

CREATING CONTEXTS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR REAL-LIFE SITUATIONS: SERVICE-LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Introduction

With the publication of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, a comprehensive set of goals for foreign language education has been formally established. Students and educators are expected to concentrate on five goal areas: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. By working toward the standards in these five areas, students are expected to develop communicative competence, which can ultimately “facilitate genuine interaction with others, whether they are on another continent, across town, or within the neighborhood” (11). However, as Overfield asserts, the fifth standard, which focuses on students’ participation in multilingual communities, has been often neglected (485). Many language classroom settings do not provide students with opportunities for making direct connections between their learning and the communities around them. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate one method of creating authentic contexts for language learning in the community by incorporating service-learning programs into language courses. By describing a community translation project in an advanced Spanish grammar course, the paper will examine potential issues and benefits derived from service-learning for foreign language education.

Service-Learning for Spanish

To be considered a legitimate pedagogical tool, service-learning programs must meet two criteria: connection to course objectives and

structured opportunities for students' reflection on their service experience. Bringle and Hatcher offer a comprehensive definition of service-learning:

We consider service learning to be a course-based credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. This is in contrast to co-curricular and extracurricular service, from which learning may occur, but for which there is no formal evaluation and documentation of academic learning. (112)

The general principles of good practice in community service-learning and pedagogy can be found in Jeffery Howard's *PRAXIS I: A Faculty Casebook on Service Learning*. Some of the principles include 1) the maintenance of academic rigor with clear learning goals; 2) the establishment of criteria for the selection of community service placements 3) support and accountability for students (discussions, presentations, and journal assignments); 4) emphasis on facilitation and guidance as the instructional role of faculty; and 5) allowance for variation in student learning outcomes. In order to assist students in making the connection between service and learning, student reflection must also be guided. For example, Williams and Driscoll stress the importance of on-going reflection, multiple forms of reflections (e.g., some writing, some discussion, journal writing), instructor modeling, and an interactive, respectful atmosphere (33-34).

The service-learning component in a Spanish language course offers numerous benefits to students. First, it offers valuable hands-on opportunities to practice the language for real-life situations. Many students do not have the luxury of overseas travel; here, they experience direct contact with native speakers right in their own communities. Advantages of community-based learning for improving students'

communicative competence have been discussed in a number of studies (Beebe et al., Hale, Mullaney, Overfield). For example, Overfield argues that within the traditional foreign language classroom, linguistic competence receives the most attention while other components, such as "actional competence and sociocultural competence, are often given less attention, thus minimizing the possibility that learners become communicatively competent" (486).

Second, service-learning provides exposure to diversity as students come into contact with different Hispanic communities. While most traditional language classes concentrate on Spanish and Latin American communities, a service-learning course allows students to explore issues facing Hispanic communities in the U.S.

Third, the reflective component of service-learning enhances students' critical thinking skills as they must connect their service experience to learning. Rather than accepting a passive "tourist" role receiving explanations from tour guides (i.e. teachers) at face value, students can become "explorers" who "would make an effort to inquire, to question assumptions, and to find out which observer-relative meanings someone else attaches to his or her social reality" (Fischer 75).

Finally, such non-traditional teaching tools not only provide avenues for developing an interdisciplinary perspective (Jeavons 138) but also encourage broader goals in foreign language instruction. In his article, "The Foreign Language Problem: The Governance of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning," Peter Patrikis argues that "if a field represents itself primarily in terms of skills or performance, then it effectively diminishes its role and status in higher education" (324). Patrikis insists that "the discourse of foreign language education must focus on education and not simply on foreign language" (324).

Service-Learning Translation Projects in an Advanced Spanish Language Course. General course objectives of Spanish 303 (a grammar course for third year students) are: 1) to enhance students' knowledge of Spanish grammar (i.e., to be able to identify and explain areas of Spanish grammar difficult for Anglo students); 2) to increase the accuracy of their use of Spanish; and 3) to expand their

vocabulary. In doing so, the class aims to improve students' communicative skills in Spanish so that they can appreciate and function in the target culture or a multi-lingual community.

Establishing a Working Relationship with the Community and Identifying appropriate Service-Learning Tasks. During the spring semester of 2000, with a grant from Indiana Campus Compact, SP303 was revised to incorporate translation projects. The community was surveyed, and a number of potential "sites" were contacted and visited. Due to the small size of Hispanic population in the area, many organizations' need for volunteers who spoke Spanish seemed to be sporadic and unpredictable. However, several agencies welcomed the idea of having some of their information brochures translated into Spanish. A written translation project was also considered valuable for meeting the objectives of the class. It would force students not only to observe and learn about grammatical similarities and differences between English and Spanish at the sentence-level but also to experience cross-cultural contextual differences revealed in the text at the discourse-level. Students worked with various community agencies to translate information brochures to increase the accessibility of the services provided by these agencies to local Hispanic clients. During the month of April after an intensive review of a number of problematic grammar concepts in Spanish, students were given detailed guidelines for the translation project.

Working in Groups. The class was divided into groups of three students. Each group had at least one student with strong Spanish language skills and one with prior experience within Hispanic communities. This group composition encouraged everyone to participate. For example, instead of being isolated, less experienced students worked with and learned from students with different strengths.

Selecting Brochures to Translate. Students received pre-selected information brochures from various community agencies. These included shelters for abused women and children, a community education center offering ESL classes, a public library, and two agencies providing court-related and childcare programs. After examining the

possibilities, each group selected a brochure and divided the workload among the group members.

Obtaining Contextual Information. First, students read the brochures carefully and delineated any words or concepts that were unclear to them. Next, they contacted their agency and arranged to conduct an interview with an agency representative. During their visit to the site, each group obtained contextual information about the goals and objectives of the agency, discussed any unclear information in the brochure, and identified the nature of the Hispanic community likely to benefit from the service. The majority of the Hispanic clients in these agencies were perceived to be recently-arrived families from Mexico or Central America.

Working with native speaker consultants. Two native speaker consultants worked with the students. Each was a graduate student at the University with a bachelor's degree from her respective country. Although neither consultant was from Mexico or Central America, these native speakers were chosen for two reasons: 1) both had experience with oral and written translation work between Spanish and English in the state of Indiana where the Hispanic population is predominately from Mexico; and 2) both were graduate students attending the same university, and thus, my students had convenient accessibility to their assistance. In addition, several students received assistance from other native speakers in the community. Students identified important/difficult terms and concepts and consulted with native speakers in order to reduce possible cross-cultural misunderstandings. After completing the translations, students met with at least one native speaker consultant who assisted them with final editing. Finally, students delivered the translated brochures to their agency.

Setting Up Accountability. Each week students handed in a short progress report in which they summarized the week's activities and plans for the following week and listed any challenges or new discoveries. Also some class time was devoted to weekly class discussion to share progress, problems, and suggestions. At the end of the course, each group gave an oral presentation, and each student

handed in a final written reflection paper with all the notes, journals, and drafts, as well as the completed version of the translation. In their reflection papers, students were asked to comment on: 1) relevance of the project to the course; 2) discoveries made through their experiences from the project about their community, cross-cultural practices (see the next section for examples), and structural differences between Spanish and English; 3) challenges and benefits of the project; and 4) recommendations for the future. The service-learning project constituted 15% of their final grade, and students reported spending 10-20 hours on their project.

Sharing Student Reflection: Connecting Service to Learning.

When asked to discuss the impact of the project for the class, students made useful observations on their language learning, cross-cultural issues, community, and motivation. At the language level, most students commented that the project gave them an opportunity to better assess their language skills in real-life situations. For example, several students who believed they had “mastered” many areas of grammar and vocabulary in the classroom realized that language learning is a life-time process. Below are some quotes from student reflection papers written in Spanish but translated into English for this paper. One second-generation Hispanic student commented: “It [the project] humbled me to see how many errors I made and that I do not know as much as I had thought.” Another observed, “There are many benefits to this project. For me personally, it helped me see my weaknesses in the language.” Many students in the class were teaching majors and understood the importance of maintaining constant contact with the target cultures and engaging themselves in continuous language study. As a result, three students made plans to seek summer employment that would allow them to use and improve their Spanish.

Students also made useful grammatical observations. After working with native speakers to edit her translation, one student commented that Spanish employs more definite articles than English. Another noticed that the subjunctive is unavoidable in Spanish and that she will have to use more subjunctive forms. One student discovered that “English uses a lot of passive constructions, but Spanish does not

use them much.” Many agreed on the need to use more “se pasiva.” Furthermore, several students noted that Spanish rendered longer sentences containing more prepositional phrases and subordination. Finally, a number of students appreciated the opportunity to use formal language with the “usted” forms since they were used to conversing in the “tú” forms in classrooms.

Many students indicated that the project forced them to see the importance of context in translation. One student emphasized: “You cannot translate word for word. You must look at the context and the idea that is intended to communicate instead of just looking at the word.” The project also highlighted limits to and challenges in dictionary use. For example, one student translating a brochure for a public library discovered that “discutir” does not simply mean “to discuss” in Spanish but rather refers more to discussing problem in a heated conversation. Instead of settling for the first meaning/translation, students learned to examine the comprehensive list of meanings provided with sample sentences.

Another useful experience was students’ first-hand encounter with native speakers from different regions who had differences in opinion on how to translate a word or idea. For example, students working with shelters for abused women found no single term for “batterer” in the dictionary. They discussed: “Beatriz [from Argentina] said we could use ‘abusador.’ Lisa’s husband [from Mexico] said ‘maltratador’ was better. Vanessa [from the Dominican Republic] said that there is no single word and thus we need to use a phrase to describe it.” The students ended up choosing ‘abusador’ for their translations because this word did exist in the dictionary and the context would clearly indicate that it meant “batterer.”

The translation project exposed the students to numerous cross-cultural issues and practices. One student wrote: “As almost all the students in the class discovered, I realized that there are many words that we have invented here in the U.S. for describing certain situations or condition of life. It is possible that these words do not exist in Spanish because the Hispanic culture does not demonstrate the need for using them like here.” Another student translating for a public

library wrote: "I discovered some cultural facts which I did not know before doing this project... the concept of 'public library' is not so common in Mexico and other Hispanic countries as it is in the U.S." Furthermore, after interviewing the agencies that provide support to victims of domestic violence, some students noted that there were very few Hispanic women using their services not just because of the small size of the Hispanic community in the region but also because their culture expected women to tolerate more abuse. The students then discussed the role of "machismo" and Catholicism in Latin America.

The service-learning translation project encouraged many students to participate in their diverse communities. First, by trying to identify local Hispanic communities, students learned that there were more Hispanics living and working in the central eastern part of Indiana than they had originally thought. One student commented, "A false concept that many people have is that the Hispanics live only in large cities of the U.S." Second, the class observed social disadvantages which minority groups constantly faced. One student observed: "Many Hispanics in the community do not know that such services are available... They need to know about their opportunities as well." Students also discussed about the general American frame of mind, especially that of small towns in the Midwest. One commented: "I think this project was a good idea because it gave us an understanding of the thinking patterns of those who do not speak Spanish." Another noticed: "Many Americans do not recognize the existence of Hispanics in the U.S. This is sad because it is possible for them to have valuable skills and information to share with us." Furthermore, one student working with an agency whose employees did not have much time to meet with her group commented: "I understand that there are not many Hispanics who live in Muncie... but if they [the agencies] really want to help all women, they are going to have to change their attitude toward cultures that are less appreciated in our society."

Finally, the service-learning translation project increased students' motivation for improving their language skills and participating in their communities. Students were more responsible for their assignment

not only because their work was intended for a real audience but also because they understood the benefits of the project for the community. As one student commented, "The benefits of the project to the community motivated me to focus on my responsibility in respect to the translation, and thus my Spanish during the project improved." Since each member was responsible for the quality of the entire brochure selected by the group, students voluntarily engaged themselves in serious peer-editing. Students also commented that they paid more attention to their errors of language use when they "sat down" with the native speakers who explained and provided suggestions for improvement.

Coping with Challenges. Incorporating a non-traditional pedagogy into a language course has led to issues and challenges. First, setting up a service-learning course component requires extra preparation time for the instructor as well as availability of additional resources. This concern, however, can be alleviated by taking advantage of a growing number of grant opportunities for promoting service-learning, interdisciplinary, and diversity programs in academic campuses. Second, since the project required a working relationship with community agencies and among group members, some students encountered scheduling problems. For future projects, they suggested more than one month period be set aside for completing such a project. Third, given the current trend in communicative teaching to avoid translation tasks in language classrooms, students did not have any prior training in translation. Students had to be taught to understand the importance of the context, develop better skills for using the dictionary, and avoid literal translations. Fourth, because of limited language proficiency, many relied heavily on the assistance of the advanced students in the class, the instructor, and the native speaker consultants to accomplish their part of the project. Furthermore, even after various drafts and editing sessions with native speaker consultants, the final version of students' translation still contained some errors. Nevertheless, these translated brochures were welcomed by the agencies that otherwise would not be able to share any information when Hispanic community members would visit them. Fifth, the

differences in opinion among native speakers to translate a word or an idea created some confusion among students. One student observed: "it seems that there are as many different translations for words as there are Spanish speakers because when each native speaker helped me, she had different words. Thus, I learned that for this type of translation, it is better to check the translation with a native speaker who represents the majority of Hispanics who will read the translation." Sixth, the class saw that even native speakers made grammar mistakes. They realized that in order to produce quality translation, they cannot depend on the suggestions made by just one native speaker. Lastly, because the students did not have direct contact with the Hispanic communities that may use their translated brochures, it is possible that a part of their reflection may be ill-conceived or stereotypical.

Although there were many challenges facing the implementation of a service-learning program, the benefit seemed to out-weigh the costs. Beyond the daily-life conversational Spanish that students were used to producing in classrooms, the students working on the projects were motivated to learn new vocabulary and incorporate more advanced grammatical constructions. As Dupuy observes, students develop stronger interest in the target language and culture when they are "learning something valuable and challenging that justifies the effort" (208). The service-learning project exposed them to issues, ideas, and social realities with which they otherwise would not have come into contact on their own.

Conclusion

The service-learning translation project in SP303 helped students better achieve the learning objectives of the class in several ways. First, unlike oral translation and tutoring activities that do not necessarily demand advanced language skills; the project demanded that students examine detailed aspects of language use both at the sentence-level and discourse-level. Second, the service-learning component made students more responsible for their own learning as they were using the language for real-life situations. Third, students not only enhanced their language learning experience but also acquired

valuable information (as reflected in the brochures from the agencies) to apply to their own lives. Finally, such a service-learning project contributed toward holistic/global personal development, in which both the instructor and the student took an interest in and engaged themselves for the well-being of the diverse communities that surround them. Indeed, one student observed: "The most important lesson that I learned is that every community is important, and we need to include the minorities in every situation." All seventeen students in the class requested that the course continue to offer a service-learning component.

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