

Melina Jimenez

Teaching Philosophy

Since becoming an English language instructor nearly 17 years ago, my teaching style and my materials have evolved, but my core philosophy has stayed the same: Students carry a world of knowledge and experience, and my role in the classroom is to provide direct instruction and opportunities for practice, to engage students in complex applications of the language and skills, and to help them transfer their skills autonomously so they can share their ideas in English. My motto in my English language class is “your head is full of information, I want you to be able to talk and write about it in English.”

I carry out this role in the classroom by giving the students a variety of tools to help them organize and develop their ideas. The tools and instruction depend on the class. In Listening Speaking (LS) classes, where formal academic speaking is one of the course goals, we work on more structured speaking, like presentations. I provide students with tools such as outlines, sentence stems, and grammar exercises, but the key is always the students’ knowledge, especially at lower levels. I assign topics that students can easily speak about in their L1s, such as an event in their lives that taught them a life lesson (LS30), a comparison of two familiar yet challenging topics (LS40), or an explanation of a problem that they are familiar with in order to explain some possible solutions (LS50). They start in a place they know and together we add structural, syntactical, and lexical complexity.

The same is true in Reading Writing (RW) classes. Students choose topics that they know and can write about without research in their L1s. Even in RW60, an advanced level, where research writing is a learning outcome, students should choose a topic that they know well and are passionate about. I build supports and instructional strategies that help students get to the finish line. I suggest areas for growth and further tools to help in their growth, but I always return to the strengths in their knowledge, their existing skills set, and their improvements throughout the semester.

In Florida, and in many locations around the nation, lawmakers are pushing back on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts. However, as an instructor in a language classroom with international students from around the world, and as an Honors program instructor with domestic students from around the US, DEI values continue to matter. As an instructor, diversity means listening to and honoring the voices in the classroom. Inclusion means encouraging students to share their voices in ways that are comfortable for them. Equity means promoting justice and fairness in my instruction and my assessments. This is evident in my application of best practices such as Universal Design for Learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. In my ELI courses, I purposely choose stories from the students’ home countries, so students can see themselves represented in the course materials. I also choose articles by women, nonbinary, and LGBTQ+ writers, so that students are exposed to a range of ideas, and we can have uncomfortable conversations about using pronouns in a safe environment where they are encouraged to ask questions. In this way, I’m working to cultivate acceptance and civility both inside and outside the classroom, even as laws are put in place to limit the acknowledgement of and learning from those diverse voices.

We also read or watch about current issues in the US, such as homelessness and food insecurity, so that they can learn about the country in which they're living. Providing time for discussion in class so students learn from each other helps the students build global awareness and further develop their communication and collaboration skills, 21st century skills that they need as they join institutes of higher learning and the workforce.

In addition, my courses and assessments have built-in flexibility and choice, my instructional design considers diverse learning needs, and I try to create a culturally responsive learning environment when choosing materials. In my (un)common Reads courses, which are one-credit courses for the UF Honors Program centered around a book and class discussions, the students do a final group project centered around the book that we read in the semester. The students can choose any medium and any focus. After reading *Good Omens*, one group wrote in-depth Reddit posts which posited a conspiracy theory between Taylor Swift and Agnes Nutter, and other accounts responded, all written by the two students in the group. Another group created a video of the Four Bikers of the Apocalypse playing Dungeons and Dragons. Each of the groups met the expectations set out on the final project rubric, but having the students choose their own final projects lends itself to a wide range of creativity in which the students demonstrate their strengths and their understanding of the book.

Two of the ABCs of fostering Inclusive Excellence at UF, according to UF College of Liberal Arts and Sciences page are "Advocate for everyone's success" and "Celebrate your successes!" I wholeheartedly believe that success for all students is how we create inclusive environments. Rather than dismissing a student who isn't turning work in as a young, lazy student, I see the student as someone who needs a little extra attention in order to succeed. I will address the students' current performance and proficiency in class and ask how I can adjust what we're doing to better meet their needs. Showing students that I care about their success lets them acknowledge the areas in which they are struggling, allowing us to create a plan moving forward.

Students come into a classroom with a vast knowledge set, so my instruction is designed to start with their strengths and help learners build their confidence, their language proficiency, and a variety of skill sets, so that they can autonomously apply the lessons that we have done together to assignments in other core skills or in higher levels, and to contexts outside of the classroom.

"Learning is stronger when it matters, when the abstract is made concrete and personal."
– Peter C Brown, Henry L Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel in *Make it Stick*