

# “I Want to Live in America” An Immigration Simulation

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## Abstract

Simulations can play a crucial role in the exploration of issues surrounding identity, culture and diversity in the world language classroom. This immigration simulation presents students with situations to enact and new perspectives to discover and allows students to develop their own opinions about this important topic.

## Introduction

In my teaching of Spanish, simulations play a crucial role in the exploration of issues surrounding identity, culture and diversity. Used as a teaching tool, simulations present my students with situations to enact and new perspectives to discover. By diving into a simulation from a first-person point-of-view, students can dissect cultural products, practices and perspectives and give their own interpretations, comments and solutions. In small discussion groups, students share their thoughts on the topics raised in each simulation. They debate current events and sociopolitical issues and elaborate by sharing their own experiences with similar issues.

Simulations are different from role-plays in that in a role-play, students are given a set part to play, with limited options for acting out a scene or situation. Students almost always know how a role-play will end, and are not usually invested in the outcome. In a simulation, the teacher is less in control of the activity, and students feel the action in a more visceral way. The ending is never quite predictable in a simulation and in my experience, students take the activity more personally. When dealing with issues of immigration, a simulation exercise works well since it gives students the opportunity for empathy — something for which a role-play falls short.

## Philosophical Framework

The activity described in this article aims to situate issues of immigration and culture in the paradigm of power struggles, hegemony, and the idea of oppressive forces outlined in the works of Paulo Freire. Freire states: “...(discovery) cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis” (Freire, P., 1995. *Pedagogy of*

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hope. New York: Continuum.). While Freire's work with literacy projects in the slums of northeastern Brazil in the 1960s led him to develop this concept, his call to blend theory and practice has great meaning for the study of cultural perspectives in the United States in the twenty first century. Freire's concepts not only help to structure the format of the following activity, but also provide a lens through which to view current immigration and the lives and experiences of immigrants in the United States.

## Background

I work in a multicultural school district. Made up of approximately 35% Asian-American students, the halls of Herricks High School resound with the sounds of Korean, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu and Mandarin Chinese, not to mention a little Greek, Farsi and Spanish. Many of our students are first generation children of immigrants to New York — some students even recent immigrants themselves. With such a diverse student body, it would seem unnecessary to have to talk about issues of immigration with our students. And yet students still need to understand on a deeper level the struggles that immigrants go through to make it to the United States. Even more so now, in this post "9-11" world, there is a greater need to help students to balance feelings of patriotism and an understanding of the diversity in our country. As a teacher of Spanish, I find myself in the challenging position of teaching content in a language that is not my students' mother tongue. I am constantly searching for ways in which to engage the students, both on the intellectual and the linguistic level. This year, my 12th grade Spanish 5 class was divided into two semester long thematic units, the first of which was "The Politics of Latin America". I began by focusing on politics as it relates to Hispanics in the United States. Long Island, the home to our school district, has seen a recent influx of Central American immigrants in the past few years. Since the immigration of Spanish speakers into the United States has often been fraught with controversy, it seemed like a fruitful place to start.

## The Lesson

We began the unit by focusing on one country, Colombia. As the wife of a Colombian-American who emigrated to the U.S. over twenty years ago, I was able to provide students with anecdotal accounts of immigrants' histories and stories. I invited my husband to our class to give students more background about the current political situation in his country. As he spoke to my students in Spanish, I could tell by their faces that they were riveted by his tales of violence and economic hardship. Students asked questions — many of them based on stereotypes about drugs, but just as many insightful queries about the government and everyday life. Hearing one person's real life story suddenly made the situation more authentic for my students and also served to clarify some misconceptions about Colombia. I knew that my students were slowly adding layers to what they already knew (or thought they knew) about Hispanic immigration to the US. The students then went to the Internet for more information. They visited sites as diverse as those of Café de Colombia/Colombian Coffee ([www.juanvaldez.com](http://www.juanvaldez.com)) and the Colombian Consulate in New York. We read a web-based picture book about a young boy's struggle with having to leave his home in Bogotá to move to Queens ([www.miscositas.com](http://www.miscositas.com)). Finally, my students wrote letters to Colombian stu-

**Servicio de Inmigración y Naturalización**  
**Audencia de ASILO POLITICO**

Apellido(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Sexo: H / F

Nombre(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Edad: \_\_\_\_\_ País de Origen: \_\_\_\_\_

¿El/Le solicitante ha sufrido persecución?  SI  NO

¿Tiene miedo de persecución por su:

opinión política	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
religión	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
nacionalidad	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
raza	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
asociación social	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Entrevista oral: \_\_\_\_\_

Determinación:  SI  NO

Figure 1

dents in a High School in Pereira and asked questions about the daily lives of kids their own age. After gathering as much information as possible, we were ready to begin the simulation activity. Students were asked to invent for themselves an identity. They needed a name, an age, a profession and a short biography (including information like family background, schooling, hobbies, skills, etc.). They were then given time in class to share their identities with their classmates and encouraged to start forming groups based on similarities. Some students joined together to form families. Others were business partners or university classmates. These groups were then charged with the task of filing a petition for political asylum. They were given a document printed in Spanish taken from the Colombian Yellow Pages (a publication created for the Colombian community in New York) with the rules for filing for asylum. As the groups read the rules, they elaborated on their biographies and created a rationale applying for legal alien status. Along with their bio sheets, each student was required to attach a digital photograph (2" x 2", as required by the Immigration and Naturalization Service) to the documents. We took these photos with a digital camera in class against a white board. As American students are prone to do, each student smiled as I raised the camera to my face. I explained that these photos were for official documents and that very few prospective US immigrants would smile for such a photo. The stoic stares that resulted in the photos helped to heighten the intensity of the project for the students. As students prepared for the culminating activity — their INS hearings — they were encouraged to create one item that they would be allowed to take with them to the interview. Some students designed a photo album depicting the horrible conditions they were forced to work in their home country. Another group brought along a bag of coffee a new strain that they had created and that the FARC (las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas/the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) wanted to steal from them. Yet another trio of students created and presented their daughter's birth certificate and a marriage license. The day of the hearings, students presented their cases in front of me (the hearing officer) and their classmates (a committee of INS agents). They stood at desks placed in front of the room and one by one, spoke about their lives in Colombia and why they were filing for political asylum. The

“agents” all asked relevant questions, trying to adhere to the guidelines for political asylum that they had studied. In order to help them make determinations about each case, students filled out a checklist based on the INS guidelines (see figure 1).

The applicants showed their photographs, explained their home situations, and pleaded their cases. The tone of the room was tense and serious, and some students were visibly shaken by their classmates’ stories. The passion with which each group of students presented its case was impressive. Students had become their characters and stated their cases with enthusiasm and even a sense of urgency. There were tales of kidnappings, financial struggles and family hardships. But despite the students’ enthusiasm and eloquence, in the end, not all students were granted the asylum they so desperately sought. The applicants needed to prove some form of persecution, and many students chose to provide a financial rationale when establishing their cases. When each group of students received their applications stamped with a large “aceptado/accepted” or “negado/denied”, their reactions were accordingly either jubilant or mournful. Some students, rather than arguing for better grades on the project, were more concerned about being granted their simulated asylum.

## Conclusion

The goal of this project was twofold: first, I wanted to provide my students with a meaningful context through which to improve their growing proficiency in Spanish. Along with the language goal, I wanted to address current topics in Latin America (in this case, the politics of Colombia) and also immigration issues in the United States. After our simulation, students admitted that they had no idea that immigration to this country was such an arduous task. Following the lesson, some students even expressed an interest in speaking to their parents about their own family’s path to America. In focusing on the struggles of one group of American immigrants, students could better understand those of other groups — their community’s, their classmates’, even their own. By allowing students to do immigration, and not merely learn about it, we expose them to feelings, thoughts and experiences that will stay with them and facilitate greater openness and interest in learning more about the issues. Simulations make students feel the issues — as evidenced by one student’s face as she read the “negado/denied” on her application. She looked up at me and asked in earnest: “Now what?” “What a good question,” I thought. Now what? Did the student ask in Spanish? In the months that have followed since this activity, students have formed their own political parties, created propaganda to enlist members and staged a group protest. Students often mention that they regularly think back to the immigration simulation and how they felt during that activity. The memory of the application process, the gathering of materials for their presentation, and the actual hearing itself have stayed with them and the feelings raised in those activities continue to inform their current projects. The simulation project by no means told the entire story of U.S. immigration, nor did it address all of the possible issues. It was never meant to accomplish such a goal, given the constraints of having only several 45-minute periods in a school setting. It did, however, set the stage for future learning. The students look at their own community somewhat differently now, with a bit more understanding, and a greater desire to learn even more about their country and themselves.