

Leaders in Class? Leadership Seminars as New Ways of Promoting Participation and Deepening Student Knowledge

Olga Tararova
Assistant Professor
University of Western Ontario
otatarov@uwo.ca

Abstract

As educators, we constantly strive to find new ways to engage students in class. Different methods have been used throughout decades to teach a new subject. It is important to understand however, that learning is dependent on the students' involvement with the material, as well as their active participation. Leadership seminars can be one of the great activities to increase engagement, as well as improve student participation. In a pilot study, students had to become leaders of small groups as part of a course requirement. Every week, three different students had to prepare a handout of the material covered during the lecture and present it three times to three different small groups. The leaders were required to review and summarize the major concepts discussed previously, answer any questions that their group members might have, and finally, lead the group by preparing 2-3 short exercises based on the assigned topic. Exercises should have been well-thought out and creative with the goal of deepening student knowledge on a given topic. Fifteen students participated in the activity throughout the semester. The results showed that the students became more active during class discussions upon the completion of their leadership seminar; those students, who were shy at the beginning of the semester, became more confident, while asking and answering questions. Secondly, the students became more knowledgeable of the material since it was repeated and reviewed three times. Finally, they started showing more respect to the professor after realizing the sheer number of hours involved in preparing weekly material.

Como educadores, nos esforzamos constantemente para encontrar nuevas formas de involucrar a los estudiantes en clase. Se han utilizado diferentes métodos a lo largo de décadas para enseñar una nueva materia. Sin embargo, es importante comprender que el aprendizaje depende de la involucración del estudiante con el material, así como de su participación en clase. Los seminarios de liderazgo pueden ser una de las exitosas actividades para aumentar la motivación estudiantil, así como para mejorar la participación de los estudiantes. En un estudio piloto, los estudiantes tenían que convertirse en líderes de grupos pequeños como parte de un requisito del curso. Cada semana, tres estudiantes diferentes tenían que preparar un folleto del material cubierto durante la 'lecture' y presentarlo tres veces en tres grupos pequeños diferentes. Los líderes debían revisar y resumir los conceptos principales discutidos anteriormente, responder a cualquier pregunta que pudieran tener los miembros de su grupo y, finalmente, guiar al grupo preparando 2-3 ejercicios cortos basados en el tema asignado. Los ejercicios deberían haber sido bien pensados y creativos con el objetivo de profundizar el conocimiento de los estudiantes sobre un tema determinado. Quince alumnos completaron la actividad a lo largo del semestre. Los resultados mostraron que los estudiantes se volvieron más motivados durante las discusiones de clase al finalizar su seminario de liderazgo; esos estudiantes, que eran tímidos al comienzo del semestre, se volvieron más seguros al hacer y responder preguntas. En segundo lugar, los estudiantes adquirieron un mayor conocimiento del material ya que se repitió y revisó tres veces. Finalmente, comenzaron a mostrar más respeto al profesor después de darse cuenta de la gran cantidad de horas involucradas en la preparación del material semanal.

Keywords: leadership seminar, participation, student-oriented classroom

1 Introduction

As language professors or educators, we constantly aim to find new methods for making classes more interesting and increase participation. On the basis of communicative approaches, we focus on engaging students through interactive activities, which implicitly include practice of grammatical concepts. In linguistic classes, participation might be more of an issue since most of the classes are based on explaining theoretical concepts and essentially doing more traditional exercises, where student participation might be relatively low. Even though linguistic classes seem to be more theoretically driven, they can also be engaging and motivating. This study proposes a “Seminar Leadership Presentation” task that seems to be a successful activity to increase student participation and deepen their understanding of the material, as mentioned in student evaluations of two undergraduate linguistic courses, as well as in their reflection papers.

The rest of paper is organized in the following order. Section 1.1 presents an overview of student background in linguistic classes, followed by section 2, which includes the description of what a seminar leadership is, followed by quantitative results obtained from the student evaluations and reflection papers. Section 3 concludes with the discussion of seminar leadership effectiveness.

1.1. Student background in linguistic classes

The two linguistic classes under study were undergraduate courses designed for second- and third-year students. The first one, “Comparative Grammar of English & Spanish” included 11 English dominant L2 students, who were either enrolled in intermediate or advanced Spanish classes. Those who were taking second year Spanish were slightly timid due to their incomplete acquisition of Spanish, specifically frequent errors while speaking. There were also four Spanish heritage speakers: two of them were using Spanish on a daily basis, while the other two were using English on a regular basis. The other 3rd year class, “Structure of Spanish Language” included eight English dominant students, who were either taking advanced Spanish or previously went on an extensive exchange program to a Spanish speaking country; four students were proficient Spanish speakers, whereas four of them had low advanced level. The other four students were Spanish heritage or native speakers and used Spanish on a daily basis. According to Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky (2010), heritage speakers can vary and usually when comparing second-generation heritage speakers with first-generation speakers or monolingual speakers, the former group usually displays significant changes and gaps in their grammars at all levels of structural analysis. However, in contrast with L2 speakers, usually even less proficient heritage speakers appear to have better phonetic and phonological abilities, but reduced vocabularies, basic word order, etc. (e.g., Montrul, 2012). Therefore, variability in student profiles becomes important specifically when there are native and non-native speakers in the same classroom. In the case of the two present classes under the study, most of the heritage speakers had exceptional oral communication skills but struggled while writing long answers. In contrast, L2 speakers had weaker oral capacities but overall, we better in writing.

2 Seminar Leadership Presentations

Seminar leadership presentations were used in two linguistic courses, “Structure of Spanish Language” and “Comparative Grammar of Spanish and English” with roughly 12-15 student enrolment in each class. In order to motivate students and test their knowledge, 15% was allocated to seminar leadership project, which included the handout and the actual presentation done in class. Since both classes were 3 hour long, the first two hours were lecture based, whereas the other hour was conducted by different *leaders*. Each week three students were selected in order to conduct a 15-minute presentation of one phenomenon discussed during the lecture class. In total, three major phenomena were picked but each leader was responsible to teach only their part. During the seminars, the class was broken up into small groups of no more than five students and each leader had to *lead* that small group’s seminar for a duration of 15 minutes. In 15 minutes, the groups alternated so those five students would go to a different leader and listen to the presentation on another phenomenon. This way, the leader was repeating the same explanation three times to three

different groups. At the end, three groups had a chance to hear three different phenomena from three leaders.

During the 15-minute discussion with each group (15x3), the leaders were responsible for the following three tasks:

- 1) Review and summarize the major concepts of one phenomenon discussed during the lecture (roughly 6-7 minutes).
- 2) Be responsible for answering any questions that the group members might have (roughly 1-2 minutes).
- 3) Prepare 2-3 short interactive activities based on their assigned topic. Exercises should be well-thought, creative in order to deepen student knowledge on a given topic (roughly 6-7 minutes).

Leaders were required to submit and provide a handout to each group member which included the summary and major points of the discussed concepts, as well as the activities prepared in advance. The handout and the presentation were prepared and presented in Spanish.

In one of classes, on top of the presentation and the handout, students were also required to submit an individual reflection paper about their experience leading a seminar. In the reflection paper, they had to focus on the effectiveness of their presentation, an overview of ideas generated during the question or discussion period within their small groups, and most importantly, an analysis of any changes in understanding the presented phenomenon. The reflection paper, similar the other two tasks, was completed in Spanish.

3 Results. Effectiveness of the seminars

The next two subsections discuss the results obtained from student evaluations (section 3.1), while section 3.2 shows results from reflection papers from one of the courses.

3.1 Qualitative results from the anonymous student evaluations

The following excerpts (1-3) provide detailed comments regarding the seminars.

- (1) *Student 1: I enjoyed the seminarios, because they helped me to see what areas I needed more work in, and by explaining it to someone else and trying to answer their questions, I learned the material better myself.*

Based on student 1 comments, seminars were effective in helping students improve on their work and understand the material better. Student 2 also found *seminario* method useful in consolidating student knowledge on the specific subject.

- (2) *Student 2: I appreciate that you engage all the class and encourage us to become pseudo-experts on certain topics to teach to our peers through the "seminario" model. I think this is an effective teaching that helps us to consolidate our knowledge.*

Student 3 mentioned not only the effectiveness of seminar presentations in terms of deepening the knowledge but also as an entertaining method to change the class style.

- (3) *Student 3: I really enjoyed this course! I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from it but I found the linguistic aspect that was incorporated made it really interesting and worthwhile, particularly for those looking to continue on in something like linguistics. The peer-led seminars proved to be a lot of fun; it was interesting to see how everyone presented and reinforced the course material and it made for a nice change of pace throughout the term as well. It was also a great refresher course for those who have already taken intermediate Spanish while still being suitable for those in less advanced language courses. This class helped my knowledge of the Spanish language*

and its structures, all while comparing them to English. I found the course fascinating and I'm really glad I took it!

In sum, as seen from the above examples, the students found the seminars to be efficient activity in deepening student knowledge and creating fun and relaxed atmosphere.

3.2 Comments from the reflection papers

Similar to the aforementioned observations, students found the experience of leading the seminars very effective, as seen from their reflection papers. For example, Student 1 in (4) commented about the effectiveness of the seminar through the repetition of the same information and the activities despite a short period of time. Student 2 in (5) mentioned the amount of time spent on preparing for a lesson in order to achieve a high level of understanding of the material needed to be taught. Finally, Student 3 in (6) commented on creating collaborative dialog between the student and the classmates in order to teach as well as learn from and with them.

- (4) *Student 1 (Spanish L2 speaker): Es más, aprendí que la práctica y la repetición son esenciales para interiorizar nueva información y que las actividades simples¹ – específicamente en un periodo corto – producen resultados muy efectivos. Después de todo, adquirí conocimiento de las complejidades de ambos modos, además de los retos enfrentados por los instructores. A fin de cuentas, fue una buena experiencia, aunque no sucedió como lo había previsto. He podido aprender de los desafíos y logros que tuve y, si jamás surge la necesidad, me siento preparada para liderar un seminario más eficaz en el futuro. 'Moreover, I learned that practice and repetition are essential to internalize new information and that simple activities - specifically, in a short period - produce very effective results. After all, I gained knowledge of the complexities of both moods [subjunctive & indicative], in addition to the challenges faced by the instructors. After all, it was a good experience, although it did not happen as planned. I have been able to learn from the challenges and achievements that I had and, if I ever get the change, I feel prepared to lead a more effective seminar in the future.'*
- (5) *Student 2 (heritage Spanish speaker): Después de enseñar el seminario, me di cuenta que requiere mucho más trabajo enseñar sobre el tema que el leer sobre ello. Gracias a seminario, yo pienso que tengo una mejor idea de cuando se usan los tiempos compuestos, o como se usan los tiempos compuestos en español y en inglés. Yo pienso que al tener que prepararme para enseñar a mis compañeros, pude tener un nivel más alto de comprensión sobre el tema, porque yo tenía que saberlo todo, en caso de que mis compañeros tuvieran preguntas. 'After teaching the seminar, I realized that it requires a lot more work to teach about the subject than to read about it. Thanks to the seminar, I think I have a better idea of when and how compound tenses are used in Spanish and English. I think that having to prepare myself to teach my colleagues, I was able to get a higher level of understanding the subject, because I had to know everything, in case my colleagues had questions.'*
- (6) *Student 3 (native Spanish speaker): esta actividad fue una gran oportunidad para hablar con mis compañeros, y enseñarles acerca de un tema complejo. Aprendí igual que ellos, y me siento mas confiado en mi habilidad para enseñar a un grupo pequeño. 'This activity was a great opportunity to talk to my classmates, and teach them about a complex topic. I learned just like them, and I feel more confident in my ability to teach a small group.'*

Thus, similar to the anonymous feedback, reflection papers demonstrate student's positive attitudes towards using the seminar method.

¹ See Appendix A for the example of activities and the handout used

4 Discussion and evaluation of the seminar leadership project

Since this method of evaluation was new to both of the classes, most of the students were worried about the quality of their work. However, the majority of the leadership presentations were done in an exceptional manner. Usually during the first round, the presenters were nervous and were checking their handouts very frequently. However, after the first 15 minutes, they felt more secure and started feeling more relaxed. The last round was usually the most successful as the leaders became more confident, comfortable and 'stress-free'. As seminars became weekly activities, the two classes became more student-oriented and created the sense of familiarity, trust and awareness. From personal observations, students started remembering each other's names and eventually became relatively close. Moreover, everyone in class started participating; they became very engaged in their small groups and continuously cheered the leaders if one of them would commit errors in Spanish. In other words, committing errors in Spanish was no longer the issue as the students wanted to engage themselves with the material by asking questions and being involved in discussions.

The seminars also became a great method for reviewing for the upcoming quizzes and tests. The handouts that the leaders provided were great guides while preparing for tests. Moreover, during the seminars, students were able to apply the knowledge while completing activities. Because some activities were very interactive and creative (e.g., using Spanish songs to identify different grammatical structures, implementing different images to identify ambiguity sentences, etc.), students were very motivated and enthusiastic to work on the tasks and also recognize the errors they previously had. Regarding student performance, the average mark for the midterm of the first class was much higher than in most of the other previously taught linguistic courses, which did not include the seminar component. In the future, it would be interesting to see if there is any direct correlation between leadership seminars and the student performance by testing student's knowledge prior to leading the seminars and after the seminars are over.

Finally, as stated in one of the reflection papers as well as mentioned in class informally, students started to pay more attention to the material and show more respect to the Professor. This was recalled from their multiple comments, which included *"wow, this PowerPoint looks amazing! I know understand the difference between los tiempos pasados"*, *"I spent 5 hours preparing for this seminar. I cannot imagine how LONG it takes you to prepare the lectures each week"*, etc. Besides, most of the students were constantly present in the class.

In sum, using tasks, such as Leadership Seminars could be an effective method to engage the students, deepen their knowledge of the material through peer-led mini presentations, create a friendly environment, and finally create the sense of respect and trust between the Professor and the students.

References

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Apéndice A. El folleto

¿Cuándo se usa el subjuntivo?

- El subjuntivo se usa en oraciones complejas
- Hay por lo menos 2 cláusulas: una cláusula independiente y una cláusula dependiente
- En la cláusula independiente, hay un **sujeito distinto** y un verbo en el indicativo
- En la cláusula dependiente, hay **otro sujeto** distinto y un verbo en el subjuntivo
- Las cláusulas están conectadas por el nexos "que"

sujeto₁ + verbo [indicativo]
que
sujeto₂ + verbo [subjuntivo]

Las condiciones que "desencadenan" el uso del subjuntivo en el presente son las mismas para todo tiempo verbal. La única diferencia es que la oración se refiere a acciones o eventos en el pasado.

¿Cuándo se usa el indicativo?

- El indicativo es la forma que se usa en la mayoría de los contextos
- Se utiliza para hablar de hechos reales y información factual
- La oración *se tiene* por cierta
- Cuando no hay cambio de sujeto, se usa el **infinitivo**

Certainty

no dudar	to not doubt
no hay duda de	there is no doubt
no negar	to not deny
creer	to believe
estar seguro (de)	to be sure
es cierto	it's true
es seguro	it's certain
es verdad	it's true
es obvio	it's obvious

*Es verdad que Chile es un país bonito.
No niego que hay mucho tráfico esta tarde.
Los amigos de María creen que vendrá hoy.
Es obvio que te gustan las telenovelas.*

En la forma interrogativa, estas expresiones requieren el subjuntivo, porque las preguntas implican generalmente duda o incertidumbre.

Subjuntivo

VS

Indicativo

¿Qué es un modo?

- El modo [mood] expresa la actitud del hablante con respecto a la acción
- No es un tiempo**
- El tiempo sitúa la realización de la acción en un tiempo determinado (pasado, presente, futuro)

¿Qué es el modo indicativo?

- Es un modo verbal que indica realidad u objetividad y expresa acciones seguras
- Cuando el hablante considera la acción real o cierta, se usa el **indicativo**

¿Qué es el modo subjuntivo?

- Es un modo que expresa incertidumbre con relación a la acción
- Según el hablante, la acción es posible, deseable o dudosa, pero **no** cierta
- Señala la subjetividad

El exterior del folleto. Se trata de explicar el concepto de modo gramatical y cuándo se usa el subjuntivo a diferencia del indicativo. Los modos son codificados por colores.

Wishes, desires, imperatives

desear	to desire; to wish
esperar	to hope; to wish
insistir (en)	to insist (on)
mandar	to order
necesitar	to need
pedir	to ask (for)
querer	to want

*Enrique quiere que salgamos a cenar.
Blanca necesita que yo le preste dinero.
Su tía les manda que pongan la mesa.
Espero que hayan dormido bien.*

Emotions

alegrarse (de)	to be happy
gustar	to like
molestar	to bother
sentir	to be sorry; to regret
sorprender	to surprise
temer	to be afraid; to fear

*Me molesta que la gente no recicle.
Siento que tú no puedas venir mañana.
Nos alegramos de que te gusten las flores.
Le sorprende que seas tan joven.*

Impersonal observations

es bueno	it's good
es importante	it's important
es necesario	it's necessary
es ridículo	it's ridiculous
es terrible	it's terrible
es triste	it's sad
es una lástima	it's a shame

*Es triste que hayas perdido tu cartera.
Es necesario que llames a la farmacia hoy.
Es una lástima que no puedas ir a la fiesta.
Es importante que comas sano.*

Recommendations

aconsejar	to advise
recomendar	to recommend
sugerir	to suggest

*Le aconsejé que no salgara con él.
Te recomiendo que bebas más agua.
Le han sugerido que yo corra todos los días.*

Doubt, denial, disbelief

dudar	to doubt
es imposible	it's impossible
es improbable	it's improbable
negar	to deny
no creer	to not believe
no es cierto	it's not true
no es seguro	it's not certain

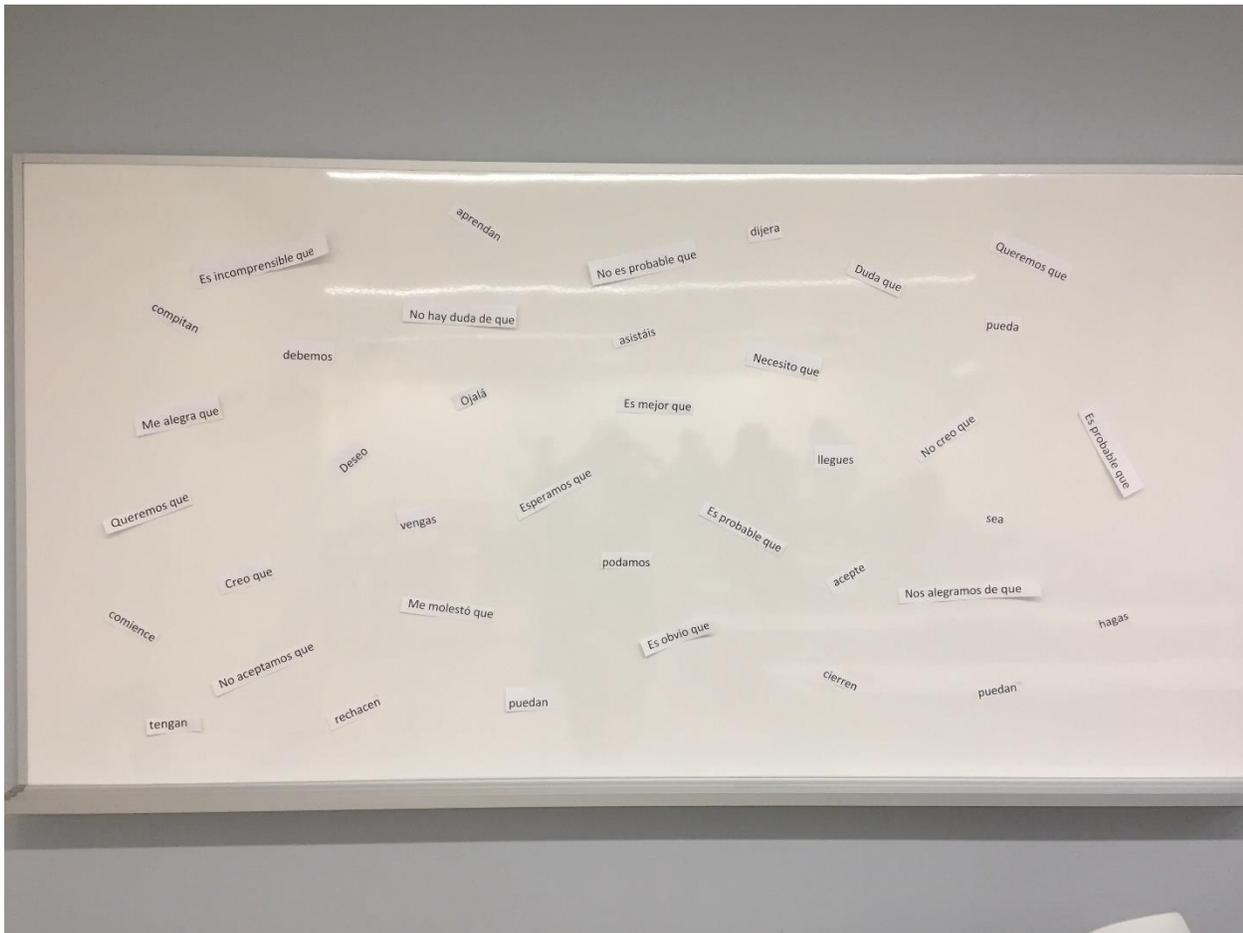
*Dudo que resuelvan ese problema.
Es imposible que mi móvil no funcione.
No creo que su hijo le dijera la verdad.
No era seguro que el candidato ganara las elecciones.*

Ojalá & Speculation

ojalá (que)	I hope (that); hopefully
a menos que	unless
antes (de) que	before
en caso (de) que	in case (that)
para que	so that
sin que	without
tan pronto como	as soon as

*¡Ojalá no llueva!
Ojalá que todo salga bien.
Llegué al campus antes de que la clase hubiera comenzado.
Voy a dejar un recado en caso de que Alejandro me llame.*

El interior del folleto. Las expresiones del subjuntivo, con sus traducciones al inglés, aparecen según el acrónimo WEIRDOS, aprendido en clase. Ejemplos de oraciones utilizando las expresiones están incluidos.

Apéndice B. Las actividades

Para esta actividad, dos estudiantes se ponen de pie enfrente de la pizarra con unas matracas de mano (“hand clappers”). Yo decía una oración completa que utilizaba una expresión de que habíamos discutido. El desafío era de encontrar la expresión en la pizarra antes de la otra persona.

¿Subjuntivo o Indicativo?

Práctica

Dibuje un círculo alrededor de la forma correcta y subraye las palabras que indican el modo del subjuntivo o del indicativo.

Dudo que mi madre viene / venga.

Es verdad que esa mujer es / sea su novia.

Es bueno que no sois / seáis tristes.

Estoy seguro de que logras / logres el éxito.

Es cierto que me reconocen / reconozcan.

Niega que este hombre es / sea su amigo.

Es importante que estudias / estudies mucho.

No es cierto que Juan sabe / sepa la verdad.

Es increíble que él no te cree / crea.

Ojalá que hace / haga sol.

Es seguro que vais / vayáis al cine.

Tú no estás / estés en clase ahora.

Dibuje una línea de las cláusulas en columna A a las cláusulas en columna B para formar una frase gramaticalmente correcta.

Alicia quiere

que deja de llover pronto.

Es ridículo

que explotemos nuestros recursos naturales.

Es terrible

que hablaras así de ti mismo.

Le molestó

que Julio le acompañe al baile.

No dudo

que Miguel no haya acabado su proyecto.

No es posible

que no le gustaba el chocolate.

Ojalá

que suban el precio de la gasolina.

Les pedí

que trajeran algo para la comida a la canasta.

Te aconsejo

que vayas a ver al médico.

Yo pensaba

que vengan a vernos.

Encuentre los verbos en el subjuntivo y en el indicativo. Note los infinitivos. Subraye la cláusula independiente.

La reina quiere ser la mujer más bella del reino. Es cierto que lo es, porque el espejo mágico le dice todos los días. Sin embargo, un día, el espejo dice que ahora hay una que es más guapa: Blancanieves. Al escuchar esto, la reina se enfurece contra su hijastra. Ella necesita vengarse. Reúne a todos sus sirvientes con prisa y les dice:

“Hace unos instantes el espejo mágico me ha revelado que ahora Blancanieves es más guapa que yo. Es por esto que les ordeno que la capturen, la lleven al bosque y la maten. No dudo que son capaces de cumplir eso, pero es importante que yo sepa de su muerte. Es mejor que me traigan en una caja su corazón.”

Los sirvientes están tristes y piensan: “¡Es una lástima que la reina esté celosa de Blancanieves! Es terrible tengamos que cumplir ese orden. Es triste que Blancanieves sea tan joven.” Es obvio que no quieren hacerle daño. Por este motivo, se inventan otro plan...