

What the Best NC Teachers Do – Transcript

Teacher: Crystal Taylor- Simon

Question 1 – Imagine someone visited your class several times, what would they say the principal teaching strategies you use are? Could you talk about teaching strategies you use that are universal, and as well as strategies are somewhat unique to you and your personality?

Crystal Taylor-Simon: As far as teaching strategies go, I do a lot of formative assessment. I do way more formative assessment than I do summative because, as you can see with today's lesson, we had to stop and pause and the kids will actually tell you, "wait a minute, I'm confused. I don't understand." I think that is more important; to find out early on than to find out if I were to quiz them at the end of the lesson. If you were to come to my classroom, you would see a lot of different types of formative assessment strategies. For example, we use the whiteboard. Most recently, since we are on a 1-to-1 grant, we use the laptops and I'm able to make a Google Doc activity where I'm able to see where everyone is. Also we use exit tickets. Those types of things are universal.

Other strategies you would see from me are just creative collaborative work strategies. I believe in the kids working together, because Spanish is a language and it is about communicating. A lot of times, especially in the high school setting, you have kids who are shy or don't want to speak up, but when you get them working with each other, then before you even get into the Spanish mode, you can get them comfortable and communicating with their peers. Other strategies that I use that are unique to me are that I am very musical. A lot of times, I'll take a current song and apply that song to the grammar topic that we are doing. The kids seem to appreciate that, because I've taken the time out to write them a song and sing to them. If you came in on any given day in this Spanish class, Lord knows what you'll get!

Question 2 – How do you organize your class to maximize learning opportunities for your students? How do you help them become better learners?

Crystal Taylor-Simon: My class is what I call "organized chaos." It's very structured. When they come in, they have a bell-ringer, the review, the lesson, the practice and the conclusion. They know, on any given day, that is our format. They are comfortable with the movement and the transition between activities, so it makes it easier. That's something that I have to set up right in the beginning so that the class time can be maximized in that way.

The way I help them become better learners is I walk them through the process of learning Spanish. I also walk them through the process of learning other disciplines. I give them the strategies I used when I was a student. For example, for vocabulary I tell them exactly how to make flash cards. Believe it or not, some high school students will say, "What's a flash card? What do you do with that?" I don't take anything for granted and I walk them through the process. I do a lot of where I'll explain things the way that I am processing so they can see. So first, when we're going to translate a sentence, I need to identify my subject, then what is that subject doing. I just walk them through the different processes so

as they begin to get in other classes, they can take those same strategies. When they take their notes, we do Cornell notes. They can take that even when they get outside of my class, so that they know that these are specific questions and objectives that are going to be covered in the topic. Here's the lesson, let me match it up. And with Cornell notes, you know that it's a tool that you can fold over, that the students can use as a study guide. I walk them through that process in the first week of school. I give them that they need to be successful in this class and their other classes.

Question 3 – How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs (EC, ESL, AIG, etc.)?

Crystal Taylor-Simon: The good part about us being on a 1-to-1 grant is that differentiation is very easy to do. I find different resources for different students' ability levels. I adapt tests for different students' ability levels, but I analyze it at the beginning. I give everybody the same base test to see where they are and then I analyze their results. I look at where they're struggling, whether it is reading, writing, listening or speaking and then I differentiate the review resources and the testing resources to help them meet certain expectations with those. A lot of it, for me, is upfront data gathering and then going back and deciding what strategies to take. For example, if I had an ESL student who speaks Spanish but they might need help knowing where accent marks are, I would steer them toward that type of practice. Everybody would be working on a laptop or some kind of practice together, but they would have a different type of practice. That way, it's anonymous. Nobody knows who's working on what. Then, when we come back together, we're all working on the same page.

Question 4 – How do you know when learning is occurring and what do you do when you question whether learning is taking place in the classroom?

Crystal Taylor-Simon: I know when learning is occurring, just like most teachers, when the students say, "Ohhh..." or their eyebrows raise, or they start nodding. They look at you like, "Oh yeah, I have this." My students know that I'm very interactive that way. I want them to make noise to let me know where they are. One of the students today said, "Wait wait wait Mrs. Simon. I'm lost." I love the fact that they are comfortable enough to do that in my class amongst their peers. When you set up the culture of give me feedback so I can give you feedback, it makes that task a lot easier. They know that at the end of the day, I'm going to reflect on what I've done in the class and if I feel like something didn't work, that activity didn't work and was not successful, all the class was confused, then I'll go back and I'll re-evaluate myself. I'll ask the kids about it the next day. I'll say, "What did you think about yesterday? What was hard about it? What was good about it? Should we scrap that activity? Should we try something new?" You just have to be in-tune with your students and create an open environment where they feel like they have the power to give you feedback for what you do. If you don't, you can teach your heart out. But if it's not reaching them, you've wasted your time.

Question 5 – How do you "hook" a reluctant learner to your content?

Crystal Taylor-Simon: A lot of times, the kids who come into my class are like, "I just gotta take it because I have to." It's a college requirement and I have those students who come in and say, "Why do we gotta learn a second language?" I tap into their learning styles. I find out, week 1, what helps you

learn... what are you good at? I gather information about them personally and I find that by doing that, students understand that I really care about them as an individual. Then, later on, I can be slick about what I put into my lessons so if Johnny wrote to me about how he loves basketball and doesn't care about anything else, then I can throw that into the lesson and then say, "Oh, we're talking about basketball now..." and they perk up. The key is to learn your students, find their likes and dislikes and invest in them. Really find out what makes them tick so you can use that knowledge and incorporate it into your lessons. I think a lot of times, we as teachers, try to do a project that is a cookie cutter type of project. For me, I love giving them choices. Different students have different ways of learning and love to do different things. If I say, "We're going to do a project with these reflexive verbs. If you'd like, you can do a song, you can do a poem, you can do a video, you can do a PSA, you can just write me an essay. It's up to you." I think, by giving them that diversity and that ability to select what they like, they tend to work harder for me, and they do. They work really hard.

Question 6 – If you were to give advice to a new teacher in North Carolina, what 2-3 learnings would you share?

Crystal Taylor-Simon: The first thing is, do not be afraid to make mistakes. Mistakes are not the enemy. You learn a lot from your mistakes. I came in lateral-entry and I had no background in education and educational classes. I was literally just thrown into a classroom. Every day, reflect on your process. Reflect on your lessons and then decide on what worked and what didn't work. Then, go back and revise, edit and get feedback from your students. In the same token, provide relevant feedback to them. If they say, "I'm not getting this" or if you get a paper and it's completely not what you were looking for, and you just mark it up and give it back to them, you haven't helped them. The key is, get feedback from your students, give relevant feedback to them and reflect on your practice. Reflect on what you do to make sure that what you are doing is truly reaching the students.