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## Active learning techniques to teach Spanish vocabulary

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## Active learning techniques to teach Spanish vocabulary

### Abstract

The journal article, "Pictures, John Travolta moves, and Sign Language: Active Learning Techniques to Teach Spanish Vocabulary," discusses the experiences 8th grade Spanish students had while using three instructional practices for learning vocabulary. Active learning strategies are a popular method for educators, especially those at the middle level. Educators can get their students active in learning by doing many different things. Pictures, "silly signs," and sign language were used to engage my students in learning fourteen Spanish vocabulary words.

Three groups of Spanish exploratory classes were the subjects in this study. Each of the three groups received instruction using one of the three methods (pictures, "silly signs," or sign language). The results of the three methods were compared to determine if one was more successful than another. After using one of the active learning techniques, each group was assessed through a post-test, and an attitude survey was administered. Although no significant difference among the student groups was noted in test scores, the attitudes of the students did vary among the groups.

ACTIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUES TO TEACH SPANISH VOCABULARY

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By

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## **Abstract**

The journal article, "Pictures, John Travolta moves, and Sign Language: Active Learning Techniques to Teach Spanish Vocabulary," discusses the experiences 8<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish students had while using three instructional practices for learning vocabulary. Active learning strategies are a popular method for educators, especially those at the middle level. Educators can get their students active in learning by doing many different things. Pictures, "silly signs," and sign language were used to engage my students in learning fourteen Spanish vocabulary words. Three groups of Spanish exploratory classes were the subjects in this study. Each of the three groups received instruction using one of the three methods (pictures, "silly signs," or sign language). The results of the three methods were compared to determine if one was more successful than another. After using one of the active learning techniques, each group was assessed through a post-test, and an attitude survey was administered. Although no significant difference among the student groups was noted in test scores, the attitudes of the students did vary among the groups.

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## **Active Learning Techniques to Teach Spanish Vocabulary**

### **Chapter 1**

Educators are always searching for more ways to engage their students and enhance their students' learning. As a middle school Spanish exploratory teacher, I am constantly thinking of new gimmicks to help my students learn and remember the Spanish language. "We are competing for students' minds every minute of class—particularly in high school and middle school. We need to make class so interesting that they will want to listen and understand just to know what is going on" (Ray & Seely, 2001, p.11). Some of the practice tools used in my classroom involved creating and singing songs and rhymes, drawing visuals to help make connections to the language, playing a variety of games and role play situations, and doing gestures and movement activities. All have had a positive effect on student learning. Using gestures and movements often took the form of silly, made-up movements, which I call "silly signs." Many times the students helped create the fun actions to remember vocabulary.

The benefits of allowing the students to use gestures and movements in my class became noticeable. Whenever we learned new vocabulary, we tried to create a gesture to help us remember the meaning of the words. Students were more attentive and involved in learning the Spanish language when we incorporated fun and silly actions to help them remember the vocabulary words. I began thinking; "If silly made-up actions work to help Spanish students practice and remember vocabulary, can I use this same idea to teach them using something far more useful in the long-term, such as sign language?" Instead

of learning a silly action for a vocabulary word, which only has a use as a memory aid in my classroom, maybe my students could learn the American Sign Language sign for the word, something much more useful for communication in their lives. What began as a fun way to help the students remember vocabulary, led me to look at four theories and practices to help me to answer questions about: physical development of adolescents, brain research, and the teaching and learning technique called Total Physical Response, and American Sign Language.

I decided to try three techniques for learning vocabulary: pictures, "silly signs," and American Sign Language. I wanted to share my observations, student pre and post-test scores, and attitudes of my students to determine which of the three techniques (pictures, "silly signs," or sign language) worked best to learn vocabulary. I also wanted to examine how students with different learning needs reacted to the three vocabulary techniques. I decided the best way to share my own experiences and the experiences of my students was to write an article for other middle level or language educators. I wanted the journal article to be of practical use and reader friendly so other educators could benefit from my findings in their classrooms.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

I wanted to compare students' scores on a pre and post-test when using three learning techniques: the picture method, "silly signs," and sign language. I was also curious if students of different learning needs would score differently with the three vocabulary techniques. In addition to scores, I wanted to review the attitudes of my students about learning the vocabulary.

#### **Learning Sign Language**

When I decided I wanted to investigate using sign language in my Spanish classroom, I realized I needed to learn sign language myself to be able to do this. This led me to an elementary teacher in my school who I knew used sign language with his first graders. He was able to share his positive experiences with using sign language and to give me resources to help me learn sign language for myself. I used his sign language picture dictionary to get some background and found it not to be difficult. I practiced and checked back with the elementary teacher to be sure I was signing correctly.

#### **My Exploratory Classes**

The exploratory program was organized in five hexes, with each hex being seven weeks long, throughout the school year. Students were randomly placed in each class in the hex. At the end of each seven week period, or hex, the students rotated to a new exploratory class, Spanish being one of them. The three groups of students who participated in this project were in three separate exploratory classes. Group one participated during the third hex of the school year, group two during the fourth hex, and

group three during the fifth hex. Each hex consisted of thirteen students with inclusion of all students, including those requiring special educational services.

### **Determining What Vocabulary to Use**

Next, I needed to choose what vocabulary words I would use in this study with my students. I had previously taught a short unit with fourteen Spanish verbs, so I thought these would be well suited since there were thirteen students in my class. Thirteen students would be responsible for creating a picture, “silly sign,” or demonstrating the American Sign Language movement for one verb, and I would use the remaining verb as an example. Since verbs show action, the vocabulary words were easy to create and to perform actions for them. Also, these fourteen words worked well because they were something I already taught in my eighth grade Spanish curriculum, so I did not need to invent a new unit for this study. Shown below is the list of verbs used during this project:

#### **AR Verbs List**

<u>Spanish</u>	<u>English</u>
Hablar	to talk
Visitar	to visit
Jugar	to play sports
Trabajar	to work
Nadar	to swim
Bailar	to dance
Viajar	to travel
Ganar	to earn
Montar	to ride
Dibujar	to draw
Tocar	to play an instrument
Escuchar	to listen
Cantar	to sing
Estudiar	to study

## **Identifying Students For Specific Comparison**

Since I wanted to compare students with a variety of learning needs, I decided to use the test scores from the vocabulary section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills to identify which students I would use for this comparison. I had an aide help me locate the test scores by looking at the individual student folders and recording the scores for me on a chart. For the purpose of this study, one student from each of the three hexes was labeled as above average (AA), average (A), or below average (BA) based on their vocabulary scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). The test scores on the ITBS represent Iowa grade equivalencies (IGE) (which rates students compared to other students in Iowa), and national grade equivalencies (NGE) (which rate students compared to other students across the nation). I chose the IGE scores to use for my student comparison. A score of 13+ on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills represents the highest mark, as this score relates to achievement beyond the twelfth grade. A score of 8 on the Iowa Basic Skills shows that a student is at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. A score of 6 rates a student to be two grade equivalencies below the eighth grade. For this study, students with 13+ scores were labeled as above average, students with 8.0-8.4 were labeled as average, and students with scores of 6.2-6.7 were labeled as below average. I identified one student from each hex who fit the categories. Therefore, nine students' scores were used as comparisons in this study.

## **Students For General Analysis**

Surveys and comments from all thirty-nine students from all three hexes were used in the study to gain feedback on the students' attitudes toward the practice strategy used in their hex. In addition to the specific comparison of the nine students with

different learning needs, I wanted to do a general analysis of all the students' test scores. Further analysis of individual scores is discussed in Chapter Five in the Summary and Conclusions section.

### **Getting the Sign Language Hex Ready**

The sign language group needed my guidance more than the picture or "silly sign" groups because of the fact that the other two groups were strictly created by the students themselves; there were no right or wrong ways to draw the pictures or make up the "silly signs." However, the sign language group needed to correctly learn the sign for their verb. Since I used the signing picture dictionary to learn the signs, I thought the students could learn through the dictionary as well. However, I had one dictionary and thirteen students needing to use it. To solve this problem, I copied each picture of the sign and written description for the fourteen verbs we were using (see Appendix A). I handed each sign description to the students; I was not sure how they would react. I was pleased to find most of the students were able to do the sign based on the description. Some students received a little help from me or other students.

### **Discovering Students' Attitudes Towards Learning Vocabulary**

At the beginning of each hex, I asked the students open-ended questions regarding their attitudes toward learning vocabulary. I wanted to know their thoughts on how they learned vocabulary best and in what classes they were required to learn vocabulary. As a follow-up to the post-test, I asked each hex of students questions regarding how the practice method helped them to learn the vocabulary. I wanted to know if one of the methods based on my students' responses, should be something I would pursue with students in the future.

## Sharing My Experience

At the end of my third hex, I needed to determine how to share my experiences and findings with other educators, particular those who teach adolescents or Spanish. A journal article in a “reader friendly” formatted journal seemed like the most practical choice. When deciding which journal to submit my article, I looked for ones that reached middle level educators. *Middle School Journal* published by The National Middle School Association fit my needs (see Appendix B). According to their editorial guidelines, the journal seeks articles which promote middle level education and relate to the developmental needs of adolescents. The article needed to be between 10 to 20 double-spaced pages.

In the article, I explain how I set up three groups to experiment with three different vocabulary learning techniques (pictures, “silly sign,” and sign language). I researched current issues related to adolescent development, brain research, Total Physical Response, and sign language. I discuss my experiences and the test scores and personal responses from my students. I share my ideas and recommendations for further research and how I intend to proceed with future classes.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Literature Review**

Active learning strategies are commonly used by educators. Engaging learners to become active participants, rather than passive observers is not a new practice. Getting students moving has great benefits to learning. Movement increases heart rate and circulation, which often increase performance (Tomporowski & Ellis, 1986). Using the body to learn adds another dimension to the learning process. "Active learning is not just for physical education teachers, that notion is outdated. Active learning is for educators who understand the science behind learning" (Jensen, 2000, p. 37).

#### **Adolescent Development**

Many middle level educators know too well from classroom experiences adolescents like to be active. Students at the middle level physiologically require movement due to their rapid growth and body change. Met states:

Middle school students are characterized by a number of developmental change-physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. These changes and the feelings they bring about have implications for foreign language instruction. Great care should be exercised in activities that require students to generate physical descriptions or comparisons (Met, 1996, p. 4).

Schurr, Thomason & Thompson (1996) describe adolescents as "Bundles of energy one minute and lethargic creatures the next, young adolescents have a seemingly contradictory amount of energy, but their need to move about, change positions, and basically wiggle is standard behavior" (p. 18). "The need for movement necessitates activities that physically engage students" (Met, 1996, p. 4). Due to the physical

development of adolescent students, using movement in the classroom setting becomes an effective practice for meeting the needs of students in a middle school.

### **Brain Research**

Movement is not only important to the physical development of adolescents, but also useful to engage the brain. Much research has been conducted and continues to be done on how the brain learns. Caine and Caine (1997) comment that treating the body, brain, and mind as a partnership or team in the learning process creates a foundation for learning to take place. Caine and Caine (1997) state:

We have seen that the mind can be affected by what is done to or with the brain and the body. We now find that, in addition, the mind can also influence the body and the brain. That is, all three-body, brain, and mind- totally interpenetrate and influence each other. Thus, incorporating the body into the learning process enhances the mind (p. 90).

Howard Gardner writes:

I believe in action and activity. The brain learns best and retains most when the organism is actively involved in exploring physical sites and materials and asking questions to which it actually craves answers. Merely passive experiences tend to attenuate and have little lasting impact (Gardner, 1999, p. 82).

Educators are presented with the daily challenge to engage their students in learning. The advantages of active learning include the following: longer lasting and better remembered material, more fun, age appropriate, intelligence independent, and reaching more kinds of learners (Jensen, 2000).

## **Total Physical Response**

Total Physical Response (TPR) is an approach developed by Asher (1996) to learn language. The teacher gives a command, and the students respond to the command through full body action (Anderson-Curtain & Pesola, 1988). Students are not required to speak the language in this approach until they are ready. For example, the teacher may ask the student to scratch her nose. The student does not need to speak to show comprehension. The physical movement of scratching her nose allows the teacher to assess understanding. The difficulty increases to doing multiple tasks and answering questions.

Total Physical Response works for all ability levels of students. Reluctant students may not be speaking the language, but they are actively participating in the language by performing the commands. Thus, they are making connections in their mind to the language in a comfortable developmental stage. Teachers can use TPR to assess students' comprehension of the language without the learners speaking. Educators have practiced variations from the original TPR. Hand Total Physical Response is a hand sign or gesture performed by the student to respond to a command given by the teacher (Ray & Seely, 2001). Total Physical Response can also be used in story telling. Similar to the other TPR strategies, the teacher tells a story in the target language while the learners respond with actions. "If our students use their muscles to learn language, they will remember better what we teach" (Ray & Seely, 2001, p. 11). "Another reason that TPR produces long-term recall, Asher suggests, is that in the initial learning, there was keen activation of kinesthetic sensory system or muscle learning" (Ray & Seely, 2001, p. 10).



## **Sign Language**

Studies using sign language to enhance language development in young learners have found some interesting results. Daniels (1994) found incorporating American Sign Language into pre-kindergarten students' curriculum had positive effects on their language development. The students who were taught sign language had an increased vocabulary of almost triple that of the control group. Daniels (1994) explains "The experience in these classes concurrently delivers the communication in visual, aural, and physical modes. The combination of signals creates the probability of a multiple imprint on the learner's memory" (p. 204). Since no verbal skills are needed to use sign, even younger learners, such as toddlers, can communicate through sign. "Using sign language literally allows a child to feel language" (Daniels, 1994, p. 202). Crawford (2001) recognizes children learning sign language use the multiple intelligences. Children see, hear, say, and use kinetic movement to learn words.

## **Summary**

Actively involving students in their learning provides benefits to the learner. Theories in adolescent development and brain research acknowledge the importance of movement and adolescents need activity to meet their physical growth. Caine and Caine (1997) discuss the mind and body working together as a unit to promote learning. Practices in such areas as TPR and sign language instruction accommodate students with the ability to move. Both practices require students to interpret language and respond through actions. Teaching with students actively engaged promotes learning.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Journal Article**

#### **Pictures, John Travolta Moves, and Sign Language:**

##### **Using Active Learning to Teach Spanish**

Peer in the doorway of the classroom at the end of the hall and observe eighth grade boys and girls giggling as they are mimicking John Travolta's classic disco dance while others are silently rockin' out on air guitars. A person might ask, "What class is this? How much learning is taking place in here?" The answers to these questions are, "This is Spanish class. They are learning a lot." A person new to my school building may mistake my Spanish classroom for drama class due to my students' acting and moving about the room.

Educators are always searching for more ways to engage their students and enhance their student's learning. As a middle school Spanish exploratory teacher, I am constantly thinking of new gimmicks to help my students learn and remember the Spanish language. "We are competing for students' minds every minute of class—particularly in high school and middle school. We need to make class so interesting that they will want to listen and understand just to know what is going on" (Ray & Seely, 2001, p. 11). Some of the practice tools used in my classroom involve creating and singing songs and rhymes, drawing visuals to help make connections to the language, playing a variety of games and role play situations, and doing gestures and movement activities. All have had a positive effect on student learning. Using gestures and

movements often took the form of silly, made up movements, which I call “silly signs.” Most often, the students created the fun actions to remember vocabulary.

The benefits of allowing the students to use gestures and movements in my class became noticeable. Students were more attentive and involved in learning the Spanish language when we incorporated fun and silly actions to help them remember the vocabulary words. “Merely passive experiences tend to attenuate and have little lasting impact” (Gardner, 1999, p. 82).

I witnessed some amazing things with “silly signs.” For example, one student decided to copy “John Travolta's Stayin' Alive” disco dance to remember the verb, *bailar*, which means to dance. The dance caught on with the rest of the class, so whenever the class used *bailar* students did some sort of disco movement, even if they were seated. When it came time for our test, I noticed several students were using our “made-up” actions to help remember the words. I observed them at their seats doing the silly actions to help trigger the vocabulary from their memory. My curiosity was sparked when I noticed the actions were beneficial to my students.

I began thinking, “If silly made-up actions work to help Spanish students practice and remember vocabulary, can I use this same idea to teach them using something far more useful in the long-term, such as American Sign Language (ASL)?” Instead of learning a silly action for a vocabulary word, which only has a use as a memory aid in my classroom, maybe my students could learn the (ASL) for the word, something much more useful for communication in their lives. I decided to try three techniques of learning vocabulary: pictures, “silly signs,” and American Sign Language. I wanted to share my observations, student quiz scores, attitudes of my students, and determine which of the

three techniques (pictures, “silly signs,” or sign language) worked best to learn vocabulary.

### **My Teaching Setting**

I studied three eighth grade groups that the principal assigned to me. These groups were in three separate exploratory classes. At the end of each seven weeks, or hex, the students rotated to a new exploratory class, Spanish being one of them. The groups made up three separate exploratory classes. Group one participated during the third hex of the school year, group two during the fourth hex, and group three during the fifth hex. Each hex consisted of thirteen students with inclusion of all students including those requiring special educational services. The eighth grade students lived in a small town in rural Iowa, were predominately Caucasian, and were from a working class background.

### **Identifying Students For Specific Comparison**

Since I wanted to compare students with a variety of learning needs, I decided to use the test scores from the vocabulary section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills to identify which students I would use for this comparison. I had an aide help me locate the test scores by looking at the individual student folders and recording the scores for me on a chart. For the purpose of this study, one student from each of the three hexes was labeled as above average (AA), average (A), or below average (BA) based on their vocabulary scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). The test scores on the ITBS represent Iowa grade equivalent (IGE) which rate students compared to other students in Iowa, and National grade equivalent (NGE) which rate students compared to other students across the nation. I chose the IGE scores to use for my student comparison. A

score of 13+ on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills represents the highest mark, as this score relates to achievement beyond the twelfth grade. A score of 8 on the Iowa Basic Skills shows that a student has achieved at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. A score of 6 rates a student to be two grades behind the eighth grade. For this study, students with 13+ scores were labeled as above average, students with 8.0-8.4 were labeled as average, and students with scores of 6.2-6.7 were labeled as below average. I identified one student from each hex to fit the categories. Therefore, nine students' scores were used to compare the results of the three learning techniques (see Appendix A).

### **General Analysis of Students**

In addition to the nine specific students with varying learning needs, I also reviewed the scores of the general population of students participating in the study. Surveys and comments from all students were used to gain feedback on the students' attitudes toward learning vocabulary, and their thoughts about the active learning strategy used in their hex.

### **Getting Organized**

For this study, I chose Hex 3 to receive a more traditional form of practicing the vocabulary words by making colored posters with the Spanish word and an illustration to show the word meaning. I chose Hex 4 to create "silly signs" for the vocabulary words. Hex 5 practiced by using the American Sign Language for the vocabulary words. All three groups received the same treatment except for the learning strategy for the vocabulary.

For all three hexes, I introduced the fourteen vocabulary words in the same way by saying the Spanish word with its English meaning and the students repeated it after

me. The hexes were given the same list of vocabulary words and were randomly assigned one of the words from the list to develop and present a poster, “silly sign,” or sign language, to the class. The same pre and post tests were administered containing the fourteen Spanish vocabulary words. The tests were in the form of matching the English word to the coordinating Spanish word. Each group was given the same survey at the beginning and end of the study to assess their attitudes toward learning vocabulary and the method of learning the vocabulary in their hex. All three groups were given the same crossword puzzle to complete as a review assignment before the post-test. Identical games were played for review purposes in each hex (see Appendix B).

### **Description of Review Games**

To review the vocabulary words, each group played the same games. The first game played was “Memory.” This game consisted of fourteen game cards with the English word and Spanish word on separate cards. The cards are mixed and placed face down. Students flip cards to find the two cards which match. The game is like the traditional Memory matching game.

The second review game played was “Word Tag.” The tag game consisted of students standing in a circle holding a vocabulary card, so all players can see the word. One student stands in the middle of the circle; this person is considered “it.” A student from the outer circle begins the game by saying the meaning of another student’s card. The student in the middle attempts to tag the person’s card before they can say another word. If the student is tagged before he or she can say another word, he or she becomes “it” and replaces the person in the center of the circle.

The third review game the students played is called the “Board Race.” In this game, the students divide into two teams. One person from each team stands in front of the board. I say a vocabulary word and the two students compete to be the first to respond in the manner in which we reviewed our words. For example, Hex 3 responded by writing the Spanish word on the board. Hex 4 responded by being the first to do the correct “silly sign” for the word, and Hex 5 used the correct American Sign Language for the word.

### **Developing the Signs**

One of the important components of using the “silly signs” as an instructional tool is to have the students develop them. The students in Hex 4 invented an action, or “silly sign,” to show the meaning of their assigned word. I modeled a “silly sign” for the students by using the one of the listed words, *nadar* which means to swim. I acted like I was struggling to swim doing a doggie paddle-like swim and said the word in Spanish as I acted. My example gave the students an idea of what was expected. They also saw being silly and unusual in creating their action was encouraged.

The students in Hex 5 were given a card taken from an American Sign Language picture dictionary. The card showed a visual and written description of how to perform the sign. I modeled the sign for *nadar* much in the same way I did the “silly sign,” but instead used the American Sign Language.

I realized some students had more of a knack for creating a “silly sign” or learning the American Sign Language than others. I walked around the room and provided assistance to anyone who needed it. Since the class contained only thirteen students it was easy for me to make contact with each student to either help them or check their understanding of

their sign. As I walked around the room, I noticed many students showing their sign to the students seated near them. I encouraged this as I thought it to be beneficial for the students to get all the practice they could. Plus, the students were enjoying themselves and were quite excited to be moving around. The advantages of active learning included the following: longer lasting and better remembered material, more fun, and reaching more kinds of learners (Jensen, 2000).

### **Assessment**

On the fourth day of the unit, based on my observations, I knew the students were ready for the test. We had reviewed the fourteen words each day through posters, “silly signs,” or sign language; as well as games, crossword puzzle worksheets, and partner practice. I assessed student knowledge periodically on all of the days during the study through simple questioning and observation.

### **Learning Needs Comparison**

The scores of the nine students identified by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills Vocabulary test were used as a specific comparison in the study. I chose to do this comparison to see the effects of the three vocabulary techniques on students with different learning needs. The students were labeled as AA for above average earning 13+ on the vocabulary test, A for average with test score of 8-8.4, or BA for below average for scores of 6.2-6.7. These scores reflect the Iowa grade level equivalence. Students scoring 13+ were considered to be above the twelfth grade in knowledge of vocabulary. Students with scores of 8 were considered at the eighth grade level, and students with scores of 6 were considered two grades below average. Since there were 14 verbs, the students’ scores on the pre and post tests were based on 14 possible points.



When I looked at the post-tests of the nine students with different learning needs, I was pleased to see the success of the students through their post-test scores. All students improved; many earning perfect scores. However, I was unable to see a pattern in any one learning method. All groups showed improvement from pre to post-test scores. Plus, all students regardless of their Iowa Test vocabulary score improved either missing 1 or missing zero on the post-test. No significant difference between students or methods was noted through the post-test (see Appendix A).

### **General Analysis of Student Average Scores**

When I analyzed the general population of thirty-nine total students in this study the difference in scores was small. The pretest scores for all three groups were basically the same. The average score in Hex 3 (picture group) was 2.5. The average score for Hex 4 (“silly signs” group) was 2.7, and the average score of Hex 3 (American Sign Language group) was 2.3 (see Appendix C). I feel the scores were similar because all students took the pretest without any prior knowledge of the vocabulary words regardless of the method of instruction. However, when I averaged the scores of the post-tests I found a slight difference. The picture group had the lowest average of 11.8. The “silly signs” group had the highest average with 13.6. The sign language group averaged 12.8 on the post-test. The students in the “silly signs” group scored 15% higher than the picture group and 6% higher than the sign language group. The students in the sign language group scored 8% higher than the picture group. This data shows there is some benefit to using “silly signs” and sign language to learn Spanish vocabulary.

I reviewed the students’ surveys and considered their observable attitudes in class. Students in the “silly signs” and sign language group were more actively involved in

class as their actions were practiced again and again. The picture group was less mobile in practicing the vocabulary because they had no actions, only pictures to refer to. The “silly sign” group may have scored higher than the sign language group because all of the actions directly related to or looked like the meaning of the vocabulary, unlike some of the sign language actions.

### **Student Comments**

I was able to get a feel for the students’ attitudes toward and perceptions about learning vocabulary and particularly the method of learning vocabulary in their Spanish hex through reading their responses to open-ended questions from their surveys. Surprisingly, students did not think they learned vocabulary in all classes. I asked students to list the classes in which they learn vocabulary words. Every student answered with reading and spelling class. However, some of the students listed those two classes only. Science, social studies, math, English, and Spanish were commonly listed. Many students left out health, art, computer, agriculture, and speech. This was interesting to me because students are learning vocabulary in some classes without even recognizing it.

When asked what the student does in class to learn vocabulary, most students responded with doing worksheets and taking notes. Some other responses included looking up the words in the dictionary and studying with a classmate. Few students mentioned playing review games to practice vocabulary.

The survey also asked what the student does on his or her own outside of class to practice vocabulary. Students’ answers varied. Some common answers were they study by themselves or with someone, make up rhymes, draw pictures, and do review worksheets. Some students responded by saying they did nothing outside of class. It was

interesting to see many students do more active types of review tactics to learn the vocabulary on their own. This suggests, when students have a choice of how to learn vocabulary, they tend to choose to review actively versus the more passive ways to review that were being done in some of their classes.

After the post-test a second survey was administered to determine the students' feelings about the instructional methods used in their hex. Every student from the poster group explained the picture helped them remember the vocabulary words; the answers varied from helped a lot to a little. One student commented, "The posters were how I got the vocabulary memorized."

Students in Hex 4 using "silly signs" had positive experiences to share. All thirteen students answered that the "silly signs" helped them remember the words. One boy stated, "The actions were just what the meaning was and they were kind of funny." Another student who receives special educational services said, "I was working on my test, and I did the actions in my head." During the test I observed some students doing actions silently at their seat. It looked as if the action triggered a light bulb in the students' brains to remember the meaning of the Spanish word.

Students in Hex 5 used sign language to practice the words. All of the students in this group, but two, reported the sign helped them learn the vocabulary. One of the students who indicated the signs did not help, commented the signs would have helped him if he were in class, as he was absent for much of the study. The other student who did not think the signs helped her mentioned she already learned the words before the signs were presented in class. Some other remarks by the students mentioned the signs that looked close to the meaning helped more than the signs that did not really look like

However, if my purpose is to provide opportunities for my students to learn a third language, that being American Sign Language, using sign in Spanish class has its benefits. The signs that looked like the meaning of the vocabulary word had similar results to the “silly signs.” For example, the sign for *bailar*, which means “to dance,” looks like two feet dancing. This similarity made the connection easier to recognize and the students picked up this sign quickly. The signs that did not look like the word meaning were more difficult to learn because the visual connection was not present. Therefore, more practice with these signs was needed.

Although many signs in American Sign Language are similar to the meaning of the word, some are very different so those may take longer to learn. Though it takes a little more time to learn them, the future benefits to the students may outweigh the time. Knowing American Sign Language along with English and Spanish makes students more able to communicate with people with auditory challenges. Essentially, the students become efficient in three languages (English, Spanish, and American Sign Language). I plan to continue using both “silly signs” and sign language. I will choose sign language over “silly sign” when the sign looks similar to the meaning.

During the study, the students and I had a great deal of fun. Each group was able to show their creative side through pictures or actions. The students were very active and enjoyed learning the verbs. It was hard to believe students were having fun learning verbs. Often times, students turn their nose up when they hear the word verb. As a teacher in the room, it was rewarding for me to see my students so involved in their learning. Students were up in front of the class being risk takers performing the actions,

or showing off their pictures. I was pleased with the amount of support the students showed toward each other, encouraging reluctant students to join in the fun.

## **Appendix A**

### **Student Scores for Learning Needs Comparison**

### Learning Needs Comparison Chart

Study Label	Student ID	ITBS	Pretest	Post-test
Above Average	3A	13+	2	12
Above Average	4A	13+	3	14
Above Average	5A	13+	3	14
Average	3F	8.0	4	14
Average	4I	8.0	3	14
Average	5G	8.4	2	14
Below Average	3I	6.7	2	14
Below Average	4J	6.2	5	14
Below Average	5K	6.5	2	12

## **Appendix B**

### **Daily Calendar of Events During the Study**



## Calendar

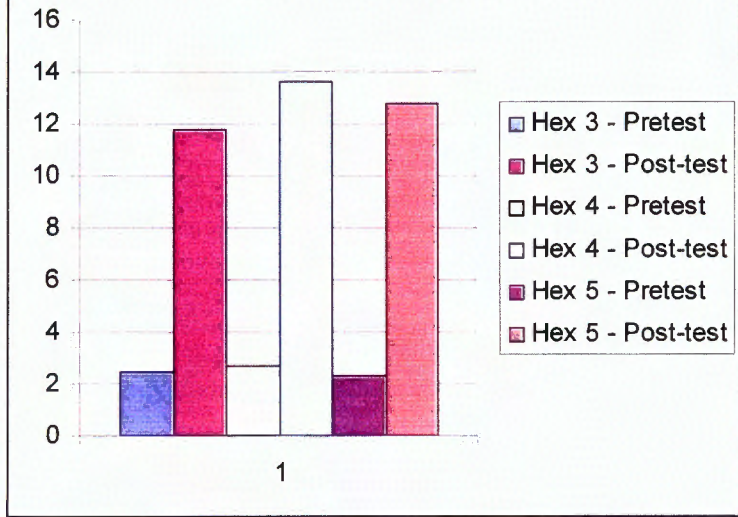
The calendar shown below gives a description of what each hex group did on each day of the study.

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
<b>Hex 3</b>	Survey Pretest Introduced vocabulary Vocabulary list handed out Assigned word to make poster	Presented poster to class Verbally practiced words as a class Played memory game	Reviewed words with partner Played tag review game Crossword puzzle	Played board race game Post-test Survey
<b>Hex 4</b>	Survey Pretest Introduced vocabulary Vocabulary list handed out Assigned word to make up silly sign	Presented silly sign to class Verbally practiced words as a class Played memory game	Reviewed words with partner using silly signs Played tag review game Crossword puzzle	Played board race game Post-test Survey
<b>Hex 5</b>	Survey Pretest Introduced vocabulary Vocabulary list handed out Assigned word to make up silly sign	Presented sign to class Verbally practiced words as a class Played memory game	Reviewed words with partner using sign Played tag review game Crossword puzzle	Played board race game Post-test Survey

## **Appendix C**

### **General Population Pretest and Post-test Average Scores**

### General Population Pretest and Post-test Average Scores



## **Appendix D**

### **General Population Scores Chart**

## General Population Scores

### Hex 3 Individual Scores

Student ID	ITBS	Pretest	Post-test
3A	13+	2	12
3B	13+	5	14
3C	10.3	2	14
3D	9.6	2	11
3E	9.3	1	6
3F	8	4	14
3G	7	3	14
3H	6.7	3	14
3I	6.7	2	14
3J	6.7	2	14
3K	5.5	3	12
3L	3.7	2	5
3M	3.7	3	10

### Hex 4 Individual Scores

Student ID	ITBS	Pretest	Post-test
4A	13+	3	14
4B	10.3	2	14
4C	10.3	2	14
4D	9.9	3	14
4E	9.3	3	14
4F	9.3	3	14
4G	8.7	0	14
4H	8.4	4	14
4I	8.0	3	14
4J	6.2	5	14
4K	5.5	3	14
4L	4.1	3	14
4M	3.3	1	9

### Hex 5 Individual Scores

Student ID	ITBS	Pretest	Post-test
5A	13+	3	14
5B	11.7	1	14
5C	10.3	3	14
5D	9.6	0	14
5E	9.3	3	14
5F	8.7	2	10
5G	8.4	2	14
5H	8.4	2	14
5I	7.5	4	14
5J	7.0	5	14
5K	6.5	2	12
5L	5.8	0	8
5M	4.5	1	11

## **Appendix E**

### **Survey #1**

**Survey #1**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

- 1. How do you learn vocabulary?**
- 2. In what classes do you learn vocabulary? List them.**
- 3. What things do you do in class to learn vocabulary?**
- 4. What things do you do outside of class to learn vocabulary?**

**Appendix F**

**Survey #2**



Survey #2

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Did the poster, silly signs, sign language help you learn the verbs? Explain.

2. What other things did we do in class or outside of class helped you learn the verbs?

3. List any other things you could have done to better learn the verbs?

### Article References

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## Chapter 5

### Summary and Conclusions

#### Summary of Journal Article

The journal article entitled, "Pictures, John Travolta Moves, and Sign Language: Using Active Learning to Teach Spanish," intended for submission to *Middle School Journal* explains my classroom experiences using methods that promote active involvement from students in learning Spanish vocabulary. Students participated in one of three methods of learning (pictures, "silly signs", or sign language) Spanish vocabulary words. Each group used one of the kinesthetic methods and was assessed through pre and post tests, along with attitude and perception surveys at the beginning and end of the study. Although no significant difference in learning technique was noted in test scores, the attitudes of the students did vary between the groups. The positive attitudes and increased classroom involvement of the groups using "silly signs," and sign language was evident. In the future I need to identify what purpose is most important for my students. Is it to learn the Spanish vocabulary the fastest? Then I will use "silly signs." Is it to learn American Sign Language along with Spanish? Then I will use that technique. These answers will effect how I will teach this unit in the future. All three methods proved successful to student learning, therefore I will use them again in my classroom in some capacity.

#### Conclusions

The scores of the nine students identified by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills Vocabulary test were used as a specific comparison in the study. I chose to do this

comparison to see the effects of the three vocabulary techniques on students with different learning needs. The students were labeled as AA for above average earning 13+ on the vocabulary test, A for average with test score of 8-8.4, or BA for below average for scores of 6.2-6.7. These scores reflect the Iowa grade level equivalence. Students scoring 13+ were considered to be above the twelfth grade in knowledge of vocabulary. Students with scores of 8 were considered at the eighth grade level, and students with scores of 6 were considered two grades below average. Since there were 14 verbs, the students' scores on the pre and post tests were based on 14 possible points.

When I looked at the post-tests of the nine students in the different learning needs study, I was pleased to see the success of the students through their post-test scores. All students improved with many earning perfect scores. However, I was unable to see a pattern in any one learning method. All groups showed improvement from pre to post-test scores. Plus, all students, regardless of their Iowa Test vocabulary score, improved either missing 1 or missing zero on the post-test. No significant difference between students or methods was noted through the data analysis.

When I analyzed the general population of thirty-nine total students in this study the difference in scores was small. The pretest scores for all three groups were basically the same. The average score in Hex 3 (picture group) was 2.5. The average score for Hex 4 ("silly signs" group) was 2.7, and the average score of Hex 3 (sign language group) was 2.3. I feel the scores were similar because all students took the pretest without any prior knowledge to the vocabulary words regardless of the method of instruction. However, when I averaged the scores of the post-tests I found a slight difference. The picture group had the lowest average of 11.8. The "silly sign" group had

the highest average with 13.6. The sign language group averaged 12.8 on the post-test. The students in the “silly sign” group scored 15% higher than the picture group and 6% higher than the sign language group. The students in the sign language group scored 8% higher than the picture group. This data shows there is some benefit to using “silly sign” and sign language to learn Spanish vocabulary.

I recognized the post-test scores to reflect the feedback from the students’ surveys and their observable attitudes in class. Students in the “silly signs” and sign language group were more actively involved in class as their actions were practiced again and again. The picture group was less mobile in practicing the vocabulary because they had no actions, only pictures to refer to. The “silly signs” group may have scored higher than the sign language group because all of the actions directly related to or looked like the meaning of the vocabulary, unlike some of the sign language actions.

The data collected through the survey highlighted some differences in attitudes and perceptions among the students. Although most students in all three groups noticed their learning method helped them to learn the vocabulary, the most positive and significant response came from Hex 4, using “silly signs.” I believe this positive response was due to the fact the “silly signs” directly showed the meaning of the word, were funny and highly creative to do, and were created by the students.

In addition, through my observations while teaching the three groups, I noticed the class attitude to be more positive and participation to be more evident in the “silly sign” and sign language hexes. I believe this is because these two groups were more active than the picture group. Students were physically moving around doing the “silly signs” or sign language, and the picture group had visuals to look at, but no movement.

I believe all three methods of learning vocabulary were beneficial due to the students being able to make connections either through pictures or some kind of movement. I found most students prefer to use active means to learn vocabulary based on their survey answers of how they learn vocabulary outside of class. The most common answers about how students learn vocabulary were to study with someone, to make up rhymes, and to draw pictures. All of these are review activities that require more than just filling in a worksheet or looking words up in the dictionary.

There are endless ways to engage students in their learning. I feel my students and I benefited from this study. I have seen first hand how the attitudes of students are affected by them taking ownership in their learning and being actively involved in class. In the future, I plan to use pictures as visual aids along with one of the signing methods to teach vocabulary. I plan to continue using both "silly signs" and sign language. I will choose sign language over "silly signs" when the sign looks similar to the meaning.

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### **Additional Resources**

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Lipton, G. (1992). Practical handbook to elementary foreign language programs. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Schinke-Llano, L. (1985). Foreign language in the elementary school: State of the art. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

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**Appendix A**

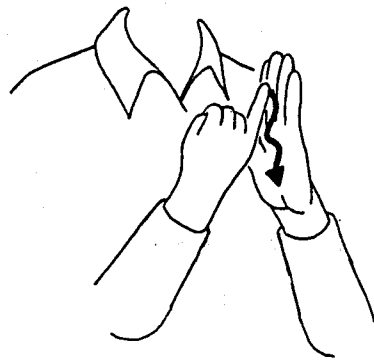
**The 14 Sign Language Picture Dictionary Verbs**

## Sign Language Picture Dictionary



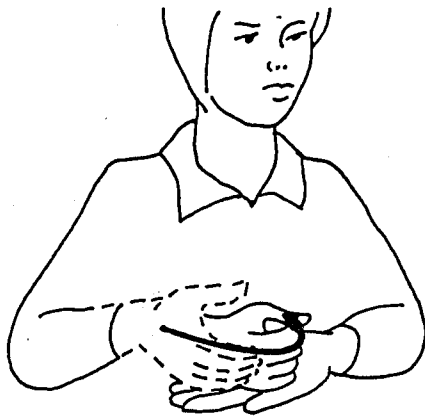
### **dance**

LH open B palm up, tips out.  
Sweep right V over left palm  
several times.



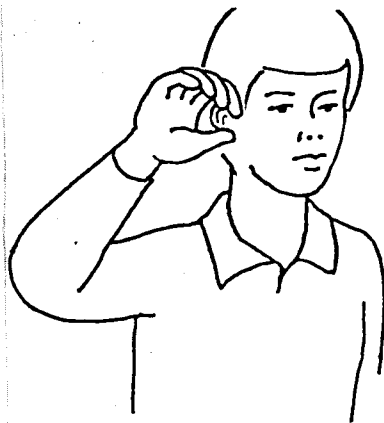
### **draw**

LH open B palm right, tips up.  
Draw right little finger down left  
palm in wavy motion.



### **earn**

LH open B palm up. Pass right C  
over left palm and close into S  
shape.



### **listen**

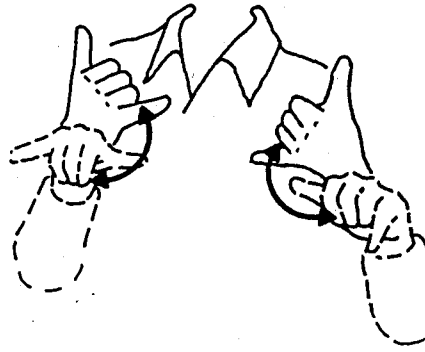
Cup hand over ear.

## Sign Language Picture Dictionary



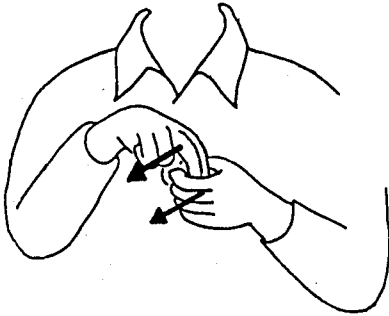
### music

LH open B palm up, tips slightly right. Swing right M back and forth over left palm and forearm without touching.



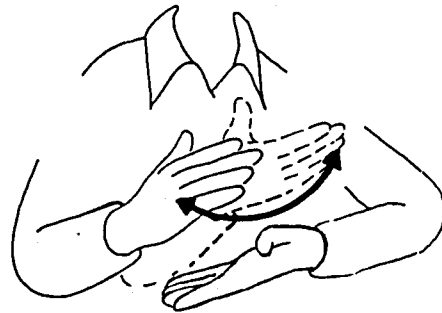
### play

Y shape both hands, palms in. Simultaneously twist back and forth.



### ride

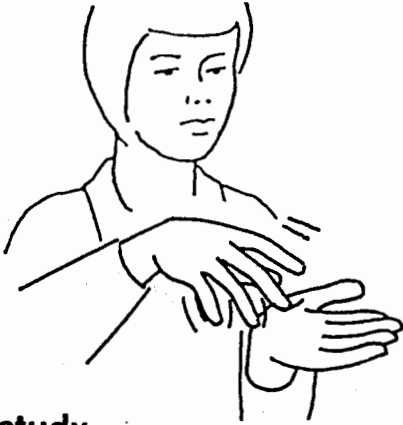
C shape LH palm right. Hook fingers of right H on left thumb and move both hands forward.



### sing

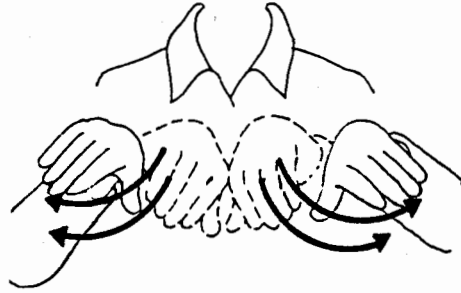
LH open B palm up. Swing fingers of right open B above left forearm and palm in rhythmic motion.

## Sign Language Picture Dictionary



### study

LH open B palm up, tips out.  
Wiggle fingertips of RH, palm  
down, above left palm.



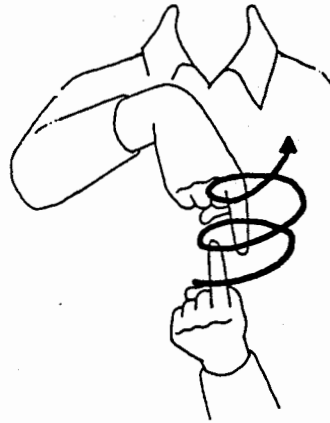
### swim

Hands together palms down. Move  
forward and out (miming breast-  
stroke).



### talk

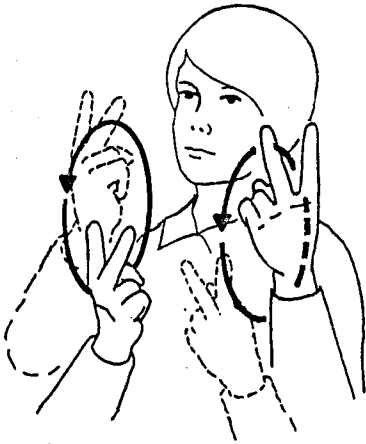
Place index tips on mouth, alter-  
nately moving back and forth.



### travel

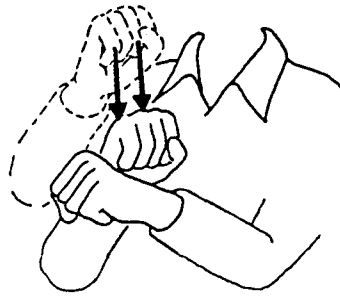
One shape both hands, palms in,  
right tip down. Circle around one  
another while spiraling upward.

## Sign Language Picture Dictionary



### visit

V shape both hands, palms in, tips up. Rotate away from body alternately.



### work

S shape both hands, palms down. Hit back of left S with right S. Repeat motion.

**Appendix B**

**Individual Student Scores Sorted by Post-test**

## Student Scores

Student ID	ITBS	Pre	Post
3B	13+	5	14
5A	13+	3	14
4A	13+	3	14
5B	11.7	1	14
5C	10.3	3	14
3C	10.3	2	14
4B	10.3	2	14
4C	10.3	2	14
4D	9.9	3	14
5D	9.6	0	14
5E	9.3	3	14
4E	9.3	3	14
4F	9.3	3	14
4G	8.7	0	14
4H	8.4	4	14
5G	8.4	2	14
5H	8.4	2	14
3F	8	4	14
4I	8	3	14
5I	7.5	4	14
5J	7	5	14
3G	7	3	14
3H	6.7	3	14
3I	6.7	2	14
3J	6.7	2	14
4J	6.2	5	14
4K	5.5	3	14
4L	4.1	3	14
3A	13+	2	12
5K	6.5	2	12
3K	5.5	3	12
3D	9.6	2	11
5M	4.5	1	11
5F	8.7	2	10
3M	3.7	3	10
4M	3.3	1	9
5L	5.8	0	8
3E	9.3	1	6
3L	3.7	2	5



## **Appendix C**

### **The Middle School Journal Editorial Policy and Guidelines for Authors**

# Middle School Journal

## Editorial Policy and Guidelines for Authors

*Middle School Journal*, a refereed journal, is an official publication of National Middle School Association. The Journal publishes articles that promote middle level education and contribute to an understanding of the educational and developmental needs of youth between the ages of 10 and 15.

Articles submitted should specifically relate to the theory and practice of middle level education and should speak directly to practitioners in the field. The Journal seeks reports of successful programs, descriptions of effective techniques, thought-provoking essays, and application of research. The editor especially welcomes articles that focus on middle level schooling in urban settings and in rural or small schools.

The *Journal* publishes both thematic and general interest issues. *Middle School Journal* invites articles that have not been previously published and are not under review by any other publication. Manuscripts that do not meet the submission requirements will be returned to the author.

### Submission Requirements

**Length** — Manuscripts, including bibliography and references, should be in the range of 10 to 20 double-spaced pages. Tables, charts, and figures should be kept to a minimum, and if included should be placed at the end of the text.

**Format & Style** — All text, including title, headings, quotations, bibliography, and references should be double-spaced with wide margins. The editor strongly encourages the use of sideheads which increase readability. For matters of style, authors should follow the guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Fifth Edition).

### Submission Process

**Copies** — Submit five clear copies, one with a cover page giving author(s) names, professional affiliation, home and work addresses and telephone. The names of the authors should appear only on the cover page.

**Submit to** — *Middle School Journal*, Attn: Cheri Howman, Publications Assistant, National Middle School Association, 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300, Westerville, OH 43081. (Faxed or electronic submissions are not accepted.)

**Acknowledgment** — *Middle School Journal* acknowledges receipt of manuscripts by postcard. Manuscripts that meet submission requirements will be logged and sent to referees. Authors will be notified by letter of this action.

**Review Process** — Three members of a manuscript review board read and evaluate independently each manuscript. A decision regarding publication will be reached within four months of the date that the manuscript is sent out for review. This decision will be communicated to the lead author. Articles will not be published until a copyright assignment form is received. Assignment forms will be sent with the letter of acceptance. Authors whose manuscripts are selected for publication will be asked to submit finished copies including any editorial changes on diskette.

**Editing** — *Middle School Journal* reserves the right to edit manuscripts to improve clarity, to conform to style, and to fit available space.

#### Information for Contributors

*Middle School Journal* has a circulation of over 27,000 and is published five times during the school year — September, November, January, March, and May. *Middle School Journal* encourages manuscript submissions on all phases of middle school education. Manuscripts are initially reviewed by the editor. Each individual manuscript is given a careful reading. Manuscripts that meet the *Journal's* guidelines are forwarded to a panel of reviewers who are practicing professionals in all phases of middle school education. Author identities are kept confidential.

Manuscripts that do not meet the guidelines or are not ready for the complete review process are returned to authors with specific commentary. Often, authors are encouraged to resubmit the manuscript in a revised format or to an affiliate journal.

Contributors should be aware of additional points that influence a positive review at each level. Authors should avoid the following:

- |                 |                               |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| generalities    | excessive adjectives          |
| personal asides | passive verbs & constructions |
| academic jargon | references to "this author"   |

Manuscript references must be in correct APA style. Please consult the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Fifth Edition).

The *Journal* will not consider manuscripts that are undergoing review by another publication or have been previously published. If accepted, authors must sign a statement that transfers copyright to National Middle School Association.

Based upon reviewer comments, the following is a partial list of reasons for the rejection of manuscripts:

- The manuscript relates a personal, not a professional experience.
- The subject is so overly specialized it would appeal only to a small segment of readers.
- The material in the manuscript is neither timely nor new in its insights.
- The manuscript is largely in list format.
- The manuscript is a research report rather than an interpretation or application of research.
- The manuscript promotes a person or commercially available product.

### Policy on Letters to the Editor

The *Journal* publishes brief comments in response to articles it publishes. Letters to the Editor are published in accordance with these guidelines:

- Must be limited to 200-300 words.
- Should directly address a point made in a published article.
- Must be issue-oriented and not personal.
- Must not promote commercial products or services.
- Will be subject to editing for clarity and space considerations.

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## **Appendix D**

### **Letter of Article Submission**

September 1, 2003

Sara E. Janssen  
15899 F Avenue  
Wellsburg, Iowa 50680

Middle School Journal  
Attn: Ms. Cheri Howman, Publications Assistant  
National Middle School Association  
4151 Executive Parkway Suite 300  
Westerville, Ohio 43081

Ms. Howman:

Educators are always searching for more ways to engage their students and enhance their students' learning. Various strategies are used to encourage students to practice their understanding of the vocabulary. Some of the practice tools may involve creating and singing songs and rhymes, drawing visuals to help make connections to the language, playing a variety of games and role play situations, and doing gestures and movement activities. Students feel greater ownership in their learning because they are actively involved.

The enclosed article, "Pictures, John Travolta Moves, and Sign Language: Using Active Learning to Teach Spanish," describes my classroom experiences with using pictures, "silly signs," and American Sign Language as learning tools for my middle school Spanish students. In the article, I share my experience using three study groups with pre and post-test scores and surveys to determine the students' achievement and attitudes using the three learning methods. Please consider this article for publication in your journal. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sara E. Janssen

Enc.