spanish, in my case, should be something alive and aimed not only to acquire knowledge easily forgotten after the exams, but also to complete development of

the pupils. My persistent goal is not that each pupil says "today I have learned..." at the end of the class, but says "today I have been able to..." And I include here grammar classes as well.²

In order to achieve all this, one possibility could be to use the exercises or activities found in textbooks in a more creative way. For example, we can ask the students working in pairs to appropriately amplify given dialogs or sentences provided for structure practice.

You: Where is Alice?

Your partner: I think she's in her bedroom.

You: _____

Another option would be for the students to look for connections among different short exercises and then create a new text reworking what appears in the book and adding discursive markers.

Why not say that each student chooses his favorite word and then the class creates a text that includes all of them? In this way, we use not only the vocabulary but also the discursive and textual coherence connectors. And, of course, the imagination to create a logical text. I do it orally and in the end they are proud of their effort.

There are many possibilities for those who wish to vary the routine practices, for those who apply Plutarch's observation: *The mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting.*

¹ Rosenthal, Robert and Jacobson, Leonore. *Pygmalion in the classroom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Inc. 1968.

² To this respect consult my recent lecture at *Instituto Cervantes Tokio*.

<http://conchamorenogarcia.es/2016/06/09/gramatica-e-interaccion-una-relacion-compatible/>