

Six Activities for Generating Enthusiasm in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

Motivating students to use acquired target language skills to listen, speak, read, and write is key to foreign language instruction. With these goals in mind, it is helpful to apply everyday activities within the classroom setting to inspire and instruct students. Utilizing the tools of creativity, humor, friendly competition, and tie-in to familiar knowledge of everyday items (i.e. songs, school supplies, body parts, etc.), teachers can create an energized atmosphere conducive to language acquisition and retention. Below are six classroom activities designed to generate enthusiasm and create desired environments. These activities can be easily adapted to fit a wide array of academic settings from elementary students through adult language learners.

Creating a Friendly Monster

- **Focus:** listen, comprehend, and apply
- **Unit:** body parts, numbers, positioning/spatial

The first activity comes after a brief introduction of the body parts using the target language. Here the teacher describes a monster from head to toe in a systematic fashion. Ideally, students stand at the blackboard (recommended if space allows) with chalk or sit at their desks with paper and writing utensils available. Starting with the head, the teacher describes a monster with multiple body parts (i.e. three noses, for arms, two hearts one of which is in his stomach, etc.) by reading a script slowly and repeatedly. It is important to repeat each descriptor (i.e. the monster had four arms with eight fingers on each hand) at least twice to ensure students fully grasp the meaning. Once a reasonable amount of time has been provided, then the rest of the monster is described in similar fashion.

Once students have drawn their monster, then recognition is given to each student. Depending on the number of students, the teacher may have to creatively invent sufficient awards to ensure all monsters win in at least one category. Categories can include funniest looking monster, monster most likely to be afraid of its own reflection, monster most in need of vitamins to fend off anemia, movie star monster, overly cheerful monster, so on and so forth. Finally, the students name their monster and the activity ends. The monsters can remain on the board until the end for students to admire each other's work until the end of class.

Exotic Foods

- **Focus:** conversation (speaking and listening) and some writing
- **Unit:** foods, colors, numbers, animals, temperatures, etc.

This two part activity can be done over the course of two classes or incorporated with homework. The theme revolves around foods using the target language. Once the students have been acquainted with the names of foods, then they create a

menu (breakfast, lunch or dinner) with options. The menu should include drinks, deserts, creative dishes (octopus with spinach sauce over frozen red rice). In fact, students are encouraged to be as creative as possible using colors, food types, numbers, invented dish names (i.e. sardine lasagna), temperatures, and any other descriptors. The menu should include ridiculous prizes such as \$17 for three burned eggs over sardines served on a blueberry bagel.

Once the menus have been created, then students role play using the menus. For example, students can work in pairs, in groups of three where one person is the waiter and the others customers, or before the class in a setting that is likely to be entertaining and instructional. Individual teachers should determine which setting will work best for each class.

People, Clothes, Colors

- **Focus:** creative expression, writing, speaking, and listening
- **Unit:** clothes, colors, typical activities

For this activity, students need white bond paper (ideally larger than 8.5 x 11) and a wide variety of markers or crayons. The exercise focuses on a scene or setting (i.e. a bowling game, soccer game, a classroom, a bus stop, etc.). The teacher has the option to let students select a specific scene or assign different scenes to students. Some students may be creative and use an unexpected scene (encouraged) while others may prefer to be given a setting. Here the students draw the participants (animals are also an option since they can be clothes too) using clothing items recently learned. The clothes (scarves, socks, winter coats, shoes, swimming suit, etc.) are colored in using a variety of shades and colors.

Once the students have finished drawing, then they should write a brief description of what is happening in the scene. This needs to include who is wearing what (include colors in the text). Once the text is complete, students present their drawing using the target language to a partner, small group, or even to the class. Encourage creativity (within the norms of classroom acceptable material) and humor. For example, the scene can depict a day at the beach using cats and dogs instead of people. In this case, a dog may be surfing with sunglasses and a swimming suit, while two cats are wearing a suit and drinking lemonade.

Scavenger Hunt

- **Focus:** team work, conversation (speaking and listening), some writing
- **Unit:** classroom items, descriptive words, spatial (i.e. near the door or next to the table)

This activity generates a lot of enthusiasm and encourages team work in the target language. The teacher selects approximately 25 different items to be used in the scavenger hunt. These items are cleverly placed throughout the classroom (teacher designates off-limit places such as desk drawers or private property) prior to class. The activity begins with a quick explanation of what is expected of the students. Then, the teacher hands each team (two or three students per team is ideal) a list of ten items to seek. However, each team receives a list that is slightly different from the other teams (this explains the need for 25 items).

Initially, the students use dictionaries or other sources to determine what each item on the list. Then the fun really begins as teams seek to locate these items quickly. Located items are collected by the teams and brought to their home base (desks). The final phase involves writing a basic sentence (in the target language) using each item on the list (ten sentences in this case). These sentences should briefly describe the item or perhaps disclose where it was located (i.e. the pencil is yellow or the paper clip was near the blackboard). Again, only the target language is used throughout the activity.

Music Mania

- **Focus:** listening, reading, word association
- **Unit:** varies depending on song selection

Here the students work on their listening and reading skills. In some cases, singing is also involved. This activity lasts

approximately 10-15 minutes and is quite relaxing to the students. The teacher selects a song tailored to the age and level of the students. Naturally, the song is in the target language. For example, use the song Happy Birthday for little ones or a more contemporary song for older students. The song should contain ideas, words, themes, or concepts currently being studied in class.

The activity begins when the song is played twice for the students. After the second time, the words are placed on the overhead and each student receives a copy of the words. Now the students hear the song and follow along by reading the words. In certain classes the students may be encouraged to sing along as well (more typical of younger classes). Finally, the students are asked to underline unfamiliar words. This leads to a discussion involving the use of contextual clues to assign meaning to unfamiliar words. As an option, fairly advanced classes may be asked to identify verbs in tenses currently being studied (conditional, past, future, etc.) or other grammar related topics.

Simon Says

- **Focus:** listen, apply instructions, and eventually lead the activity
- **Unit:** body parts, classroom items, movement, spatial

Simon says is a terrific game ideally used towards the end of the class session. In fact, this game can be used to encourage students to apply themselves during class with the knowledge that this fun game lurks around the corner.

Initially, the teacher leads the class. Subsequently, students take turns playing the role of Simon. This game is effective if played periodically and if everyone gets a chance to lead the class at some point.

The rules are very simple. Using only the target language, the leader has everyone stand and await instructions. The commands may be as simple as Simon says touch your nose, Simon says clap twice, Simon says raise your right leg and count to ten, and so on. The trick is that only commands preceded by the phrase "Simon Says" are to be followed. Anyone who performs an action that was not preceded by "Simon Says" (i.e. touch your ears or do two jumping jacks) sits and is out of the game. Eventually, only a few students remain standing and reducing the number of players may be quite challenging.

This game captivates everyone and produces a lot of laughter and humor. Even students who are eliminated from competition want follow along to see how their classmates perform. Leaders are encouraged to be creative (within established limits) when issuing instructions. The use of movements, incorporation of body parts, and application of understood instructions make this fun game a valuable learning tool.