

**We Teach Languages Episode 143: Highlighting Black Communities and Culture in the Spanish Classroom with Regina O’Neal**

**Announcer**:  [0:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[0:07] [background music]

**Stacey Johnson**:  [0:12] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today, on episode 143, I get to interview Regina O'Neal about how to highlight Black communities and cultures in the language classroom, specifically in the Spanish classroom.

[0:29] If you're a Spanish teacher, you're going to want to take a lot of notes, and you'll definitely want to head over to the Show Notes on our website that has Regina's actual presentation in it. A lot of resources that she's provided for those of us who want to track those resources down for our own work.

[0:47] However, if you are a teacher of another language, I think you're going to get a lot out of this episode as well even though this specific resources won't apply to you.

[0:58] Just getting a sense for how Regina interacts with their students, how she plans her lessons, what types of connections she makes between what's happening in the world and what's happening in her own classroom, and the target culture, I think it's a really great episode and one that you'll benefit from no matter what language you teach.

[1:19] To get us started, Regina, would you mind sharing a little bit about who you are and where you work?

[1:26]

**Regina O'Neal**:  My name is Regina O'Neal, and I'm a Spanish teacher. I'm the World Language Department Chair at the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute in Baltimore, Maryland. I'm happy to be here.

**Stacey**:  [1:37] I'm so happy to have you here. You mentioned you teach in Baltimore. Would you tell us a little bit more about your teaching context? Who are your students, and what is it like where you teach?

**Regina**:  [1:49] I have taught all of the levels, from Level 1, 2, 3, and our Level 4 is AP. I've been teaching Spanish in Baltimore since 2000. I originally taught K‑6 at Montebello Elementary School.

**Stacey**:  [2:07] It's been so long.

[2:09] [laughter]

**Regina**:  [2:09] Absolutely. I'm very happy at Poly, but like most foreign language teachers in the city, the curriculum lends us a lot of flexibility, especially when it comes to culture. A lot of teachers get stuck every once in a while to the run‑of‑the‑mill cultural activities or cultural themes.

[2:31] I noticed that I didn't want my students to think of Spanish in a very singular way, and I wanted my students to understand that there are so many different cultures that this one language represents. I wanted to give them touches and tastes of a little bit of everything, so that they could be exposed and more knowledgeable.

[2:57] What did I do as far as the culture is concerned? I thought it's important to start to highlight specifically Black culture in my Spanish classroom, because the majority of my students are Black students. I am a Black teacher. I wanted the kids to see a connection, a direct connection between their culture, between their history, and the culture and history of the people who speak this language as well.

[3:29] I wanted them to feel a closeness, a connectivity to inspire them to invest them more in their pursuit of becoming bilingual people.

**Stacey**:  [3:44] The presentation that you originally gave, was at Maryland Foreign Language Association Conference, so MFLA?

**Regina**:  [3:51] Yes.

**Stacey**:  [3:52] The best of MFLA, and then you took the presentation to NECTFL, and then to ACTFL, which are two huge world language conferences. You've already gotten to share this message with a lot of people, but I haven't heard it yet. I haven't seen your presentation, so I was hoping you would walk me through what you shared at MFLA, NECTFL, and ACTFL?

**Regina**:  [4:16] Absolutely. The first thing that I explained to folks is the purpose of the theme to highlight Black people from all over the world, but specifically from Spanish‑speaking countries. From poetry history all the way to the analysis of aesthetic beauty even, and really focus and hone in on sharing this with teachers who serve predominantly Black students.

[4:48] I also explained that every activity that we do can be scaffolded from novice low all the way up to intermediate high, and in some cases even advanced low. We were lucky enough at my school to have "Like Water for Chocolate" be taught to our 10th grade students.

[5:10] What I immediately did was found a fragment from a chapter and I had the students read and annotate, and use that as a close reading. I also supplement that with trips to the GALA Theater in DC, so the students could actually see Like Water for Chocolate in action.

[5:31] They were able to ask questions to some of the actors, and I had a couple of other extension activities. I had the Level 2 kids do an investigation on Afro‑Mexican folks. I wanted to know the history, culture, the whole nine yards, what could you find out.

[5:52] For the older students, the Level 3 and up, I had them do a comparison and investigation, but I also wanted a comparison of the abolishing of slavery in the United States of America and the abolishment of slavery in Mexico.

[6:11] All of that lends to so much rich discussion with the students, who were absolutely flabbergasted at the fact that Black people exist in Mexico and have for centuries, upon centuries.

[6:27] It's a good opportunity to open eyes, widen minds. Then, I encourage all of my students, "Please share everything that you learn with your families, with your friends. Don't take my word for it. Please look it up yourselves," which is why we investigate a lot in my class, there's lots of investigation.

[6:49] I like to move from there to beauty and aesthetics, and I always incorporate poetry there. I start off with an activity referred to as "OPTIC," O‑P‑T‑I‑C. The O stands for general observation. The P stands for parts. The T is title, the I is interrelations, and the C is conclusion.

[7:15] The students will take a look at a piece of art. I chose "The Birth of Venus" by Botticelli. The kids will stare at it, I'll separate them into groups, and then we'll work with all of those letters, where they'll have to give a general observation. What do they see? What are the parts?

[7:36] If I don't know what the title is, what do I imagine it would be? How are the parts related to one another in this particular piece? What is my conclusion? Is it beautiful? Why, or what exactly is beautiful? Why not? What is not pleasing to me? They work in groups.

[7:58] One good thing I like to do about the groups is everybody has a job. Everyone has to have a job. It's a good way to make sure that your students are staying in the target language, but they're also checking themselves. That way the instructor doesn't have to admonish, for lack of a better term, the kids regulate themselves.

**Stacey**:  [8:23] What are the jobs you assign?

**Regina**:  [8:24] Certainly. I always have a manager, the boss. Her job is to make sure that everyone else is doing their job and that everyone is participating. I have a very good close‑knit relationship with my kids, so I tell the manager, "If you don't do your job, I'm coming after you. Please don't make me fire you."

[8:48] Then, I have a speaker. Their job is to speak out loud on behalf of everyone in the group. There's a secretary. That person is required to take notes, jot down things. Then, there are the Spanish police. Their job is to make sure that everyone stays in the target language, and that if their buddy says something in English, they gently encourage them to go back to the target language.

[9:18] Everyone's working. There's lots of hustle and bustle. People get up and move around, so that they can see the art a little bit better. We spend the entire period just on this one piece of art, and thinking out loud, what exactly do we consider beautiful and why?

**Stacey**:  [9:38] That's awesome.

**Regina**:  [9:39] After we do that, I have intentionally taken a number of different images. I show them to the students one at a time. One is a beautiful picture of Frida, another is a beautiful picture of Buika, who is a flamenco singer.

[9:59] There's a piece from Pablo Picasso, "The Weeping Woman," there's a "Mona Lisa." There's numerous different images, so that the students can think out loud what is beautiful to them, and who establishes that idea of beauty in the first place? That ultimately leads us to a poem by Gustavo Adolfo Becquer, Rima XI. The students absolutely love it, [non‑English speech] .

[10:37] What I like to do with that particular piece, besides have them recite it and impress me with their beautiful recitations, and move me to my core, because I told them, I said, "Poetry is meant to be felt in your soul." You have to convince me that you are Becquer himself when you get up here recite it. It's one of my favorite things to do.

[11:02] Leading up to that, I put them back into groups. We look at all three stanzas. I asked them, "How many people are mentioned in this piece? How do you know?" Then, I asked them, "Give me a drawing, give me a visual representation of what the first woman looks like. Give me a drawing of what the second woman looks like, and how do you know?"

[11:31] There's lots of conversation surrounding these perceptions and ideas of beauty. Of course, we can have fun with the last one, why do you suppose he pick the last one but he didn't want the others? Then, we have a forum just discussing that alone.

[11:53] I also like to show them lots of different kinds of poetry. Another poetry piece that I teach is "Chiriboga," which is a beautiful poem written by Nancy Morejon, she's from Cuba. Chiriboga is how I describe...It's an ode, its's a love letter from a Black woman to her own hair. It's absolutely beautiful.

[12:19] The students use it to talk about Black beauty, to talk about why it isn't talked about more often, and how society, our family, etc., shapes our perception of what we consider to be beautiful. I have a lot of students, and I myself, I had a love hate relationship with my hair. I did grow up out of it, but I can understand when my students, especially my girls, have issue with their hair.

[13:01] Our hair is a crown, it's very important to our identity. Through working with this particular piece, my students have an opportunity to listen to how this woman talks about herself, talks about her hair, and inadvertently, talking about all of us in our hair.

[13:28] It gives my girl specifically an opportunity to repeat these words as though they are Nancy, absolutely Nancy, and convince me that this is how you feel. This is how you feel about yourself and about your hair, and that you are God's gift to this planet, just the way that you are. It does my heart so much good to hear that. To hear how it makes them feel when they recite these words.

[14:03] There's plenty of others. There's "Mujer Negra," also by Nancy Morejon. There's a powerful piece by Victoria Santa Cruz. It's called "Me Gritaron Negra!" I use all of these and I complement it with Dr. Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman."

**Stacey**:  [14:19] It's a fun connection for me, because I use Phenomenal Woman to teach English, using that particular poem. It's fun for me that you're using it in your Spanish class also.

**Regina**:  [14:35] I am. I use it to compliment specifically, Me Gritaron Negra the poem by Victoria Santa Cruz, which is a very powerful piece. It was inspired by the events of her life, all the way back to when she was seven years old and the discrimination that she felt in her country.

[14:59] How she felt about herself, not because she was born feeling bad about herself. Absolutely not, but how other people were treating her. It made her feel terrible. She wanted to change things. She would cower, and she was made to feel ugly, but she has a revelation of herself. It's almost like the blinders have been taken off as she can see herself for who she is and what she is.

[15:34] She feels comfortable, confident, strong, and she can recognize her beauty for exactly what it is. That takes time, strength, and lots of other things that I can't even name right now. To see Victoria struggle from the beginning of the poem, and to see where she ends up at the end of the poem is transformational, mind, body, and soul.

[16:04] When my students listen to this and they think about it, and then they read the lyrics to my Anschluss piece, they can see how women think, feel, and see themselves.

**Stacey**:  [16:18] The sense that I'm getting on your aesthetic beauty choices is that you're using literature and Black women's writing specifically.

**Regina**:  [16:32] Yes.

**Stacey**:  [16:32] That help students gain insight instead of a painful experience. They might be painful experiences, but their experiences of eventual victory and transformation. You're showing them very positive examples. Does that sound right?

**Regina**:  [16:52] It does. I think the reason why the class discussions are so important is because these conversations are not had in other spaces, in other places. We have them in my room, because I think it's important.

[17:11] Then, after we'll read an incredible piece like Chiriboga by Nancy Morejon, we'll sit down and we'll say, "What do you think now that we have analyzed, we have annotated, we have embodied this piece? What jumps out at you as beautiful?" We have uncomfortable silences, and we'll sit there and wait nervously for people to speak up.

[17:40] I think what's powerful is that there are times in which my non‑black students, it's the first time that they're ever verbally saying, "Yes. This woman who looks nothing like my mother. She looks nothing like me, but she is beautiful." The first time we're saying these things out loud, that matters. That absolutely matters.

**Stacey**:  [18:00] Do you think there's something about a language classroom that makes it more possible for us to have those kinds of conversations, or do you think you're just having them because you care about it and making the choice to do it?

**Regina**:  [18:15] It could be both things to be honest with you. This is definitely my second language. I have noticed throughout my life, that it's easier for me to get things out sometimes in my second language [laughs] than it is on my first. Things that I want to avoid are things that cost me a great discomfort, if I have to spit it out, I'll probably spit it out in my second language.

**Stacey**:  [18:41] That's so interesting. There's some research that shows that we are less emotionally invested in our second language.

**Regina**:  [18:48] Oh, more now? Therefore, it's a little bit easier to say.

**Stacey**:  [18:52] [laughs]

**Regina**:  [18:52] A little bit easier to say and I have already created a space for these kids in which they have no choice, but to take off the fear, to take off the shame that is associated with learning functioning in a second language. They are cloaked in fear and shame, and so we practice taking them off every single day.

[19:21] Once that becomes part of the classroom culture, they become more likely to pretty much rock with whatever I'm rolling with.

**Stacey**:  [19:32] This is so good. I am really thinking right now that what you're doing about helping students see themselves and Black culture in the Spanish classroom has got to be so tied to the other work you're doing, helping them not feel shame and fear in your classroom.

[19:54] You can't at once, for instance, if you teach in a predominantly Black classroom, you can't teach Black students to feel fear and shame when speaking a foreign language, and also teach them to feel and connection and admiration for all the Black culture that you're exposing them to inside of language your curriculum. It has the right hand.

**Regina**:  [20:19] Right. Ultimately, we as teachers, if we're not making them comfortable and confident enough to buy what we're selling, we're not going to be as effective as how we could be. First things first, they have to feel and know that we love them, that we care, and that we are invested in their success on their journey to buy literacy, to fluency, proficiency.

[20:50] Once they're feeling us, once they believe us, once they trust us, we have to make the most of that. I'm very happy with the way that these lessons go, I am very happy.

[21:06] I'm happy for everyone involved, because it's very easy to say the singular thing that the entire planet says. When you stick a picture of Beyonce on the wall, let's say she's the image of Black beauty and only her. She's beautiful and only her. That's an issue, because not everybody looks like Beyonce, and blackness is not a monolith.

[21:34] It's exceedingly important that we have these difficult conversations in class so that we can change the way that we look at things if that's what we have to do.

**Stacey**:  [21:48] That's amazing, and so far everything that you've described isn't a face‑to‑face classroom. Are there any ways that you are also doing this work using digital tools or resources that those of us who are teaching online or hybrid might be able to take some examples from?

**Regina**:  [22:07] I like to use blogs with my students. There's one called Afrofeminas. You can find it pretty much on any social media outlet. The kids can look and read, and pick out things, and there's so much work that can be done just off of a blog alone.

[22:32] I also like to use this data comica. It's a comic book, it's called Super Rizadaz, Rizos en la Escuela. It's from Ms. Rizos. She actually is a hairstylist and she owns salons. She decided to put out a comic book for girls. It's a fantastic little story about a little girl who's in school, and she's being admonished by her teacher, because her hair is too while they needs to be tamed.

[23:08] They sent her to the principal's office, and she's in tears, because they want her to straighten her hair. The superhero Super Rizadaz comes to the rescue and teaches her first of all that it's illegal what they're trying to do, so she empowers her with the knowledge of what the law is in her land.

[23:30] Then, she reminds her of how absolutely beautiful she is the way that she is. The way that her hair naturally grows out of her own hair is just fine. She hugs her and she goes out into the world with this information. It's very cute. I like to use that with my students as well.

**Stacey**:  [23:55] I can also see so many times, teachers will ask me or ask each other on social media questions like, "There's a big thing in the news about how some high school basketball star was told he couldn't compete in the tournament until he cut off his dreads."

[24:11] How am I going to talk about that? How am I going to bring that into my classroom? How am I going to circle around to current events and having a resource like that ready to go?

**Regina**:  [24:21] Then, when you bring that current event in, just give them a minute to think about it or they might need a day. They might need to chew on it for a little while, and say, "OK, so the next time we see each other, I want you to tell me how this makes you feel and what you think."

[24:38] Depending on what the student's ability level is for self‑expression, they could express what should have happened or what would you like to see happen for this young man? Do you think that it was right, what they did to this young man? All of those things are helpful I think.

**Stacey**:  [25:02] Some teachers might be thinking, how can I do that with my first year students? I want to encourage people that if your students don't know how to say it, this makes me feel this, they should do this. You can provide them with sentence frames, so that you give them sort of the structure and all they have to do is fill in their idea. Proficiency shouldn't be a barrier to doing that kind of really good work.

**Regina**:  [25:26] Absolutely. I think sentence builders are genius. I'm trying to incorporate a lot more of them into my practice to tell you what. Another thing that we can do at the lower levels, especially when we're teaching the children to describe themselves, we can brought in the descriptors.

[25:48] For example, I am a woman. I am Afro‑American, my mother is white. She is Irish, she has green eyes and freckles. I teach them the different names for races of human peoples on the planet. They learn how to say, "My neighbor is Asian. He is from Taiwan." All of those structures come in handy.

[26:22] You learn how to describe yourself on a deeper level, because it's easy to say, "I'm an American," but it doesn't tell you anything more than just that.

**Stacey**:  [26:34] If you're doing some of these activities that you've talked about, where you're bringing in artists like Buika or you're bringing in art that is representative of people around the Spanish‑speaking world, and they only know how to say a few basic descriptors, they're not going to be able to do that deep analysis of art that you described, where they pick out all the parts.

**Regina**:  [26:57] You're right. Constant rehearsal, and then making sure that everything stays fresh in their mind.

**Stacey**:  [27:04] That's fantastic. What else do you have for us? What else do you share with your students?

**Regina**:  [27:09] I just want to say one more thing about art.

**Stacey**:  [27:12] Go for it.

**Regina**:  [27:13] I have been recently turned on to an artist named Harmonia Rosales. I don't know if you've heard of her, but you have got to check this lady out. She is a painter. Her work is, in my opinion, I find her to be spectacular.

[27:29] She painted something called the Birth of Oshun. It's supposed to look something like Botticelli's The Birth of Venus, only everyone in her paintings are Black people with just beautiful imagery, the whole nine yards.

**Stacey**:  [27:46] I'm looking at her website right now.

**Regina**:  [27:49] I'll send The Birth of Oshun, so that you can see what I'm talking about, because I actually mentioned this at NECTFL, but I couldn't give them too many details because I had not done it yet. By the time I got back to school, I was able to do this lesson and watch the kids do a cultural comparison of something they were already familiar with, Botticelli's The Birth of Venus, with Rosales' The birth of Oshun.

[28:18] Looking at the pictures side by side and describing the women that they see in front of them, and all of the incredible adjectives, and why, and the analysis, it was fantastic. It did exceed my expectations. I look forward to using a lot more of her stuff. I think she's incredible.

**Stacey**:  [28:39] I've only seen a handful of her paintings from looking at the website just now. I can't take my eyes off it. It is stunning.

**Regina**:  [28:47] I told you she's something else. The other thing I like to use a lot is music. I remember when I first started teaching AP, there was a brief blurb on the Garifuna. I, personally was not educated, I was not educated at all. I had never even heard the term before, so I have my work cut out for me, with all the research and whatnot that I had to do myself before I brought it to the students.

[29:18] I was blown away by the culture, by the history, everything, and so I developed a lesson on the Garifuna people. Another cultural comparison that we'd like to do is all of the popular young American now dancing versus the Garifuna Punta, because it's easy to say the Honduran Punta, but it's actually Garifuna.

[29:45] Making sure that the students understand that distinction, and then turning them on to artists like Susana Baca, to mellow them out, especially if I have a class come in after lunch, goodness sakes, I need them to calm down. Turn on a little Susana Baca, they chill out, and they say, "I love it. Who is this? What's this? I say, "Let's talk about it."

[30:11] We're about to do some research on this lady, and her genre and this music, and how it makes you feel. Have you ever heard anything like this before? If you were on vacation, where would you go that this would be playing in the background? Lots of playing with different kinds of music like that.

**Stacey**:  [30:32] Another thing that I heard you say that I want to like park on and make sure that listeners picked up on it also, is you found something new that you wanted to bring your students. Instead of just showing it to them as an uninformed observer like, "Look at this interesting novelty I found for you."

[30:52] First, you did your research. You made sure that you did the investigation and the self‑reflection that you needed to do to bring them a full rich experience, instead of just letting them be tourists in the Garifuna culture, right?

**Regina**:  [31:08] I had to, to be honest with you, because I was getting input from all different places about how this is a Honduran aspect of culture. All of the input that I was receiving was neglecting to say that it was actually African. This is Black culture right here.

[31:27] A lot of the sources, I'm not even going to lie, were Honduran, a lot of the sources. It just goes to show the United States are not the only one struggling, with not only racism but colorism as well. These are issues that are being in some instances, they're being tackled, in other instances, completely ignored all over the world.

[31:53] It's amazing. It's an opportunity to discuss things like this with the kids. I'm trying to give my students lessons I wish someone gave me. [laughs] I tell you.

**Stacey**:  [32:07] Yeah, awesome. One thing I did want to mention is that we love to put links to things in the show notes. If it's OK with you, I would love any links that you have. If you have your presentation somewhere publicly available, if you can give me?

**Regina**:  [32:22] Of course. I'll send it right to you.

**Stacey**:  [32:25] [laughs] Perfect.

**Regina**:  [32:26] Thank you so much.

[32:27] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [32:26] If you have questions or comments related to today's episode, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us multiple ways. All of them are available at our website, weteachlang.com/contact. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter @weteachlang.

[32:46] We would like to say a very special thank you to the Pearll Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about Pearll by going to Pearll, P‑E‑A‑R‑L‑L.nflc.umd.edu. Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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