

Teaching English in Andorra

*Sara Fowler**

Centre de Formació Professional d'Andorra, Andorra

Sara Fowler is a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Aixovall, Andorra. After completing her MA TESOL at Hawaii Pacific University, Sara began a ten-month term teaching at a vocational school called The Professional Training Center of Andorra (Centre de Formació Professional d'Andorra) starting in September 2015. This essay was written partway through her experience as a reflection on what she has learned so far. You can read more about her teaching and traveling stories at her blog, <https://serendipitouslysara.wordpress.com>.

Centre de Formació Professional d'Andorra

My school, commonly referred to as FP, is a vocational school located in Aixovall, Andorra. Students come from all of Andorra's seven parishes, as well as some from a nearby town just over the Spanish border. The students' first language is generally Catalan, but quite a number of them speak French, Spanish, or Portuguese at home. Students in Andorra are required to attend school until they are about 16, at which point they can choose whether to a) attend "Batxillerat," a two-year college prep school (similar to sixth form in England), and then attend university, b) attend a vocational school, or c) enter the workforce. The students at FP have all completed their obligatory education and are pursuing a certification in a specific career track. Most of them are between the ages of 16 and 21, but there are some students who are older. Some of the students have prior work experience or formerly attended Batxillerat; some of them have plans to pursue a university degree later. In addition to studying "technical" subjects in their chosen career tracks, all students are required to complete general education courses, including English. With the exception of language classes (English, Spanish, and French), all classes are conducted in the official language of Andorra, Catalan.

Show 'Em Who's Boss

Possibly one of the hardest things as a new teacher is getting past the anxious feeling of being a new teacher. However, it is very important to do just that because your students can smell fear (this might sound familiar to dog and horse owners?). I learned this the hard way during one of my first weeks of teaching, when the other English teacher was out sick and I had to combine two classes. I found myself facing an enormous group of 17-year-old boys whose names I didn't even know yet. I was terrified going in, and they knew it. After trying to be nice, after a bit of pleading, after making threats to move them or kick them out of class, after briefly chastising them in Spanish, and after another teacher came in to please ask them to be quiet...nothing changed. Toward the end of class, one of the boys said, "It's because you smile too much. You have to scare them." They only started to listen when, in the last ten minutes of class, I kicked a student out of the classroom and told him he would receive a zero for the day.



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* Email: sfowler3@my.hpu.edu. Address: TESOL Program, MP 441, 1188 Fort Street Mall, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA.

Since then, I've moved talkative students to the front row, confiscated cell phones, given out zeros, and singled out students who are obviously not listening. My students protest, but these things help. They still think I'm nice, but they also know that I'm serious. As I tell them, "If you're desperate to talk, you can go explain to the principal why you're getting a zero for the day."

If you have a student who is a class clown, use that to your advantage. Class clowns love to come up and act things out or show off. Take that student who won't be quiet and make them the center of attention to your advantage!

Do Less

Learning to be a teacher, I heard many times that as the teacher, I should actually not be the one doing the majority of the work. I knew that meant I should not do all the talking or lecture for 50 minutes, but what I'm learning on the job is how many other things I can delegate to students, and how doing so actually makes lessons run more smoothly.

I cannot tell you how many minutes of my life have been lost standing at the front of the classroom, listening to the awkward silence in response to one question: "Would someone like to volunteer?" Suddenly my students, who normally can't stop talking, don't want to say a word. Funny, isn't it? There's a simple solution to this.

Sometimes, a student will volunteer at the beginning – this is great. If not, pick someone. Then, when that student finishes their turn, tell them to pick the next victim/volunteer. This serves a few purposes: it keeps your students on high alert, it means everyone has to go eventually, and it lets you off the hook. Letting students call each other out for not paying attention or being prepared means they all try harder, and you don't even have to look mean!

The same thing goes for making up questions or challenges. When playing a game with my students, sometimes I struggle to come up with the next item on the spot or I worry about picking something too hard. Letting the student who won the last round come up with the new challenge is always easier and usually pretty entertaining, because they get a kick out of trying to stump each other. My students never want to show me what they know, but as soon as I ask them to stump each other, they can't wait to come up with more and more obscure vocabulary words and challenges.

Give the people what they want

Teenagers can be the world's least enthusiastic group of people. Seriously, when I asked a student of mine what he likes on our first day, he said, "I don't know. Things." Then he proceeded to list a hundred things he hates. Most of them would list English in that category. So how can you make them like English class?

For the most part, this means making English class as fun and relevant as possible. My job is to teach English Communication, meaning I am not focusing on teaching grammar. My role is to get the kids talking and to expose them to a native speaker. I want to make it fun. I try to do this both in my private lessons and my regular classes. The biggest way I do this is to let the students make their own choices whenever possible. If you assign your class to write a paragraph introducing a person, let them choose the person. (Half of one class chose professional wrestler/actor John Cena.) If you tell kids to write a dialogue for a role play, let them pick silly characters or make jokes. Sure, they wouldn't make that joke in a real life scenario, but they know that, and it's better to have a class laughing in English than complaining in Catalan. If they whip out their iPhones to film their classmates' antics, at least you know they're having fun.

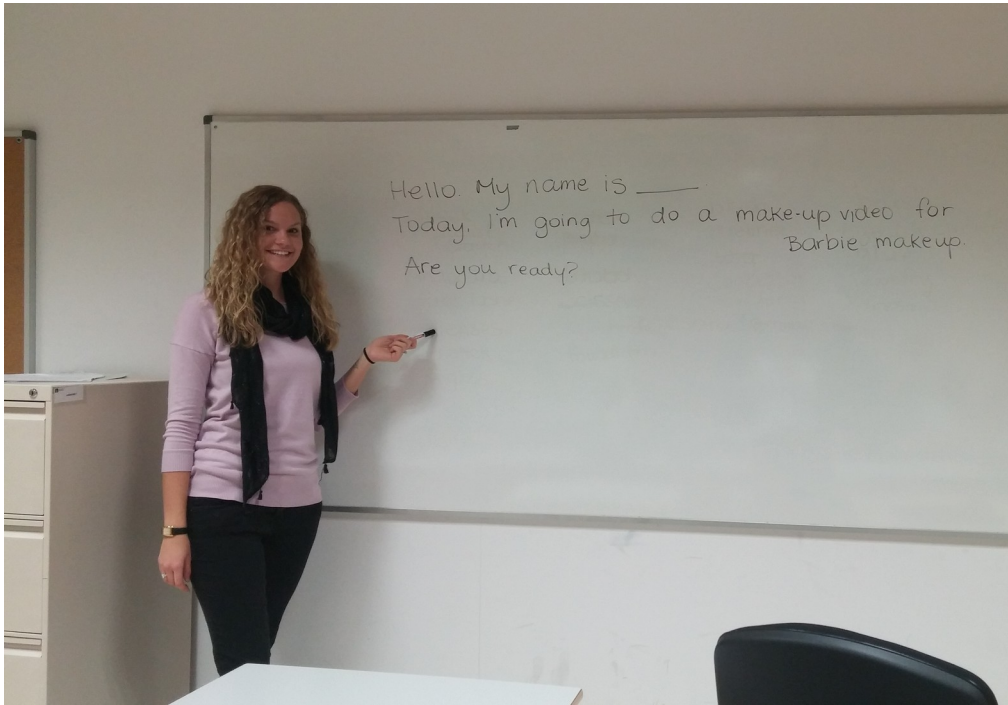


Photo: Sara Fowler in her class in Andorra

Lie to them

I lied to my students at the beginning of the year about speaking anything other than English. While that meant that a lot of them were astounded by how ignorant I was (most Andorrans speak three or four languages more or less fluently), it also meant they had no choice but to speak English to me, so they had to try. After two months here, most have figured out that I speak Spanish and they know I understand them in Catalan, too. The big reveal is always a lot of fun: “Wait, you’ve understood us the whole time? Ohhhh noooo.” Now I’m an evil genius instead of an ignorant American.

Most of the time, my students are good about using English with me. There’s a genuine effort to address me in English, although sometimes they get so frustrated or confused with a complex question that they ask in Catalan or Spanish or get a friend to help. I always reply in English. A very few times, I have had to resort to asking a question or giving a direction in Spanish because I have an entire class of blank stares after five attempts to rephrase. Sometimes, when they ask what a word in English means, I give them a definition in English, followed by a direct translation to make sure things are clear. It’s great to have this option, because it can minimize frustration and speed things up, but I don’t want to rely too heavily on it. When I see my students out in the “real world,” which happens all the time because Andorra is a country the size of a postage stamp, they speak English to me.

However, the biggest way I rely on the L1 in the classroom is sort of invisible, at least to my students. What I mean is, knowing how my students’ native languages work and sound, and being fluent in at least one of them, I have a pretty good idea of how my students think about language. This means that I know which structures they are used to and which ones will totally confuse them, I can anticipate what they will think they’re hearing or seeing based on their language’s phonetic

structure and spelling, and I know which English words have cognates they'll latch onto quickly and which ones will be completely indecipherable to them. So even when I am speaking 100% in English, I use that knowledge to adjust HOW I speak English – how I structure my sentences, which words I use, how I rephrase things when there's confusion. In addition, when my students speak, a lot of the mistakes they make are things I totally understand, and I know what they are trying to say, because I know they are making them because they are translating directly. Knowing the L1 helps because I spend a lot less time trying to figure out what my students meant to say. Knowing your students' first language is by no means necessary, but if you DO know it, it can certainly save you a lot of headaches and confusion, *even if you never actually speak a word of it to your students.*

Conclusion

Not even a quarter of the way through my Fulbright term, I have already learned too many lessons to possibly share them all here. One wonderful thing about teaching is that we can learn from the good days *and* the bad days, so I am excited to see what adventures and challenges the next eight months bring. I look forward to sharing whatever wisdom I find along the way in a future piece, so stay tuned!