

Inquiring Minds column: Who teaches the teachers? I do!

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Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante (center), professor of linguistics and Spanish, works with Rocio Valenca and Iris Cores, graduate students at a university in Mexico. They are visiting USU to observe language and linguistics classes.

By Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante

Countless young people throughout the world sit in foreign-language classes for years, only to find out in the end that they've acquired no relevant communication skills for the world outside the classroom.

To change this, we must change the teachers – even before they begin their careers. To accomplish this goal of better prepared teachers, my work focuses on two key questions:

1. What does it mean to develop communication in the language classroom?
2. How can language teachers apply their understanding of the concept of communication in their classroom approach so that their students will be equipped with the necessary language skills for the demands of the 21st century?

These two questions have guided my career in teacher preparation. My goal is to ensure that foreign-language teachers focus on the development of linguistic skills for communicative purposes, rather than on the traditional approach of memorizing vocabulary lists and grammar rules.

What I call “a communicative approach to language teaching” promotes students’ abilities to fulfill real-life tasks and use their new language to navigate the professional, academic, and personal needs our time requires.

Preparing language teachers for the profession has opened countless doors not only for me but for my former students, who now hold teaching positions in high schools throughout the nation and in Dual Language Immersion programs in Utah. Other graduates have pursued teaching positions abroad or have continued their own education in graduate programs.

I've shared my expertise in *how to teach teachers* in institutions across the United States as well as Australia and China and, more recently, in Mexico and Brazil with the support of a Fulbright Scholar grant.

We've achieved significant milestones. I co-directed the design and implementation of a Fulbright grant that brought scholars from Iraq to the USU campus for a 10-week program in 2013. Last year, as a Fulbright Scholar, I was able to spend a semester at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, Mexico. There, I focused on the use of the communicative approach as I worked with undergraduate and graduate students preparing to teach English and Spanish.

While in Mexico, I was able to establish a co-teaching model for undergraduates in their student-teaching practices. I also traveled to Brazil to deliver seminars at the Graduate Studies Program in Education at Faculdade Unilasalle as a recipient of a Fulbright Western Hemisphere Regional Travel Grant.

Implementing the communicative-language teaching philosophy in teacher-preparation programs has come with a series of challenges, from which I continue to learn. In China, for example, during classes with university-level English teachers and graduate students, some pulled me aside to tell me that in China, the student's role was to listen and take notes. Trying to find a happy medium, I adjusted the workshops while still highlighting the communicative approach.

In Mexico, some regular English teachers expressed concern to the university administrators about the use

of the communicative approach in their English classes. Even in Cache Valley, I have found some resistance. However, I have also found numerous teachers who want to learn more, who are very enthusiastic, and who welcome communication in their language classrooms.

Watching novice teachers become effective instructors and witnessing language students perform real-life tasks fills me with excitement. It has been very rewarding to be a part of this profession, focused on communication that opens doors to 21st-century opportunities for our language students.

New challenges will surely arise as we continue our work, but I am convinced that future language teachers will be prepared to face them. Then, students who take years of foreign-language instruction will be able to use their new target language to fulfill their personal, academic, and professional objectives.

Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante is a professor in Spanish and Linguistics. She is the 2016-2017 recipient of the Fulbright Scholar Program's Garcia Robles Scholarship for global teachers of English as a foreign language. She taught in Mexico from January through May 2017.

For more about Dr. Spicer-Escalante's work, see these news articles:

["Professor Wins Fulbright for her Work in Training Future Language Teachers" \(Aug. 25, 2016\)](#)

["Professor Guides Teachers to Success in Utah's Dual Language-Immersion Program" \(Dec. 7, 2017\)](#)

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