

# Cooking Up a Language Lesson as Complete and Complex as Making an *Arepa*

OMAR RACHID



As language educators, we are the linguistic chefs of every lesson to develop learner language proficiency and cultural competence. The steps involved in “cooking a language lesson” are as complete and as complex as those for making an *arepa*, from the curation of ingredients, to the form and preparation, to the final presentation. Following these steps ensures that lessons are nourishing for our learners and leave them asking for seconds.

Before proceeding with this culinary analogy to developing a complete language lesson, here is a brief explanation of an arepa and the rationale for their gastro-relevance to this focus topic. *Arepas* are an iconic food staple of Venezuelan and other Latin American cuisines, somewhat similar to an English muffin in shape and size, with the primary ingredient being corn flour.

The versatility of an arepa cannot be overstated; they can be sweet or savory, fried or baked, large or small, served with breakfast, lunch, dinner, or a late-night snack, be Venezuelan or Colombian, filled or topped, and made from corn, wheat, or even potato. The word arepa, which means corn, was appropriated from the *cumanagoto* (Cuervo) language of the indigenous Arawaks in the north-eastern region of present-day Venezuela. Since language and culture are inextricable, it would be irresponsible to fail to note that this national symbol carries in its complex flavors centuries of colonization, genocide, cultural erasure, and cultural appropriation.



This intersection of cultural richness and oppression, be it culinary or linguistic, also exists in our language classrooms. As language educators we must disrupt the patterns that create harmful environments for learners if lessons are to be complete, complex, engaging, proficiency-driven, and culturally responsive, from design to delivery.

### Curriculum as Ingredients

The main ingredients of an arepa are equal parts water and corn flour, a pinch of salt, and some cooking oil. The main ingredients of a complete lesson are equal parts unit objectives and daily Can-Do learning targets, a pinch of a hook to engage learners, and instructional moves that take into consideration teacher target language input, gradual movement toward learner independence, and cultural responsiveness to the learners “digesting” the lesson.

While this may seem like a lot, there are ways to systematize these practices without losing any flavor. The introduction of Harina P.A.N. in the 1960s allowed families to make arepas from pre-ground and pre-cooked flour rather than using the traditional labor-intensive process of grinding the corn into flour. Similarly, the following strategies can help put systems into place that allow the curation of ingredients to create efficiencies of scale in designing a lesson.

In a proficiency-driven language lesson, there are no time constraints. Students have a starting point or performance level, and the instruction guides them to the next performance level. Positizing this relationship between learner and language embeds both joy and purpose in the lesson as well as in the context of the greater learning objectives.

Prior to engaging in lesson design, the educator—preferably a team of educators—will have created unit objectives, the end of unit summative assessment, and the bite-sized weekly objective that feeds into the unit objectives. It is within this framework that we can then look at an individual lesson with this starting point:

Learning Target =  
Function (*Why*) +  
Context (*What*) +  
Structure (*How*)

When preparing the arepa mix for the lesson design, we need to clearly delineate the purpose of the lesson—the **why** behind the lesson. For this ingredient, it is helpful to refer to Appendix J in *The Keys to Planning for Learning* (Clementi, & Terrill, 2017) which breaks learning into six different functions and provides spiraling Can-Do Statement starters from Novice to Advanced levels. These will have been identified in the unit objectives so that the lessons build up learner confidence and maximize their performance in class.

Moving onto the context—the **What** behind the lesson design—it is important to note that the filling matters. It does not have to come out of a box, it does not have to be pre-packaged into identical, replicable bite-sized pieces, and it does not have to be one-size-fits-all. It does, however, have to de-center the educator and center the learner; it has to de-center eurocentrism and center the global majority; and it most certainly has to de-center the traditional foods, flags, and festivals of a curriculum in favor of intercultural communication objectives as found in the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* to embed cultural competence in the design of a lesson that has students working toward proficiency.

Strategies helpful in crafting a culturally responsive lesson can be found in *Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecards* developed by the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, & Peoples, 2019) which reflect on content and context to evaluate the kinds of representation that exists in the resources used taking into



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

Arepa de perico  
Source: [bettycrocker.com](http://bettycrocker.com)

Arepa de dominó  
Source: [flickr.com/photos/cherrylet/4981826848](https://www.flickr.com/photos/cherrylet/4981826848)

Arepa de reina pepiada  
Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

Some not-so-round Venezuelan arepas made by the author.



*Learning Walks, where colleagues open classroom doors for observation, and Curriculum Development Days, when educators co-plan units in advance, were felt to be the most fulfilling and relevant collaborative, professional learning experiences at Singapore American School over the past few years.*

consideration characters, authors, representation, social justice, and teacher materials. “The curriculum scorecard will work best if you have a team of at least three people with diverse identities (race, gender, age, sexuality, class, national origin) and roles (parent, student, teacher, administrator, community member) who work together to evaluate the curriculum” (p. 5) The final ingredient in the formula are the structures that are practiced and rehearsed during that lesson to build complexity, variety, and accuracy in the learner’s comprehension and production of language.

Nothing does more to communicate a growth mindset in the lesson and positivate the learner and educator relationship than this ingredient of the formula because it defines success at the beginning of the lesson, it offers an example of what that success looks like, and it provides opportunities for practice, self-assessment, and reassessment to achieve the learning target.

### Filling with Functions

Once a clear lesson objective has been established, a hook must be designed to physically, mentally, and emotionally prepare the learner to come into the learning space and to welcome new learning in the target language that activates prior knowledge from previous lessons. In essence, learners need an invitation to the gastronomical feast that is the lesson in order to maximize the learning.

In a 45-minute lesson, this looks like a 5- to 10-minute ‘appetizer’ as coined by my esteemed colleague David Pallás Gibanel, who has taught in more than half a dozen countries during his more than two-decade career as a Spanish educator. These appetizers assume the energy of a game show and connect to prior learning in a partner activity that maximizes participation. In short, these are mostly interpersonal oral activities that relate to the content of the unit and are conducted as partners so that students feel connected and immersed from the moment class begins.

The versatility of an arepa cannot be understated, and the metaphor is suitable for a lesson which can be filled with an endless array of instructional moves that cater to every taste palate, making it possible to differentiate and personalize instruction so that learners keep asking for more. The following is a curated selection of go-to instructional moves that can be used according to the function that is being targeted in that lesson.

- ***Arepa de Reina Pepiada* or **Description****

This classic, iconic, and nostalgia-filled arepa was named after a 1955 Miss Venezuela beauty queen. It consists of shredded chicken, lettuce, and avocado. This description paints a mental image and evokes emotions, which is what we should be aiming for as educators when targeting a lesson to practice the function of “describing.”

From Novice to Advanced levels, it works best to practice this function by pairing students in an activity in which Partner A can see the image and Partner B cannot see it, so the image should be covered. Partner A describes it by painting a mental picture of the image. After about a minute of description, Partner B is presented with two very similar images and has to decide which one is the one being described based on Partner A’s description. Another strategy that works well is the Password game, similar to Taboo; both work well to practice circumlocution, a strategy that builds the ability to describe.

- ***Arepa de Dominó* or **Narration****

First, slice the arepa open and make sure there is enough room for the filling. Then layer in deliciously prepared black beans. Finally, top it off with shredded sharp white cheese that does not completely melt in the heat of the arepa and the beans. Instructions like these allow learners to move from Novice to Intermediate to Advanced levels by first sequencing and then being able to narrate and retell stories or events.

To engage learners in organizing and sequencing, a lesson that works every time is a story presented to them as jumbled sentences. Present learners with the dialogue as a set of sentences in the wrong order and, based on context clues, they must order

them so that the phrases make chronological and sequential sense. Working first independently, then as partners, and then as a group, they must determine the right order. Once the phrases have been sequenced, subsequent rounds get more challenging. In Round 2, some of the sentences have missing words, while in Round 3, some of the sentences may have missing phrases. These more challenging rounds allow learners to attach meaning to the retelling of the story. This lesson filling is a big hit, fully engaging students' critical thinking to logically sequence events.

- *Arepa de Perico* or **Asking and Answering Questions**

Why the *arepa de perico*? Not because it is a Sunday brunch favorite (the tomato, egg, and onion filling tells you that breakfast is ready), but because this arepa is eponymous with the word for parakeet, a bird known for parroting short phrases. One of skills parroted in class is the art of asking good follow-up questions. This engages learners in listening to one another and responding both verbally and nonverbally to the interlocutor before them.

Interaction and fluency are arts that must be rehearsed, and for this I rely heavily on Let's Get Socratic!, a tool developed by the Duke University Talent Identification Program (2017). It identifies eight different strategies for learners to use when listening and actively participating in an interpersonal context, available at [tinyurl.com/2kst3xu8](https://tinyurl.com/2kst3xu8) for download. I have printed these strategies for students to have readily available, similar to a conversation placemat. During different rounds of prompted conversational practice, we will either all focus on one strategy or students will choose a strategy to focus on while their partner has to identify the strategy used. This adds a fun strategic twist to a prompted interpersonal conversation.

The variety of arepas is endless, and there are also more functions than those addressed above. In *The Keys to Planning for Learning*, three additional functions are referenced: expressing hopes, dreams, and possibilities; expressing advice, opinions, and preferences; and expressing feelings and emotions (Clementi, & Terrill, 2017). The

key is to develop a repertoire of fillings that are customizable and differentiated, so that educators and teams of educators can put systems in place without losing the flavor of the curriculum or instruction.

In a recent collaborative lesson planning session at Singapore American School, we re-examined how our lessons were building into a summative end-of-unit assessment that was culturally responsive. Using culturally responsive resources curated by our Office of Learning, we were able to take a step back and question the ways in which we assess, and the ways in which our learners experience the assessment so that it honors, validates, and affirms the diverse cultural norms and experiences present in our learning environments. We asked ourselves how are we centering minoritized voices and how are we intentionally undoing harmful practices that get carried from lesson to lesson, year to year?

We committed to affirming different ways of showing learning, whether publicly or in private; to acknowledging the ways in which our learners respond to fellow students in presentations; and to honoring “both the verbal and nonverbal culturally-influenced communication styles.” Our learning environment must be actively and proactively antiracist since “racist ideology and beliefs have been historically used as justification for discrimination both at the individual and institutional levels in the United States and remain ubiquitous” (Goosby, & Heidbrink, 2013).

### Permission to Innovate and Deconstruct

As arepas have evolved over the centuries, so has language. The genetic makeup of the arepa carries within it centuries of cultural erasure from the indigenous creators, and has been appropriated into the Spanish language and settler colonialism that has engulfed the American continent over the past 500 years. During this same time period, the genetic (Alemany, Ley, & Sánchez, 2016) makeup of the Spanish language has also evolved; approximately 3% of the words are indigenous to different peoples of the American

continent. This grants us as language educators permission to innovate and deconstruct the language to reflect the learners in front of us and the future that is in front of them. In anchoring lesson design to the ingredients of a learning target, to the filling of an essential function of language, and to the commitment of a culturally responsive experience, we can cook a language lesson as complete and as complex as an *arepa*.

*Omar Rachid is based in Seattle, Washington, where he will begin teaching Middle School French at Lakeside School in Fall 2022 after having spent seven years teaching, coaching, and leading at Singapore American School in Singapore.*

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