

“Real Language”: Combining Intermediate Spanish Language Learners and ESOL/Native speakers for Vernacular Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the possibilities of combining Spanish language learners and English language learners in high school and post-secondary institutions for mutual benefit to learn authentic language. Academic or “classroom” Spanish is insufficient to empower students for today’s workplace. The concept behind “Real Language” is illustrated by an example of an interdisciplinary activity to facilitate communicative interaction in genuine language and promote cultural understanding between intermediate Spanish students and ESOL/native speakers at the high school and post-secondary level. Students are asked to utilize their life skills in interactive, freestyle conversation without the intervention of an instructor. The learning space for language exchange is an out-of-class venue for a non-intimidating, more authentic setting. This simple qualitative study investigates the potential value of this sort of interdisciplinary activity. The intent is to evaluate attitudes of the participants in relation to confidence in their ability to use the target language, and their willingness to use it in social and professional environments and, in addition, to facilitate cultural understanding. The positive result of the project is validated by the voice of the student participants as they reflect on their experience in “Real Language”. Could this concept facilitate evolving strategies for interdisciplinary contemporary foreign language learning?

Keywords: vernacular language, interdisciplinary activity, attitude (toward L2 learning).

INTRODUCTION

“I took Spanish in high school and college, made A’s, and I am unable to communicate with the native Spanish-speakers I come in contact with.”

“I took two semesters of Spanish in high school and can’t even order food in a restaurant.”

These reactions are typical when high school and college graduates are asked about their ability and confidence to actually use the foreign language they learned in their studies. Such comments are an indictment on present day methodology and

performance goals in American high school and college curricula. The United States has a population of over 35 million Spanish-speakers [1]. The language of this community represents a diverse variety of world Spanish dialects from a geographical distribution of over 22 countries. This wide expanse of language source is influenced by a similarly diverse range of cultures infused with indigenous and regional dialects. There is no one academic “classroom” Spanish that, in itself, can equip students for Spanish language use in the United States in social situations and the contemporary workplace.

As stated, the Spanish spoken in the United States is a largely vernacular language; a language that is very different from the national academic language performance outcomes of today’s foreign language curriculum [2]. If a Spanish language learner enters professions such as sociology, law enforcement, education, or medicine, exposure to authentic native Spanish speakers to augment classroom learning is becoming more necessary to empower the student with competent communicative ability in vernacular language, language as it is really spoken. For example, most colleges offering a major in Spanish include a mandatory study abroad immersion component to provide the exposure and experience of listening, speaking, and interacting with native speakers in an “authentic” Spanish context. Non-language majors, in contrast, get primarily lab exercises and classroom conversation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most high schools and post-secondary institutions have Spanish language learners and ESOL students. Spanish-speaking people constitute the largest minority language group in the U.S., and contemporary movements in foreign language pedagogy advocate a communicative approach to L2 acquisition. Given these facts, why have educators not realized the potentials of combining the two groups for mutual needs in genuine language acquisition and exchange of authentic cultural knowledge? A survey at a small southeastern college revealed that students who are Spanish language learners do not use native Spanish-speaking students

for help and practice unless they sit in class with them. Most cite embarrassment and feelings of incompetence as reasons for not taking advantage of the outstanding resource the native speakers could be. When asked, the native speakers give a similar response [3]. This situation implies a need for activity designed to break down the common barriers of embarrassment and cultural differences that cause students to pass up the opportunities around them to practice and perfect their L2 skills.

This article is intended to show that both groups found in most high schools and post-secondary institutions have numerous goals in common. The shared needs for immersion at any level would suggest that it would be mutually beneficial to initiate an interdisciplinary approach in the institution's curriculum to the benefit of both disciplines. This research is grounded in the pedagogical philosophies of John Dewey who advocates taking advantage of the rich cultural and linguistic background each student has embedded in their life experiences [4], Paulo Freire who demonstrates that marginal groups can learn and succeed and that their experience has value [5], and bell hooks, who believes in "taking learning out of the classroom" [6]. The basic rationale taken from these educators is that both groups are, in most institutions, separated, and with no initiation of movement towards combination for mutual benefit. The activity used in this article is to seed the mind of the reader with just one simple example of the almost limitless number of projects, activities, course supplements, or eventually whole interdisciplinary classes that could be imagined. The possibilities of interdisciplinary strategy and activity between these two groups are limited only by the imagination of the designer.

PERTINENT LITERATURE

Foreign language pedagogy has steadily developed since its introduction in education in the United States. The literature in question shows the movement from a strict discipline to an outcome-based communicative endeavor. Foreign language study initially emerged from the study of Latin where emphasis was on grammar and language without much thought for production. By the 1960s the standard of teaching foreign language was audiolingualism. The audiolingual method focused on intense drills, completely academic learning with little focus on the world at large that spoke the target language. [7] [8]. After a few years audiolingualism began to give way to other methods and approaches and more attention was given to cultural knowledge. Eventually, the focus of language learning began to shift toward learning the style of language spoken by the average speaker and teaching techniques for genuine communication [9]. Subsequent changes in strategies for outcomes started to focus on the element of the Spanish-speaking society in the United States and to include cultural understanding as well as communicative skills.

By the early 1970s textbooks were changing their focus from academic learning to communication plus development of understanding the culture of the target language. The textbook *Churros y Chocolate* was one of the earliest to reflect this shift as expressed in the author's introduction and mission statement [10].

The next movement in foreign language education was a shift to take learning outside of the classroom. Service Learning began to develop as a method of placing students into the world of authentic experiences [5] [6] [11] [12]. The language laboratory also became a center of focus to create authentic vernacular language interchange. Activities began to change from speaking drills and grammar structure practice to devices such as taped interviews among native speakers, films and use of recordings of authentic language exchange often interspersed with the responses of the student. Assessment also changed from grammar and structure practice to include conversational interchanges revolving around cultural situations [13].

Since the 1980s the educational scene in the United States changed drastically again with the advent of the "digital revolution". This revolution in education evolved at such a rapid pace that new technologies and new ways of treating literacy are coming on the scene and changing faster than they can be studied and evaluated. Students' voluntary and out-of-school practices are mostly multimodal (e.g. e-mails, digital stories, websites, online texts and chatting, social media, blogs, etc.). Educators can now look for ways to incorporate these out-of-school experiences into their curriculum and classroom activities [14]. This research has been extended to English language learners' home practices and the role of such social contexts to investigate their literacy development [15] [16].

The latest textbooks now incorporate student experience with "Real Language" both inside and outside of the classroom. The text *Experience Spanish* [17] reflects the movement toward making full use of the technological revolution of the last several decades to take the student to the Spanish-speaking world through actual contact via the Internet. An example is the online component to the text which has a virtual study abroad experience complete with problems that typically arise in a study abroad program.

There is a gap in research and philosophy that could meet the needs of both Spanish language learners and native Spanish speakers who are English language learners through interdisciplinary activities, classes, and textbook supplements. There is very little research being published advocating that the needs of Spanish learners and ESOL learners can be addressed simultaneously. Even with the differences in the immersion factor in the United States, many educational goals, methods and outcomes are the same in the areas of education. This research proposes investigation of the combination of the two groups (Spanish language learners and ESOL/native speakers) to

incorporate a new avenue of educational research and practice to enhance the mutual needs of both groups.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guide the “Real Language” lab activity in hopes that educators might see the value of interdisciplinary activity and initiate more interest in the future.

RQ1: Would Spanish language learners and ESOL students benefit from interdisciplinary communicative activities for acquisition of genuine language, increased confidence, and cultural understanding through freestyle language exchange?

RQ2: Does the lack of instructor participation and control increase the willingness and quality of student participation?

METHODOLOGY

This argument for interdisciplinary activity is presented by an example of the success of a simple pilot lab activity designed to show the implications of an interdisciplinary approach to Spanish/ESOL partial immersion.

Action research serves as the methodological framework for this project for several reasons. The primary justification is the production of new knowledge. The knowledge gleaned is practice-driven rather than theory-driven. Also, conclusions will be drawn from the results recorded by the participants rather than the researcher’s agenda [18].

In addition, a modified form of participatory action research developed by Paulo Freire is embedded in the methodology of this study. The experimentation and innovation of methodology departs from the formal model where the “teacher” as presenter, stands at the front and “imparts” information to the “students” that are passive recipients [5]. The “Real Language” model removes the teacher from the experience as much as possible to facilitate the “natural” speech found outside the classroom environment. In this activity, instructors are present as observers from a distance but separated from any interaction during the two periods of activity.

The following procedure is a language laboratory activity that began as a pilot study to determine the value of combining both intermediate Spanish language learners and ESOL/native Spanish-speakers for mutual benefit in acquiring vernacular language skills and authentic interchange of knowledge of all cultures represented.

The “Real Language” lab

Rationale:

The goals of the exercise are twofold: a) to create an uninhibited conversation venue that is not instructor-driven, and b) to provide a relaxed, non-stressed environment for the exchange of vernacular language and cultural knowledge among peers. Students are asked to discuss topics of their own interest that may or may not be part of a formal classroom situation. Participants are given ample opportunity to produce phrases, idiomatic expressions, and colloquial terms that would not typically be addressed in a classroom environment. Thus, the students would experience language as it is actually spoken in the marketplace with peers who speak the target language as natives and have the same needs for genuine language acquisition of the other group. Learning comes through self-generated criticism, interaction, help, and natural curiosity. Intercultural friendships are a pleasant and natural potential offshoot of these exercises. The following laboratory activity was performed, observed, and critiqued twice with three students of each group participating.

PROCEDURE

1. Intermediate Spanish students and ESL students/native Spanish speakers sign up in equal numbers to form groups up to 4 of each language. The participants are chosen randomly from the students that express interest in participation.
2. The group sessions last 40 minutes: 20 minutes of speaking only Spanish followed by 20 minutes of speaking only English.
3. Students are invited to speak freely about any topic they choose. The only rule is to stay completely in the target language.
4. Instructors observe from a distance and do not intervene except to signal the moment to switch languages, this it is strictly a peer activity.
5. Instructors can choose from a variety of methods of grading. Credit can be given as a participation grade or as a part of the overall lab grade. The number of sessions or frequency can be established to suit the instructional style and goals of each instructor.
6. Written evaluations are expected from the students immediately after each session.

RESULTS

The following evaluation questions were the ones each student responded to at the end of each section. The open-ended questions are being presented with the resulting comments of students after two sessions of the “Real Language” lab activity. The students were in a comfortable

room designed for conversation practice (previously for practice conducted as a guided conversation in which instructors lead in the interchanges prompted by questions related to the thematic context of the chapter currently being studied). Students were situated in the room with the knowledge that instructors would be “around” but would not participate. The conversations will not be audited nor recorded; they will be totally between the students. Students can talk about any subject they wish to choose. The only rule which must be strictly adhered to is that the first 20 minutes would be in English only, and the second 20 minutes in Spanish only. An instructor will only intervene to enter the room at the halfway point and instruct them to switch languages.

The following list is the 10 open-ended qualitative response questions about the experience, followed by all responses given during the two times the lab was conducted. There were different students each time. After answering the open-ended qualitative questions about the experience a few questions were given to allow the suggestions of the students for changes in future labs.

Student Evaluation (with responses)

Intermediate Spanish students / ESL students, native Spanish speakers

Please evaluate your “Real Language” lab experience by answering the following questions. Remember, your responses are confidential.

There are several questions to solicit your opinions, suggestions, and criticisms. Your observations are very important. They will help determine the value of this type of activity and continue to craft it to enable future students to obtain a more meaningful language learning experience.

1. Was your lab session valuable to learning a new language?

All positive responses: (very helpful experience) (yes) (informal environment helped)

2. Did you feel intimidated using the target language with peers?

Not intimidating: (some at first, but quickly felt comfortable) (all the conversation was very interesting) (it was very easy to talk)

3. Did you learn things you would not have learned in class?

All positive responses: (I learned what it’s like to be a minority) (we spoke about things we wouldn’t have in class) (we spoke about personal subjects) (talking to real people outside of class helps)

4. Do you feel the things you learned are as useful or more useful as regular classroom practice?

All positive responses: (it was very useful) (these were real life conversations!)

5. Did you learn things about the culture of the other students?

All positive responses: (we spent time talking about customs) (I learned something about women) (I learned about Peru)

6. Did you feel you were sharing knowledge of your cultural values and differences with the other participant?

All positive responses: (some) (yes)

7. Do you feel this was a positive learning experience?

All positive responses: (truly it is) (si mucho)

8. Did you like not having an instructor present?

All positive responses: (yes the instructor is intimidating) (less intimidation)

9. Would you like to continue these sessions as a regular lab requirement?

All positive responses: (replace QUIA lab with this) (QUIA was the online laboratory supplement to the classroom text) (yes)

10. How effectively were you able to correct each other’s errors in grammar and pronunciation?

All positive responses: (yes, and I think this is the key to learning a language) (the lab was most useful for pronunciation) (Yes, several times)

Suggestions

-What improvements would you suggest in future sessions?

(Groups of 2 or 3, no more) (Longer sessions) (Table games that utilize vocabulary) (Provide food and drink)

-Describe your overall experience. What did you like or dislike about the activity?

(Great, I would love to continue)(I loved it; it was great to speak without intimidation) (Very positive and useful) (Very enjoyable) (It was fun and I learned a lot.)

-Please make any additional comments you would like.

(I like meeting new people) (This lab is an excellent way to learn foreign language) (I would incorporate it into the language program)

-Anything you did not like about the lab? There were no negative responses

AUTHOR'S FIELD NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

In support of Research Question 1: Would Spanish language learners and ESOL/native Spanish-speakers benefit from communicative activities for acquisition of vernacular language, increased confidence and cultural understanding through freestyle language exchange? The researcher monitored the students in the (windowed) conversation room from a distance in the laboratory and by sight only. The students quickly overcame shyness and began to talk in the indicated target language. The conversation appeared lively and flowing. They laughed frequently, corrected each other, asked questions and took notes, presumably on vocabulary and expressions they wanted to remember (this was not suggested as procedure). The whole session was lively but orderly. These observations were validated in the students' reflections in the evaluations.

In support of Research Question 2: Does the lack of instructor participation/control increase the willingness to participate and the quality of student participation? Again, the author observed an atmosphere conducive to learning, attentiveness and participation. There were several references in the responses to open-ended questions that they felt less intimidated interacting with their peers than if an instructor was present.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The intent of this study is to present a single successful interdisciplinary activity between the two groups in order to pique interest for others to pursue the topic in pure research and practitioner research. If this concept can be seen as a next step or at least a viable avenue to produce communicative competence for non-Spanish majors and ESOL students, many new doors for strategy can be opened. The lab exercise indicates that students are open for peer interaction in genuine settings to facilitate genuine language without instructor control.

Possibilities for further research are limited only by the researcher's imagination. Interaction can be initiated at

any level from lab activities, occasional interdisciplinary activities to whole classes in Spanish/ESOL conversation or writing. The concept is open to quantitative study to explore correlation between interdisciplinary activity and grades or standardized outcome proficiency ratings. Interdisciplinary contact between English language learners and Spanish language learners could be fertile ground to create a professional organization dedicated to the study of interdisciplinary research specific to second/foreign language in combination with English language acquisition. As a final thought, the field is wide open for the development of interdisciplinary textbooks or textbook supplements in this area.

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