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AUTHOR Hill, David P.
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ABSTRACT

The Spanish Intensive Courses sequence at the University of South Carolina, first offered in fall 1982, has become well received and highly visible in the university. The sequence has grown to three courses in fall 1983, all exceeding minimum enrollment requirements despite selective admission criteria. The success of the sequence has inspired the planning of German and French intensive sequences. The source of success appears to be proficiency-based instruction. The program originated from the desire for language testing reflecting student language ability more accurately than traditional grade and course-completion records. The initial 1-semester, team-taught Spanish course was designed to address this need. Upon approval, the course was publicized widely. General course structure and the division of responsibilities in the team teaching is important to the success of these courses. Each course has four instructors: one senior and one junior faculty member and two native-speaking graduate assistants. The first course awards seven credit hours, which fulfills the college's language requirements. Two subsequent courses award six hours each. Materials include a traditional grammar book and workbook and a local Spanish-language newspaper. Language-related activities outside class provide speaking opportunities. The program has reversed a department enrollment decline and improved department status. Followup courses are needed. Additional program development is foreseen. (MSE)

SPANISH INTENSIVE COURSES

The South Carolina Experience

David P. Hill

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Spanish Intensive Courses:

The South Carolina Experience

David P. Hill
The University of South Carolina

The Spanish Intensive Courses sequence at the University of South Carolina (U.S.C.), which offered its first courses in the Fall of 1982, is already one of the best received and most highly visible language programs in the University. The "11" sequence has grown from one course, Spanish 111 (Intensive Introductory Spanish) in the fall of '82 to three courses, adding 211 (Intensive Intermediate Spanish) and 311 (Intensive Advanced Spanish for Conversation) by the fall of '83. Every course which has been offered has exceeded minimum enrollment requirements despite selective criteria for admittance into the courses which have eliminated approximately one-third of the students seeking to enroll. The initial success of the program has inspired the creation of the German Intensives sequence which will offer its first course in the fall of '84, as well as plans for development of a similar program in French.

The source of the success which the sequence enjoys in the eyes of its students, graduates, and staff, seems to be found in the concept of "proficiency-based instruction" which provides the conceptual underpinning for the program. All course planning "works backwards" from the students' final activity, a twenty-minute taped oral proficiency interview, which is conducted and evaluated along the lines of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), and now ACTFL and ETS, oral proficiency guidelines.[1]

[1] The measurement of oral proficiency has been an important part of language training programs administered by the federal government for thirty years. In the last five years cooperation among numerous agencies, including the FSI (Foreign Service Institute), the ILR (The Interagency Language Round Table) ETS, and ACTFL, has resulted in the development of provisional proficiency guidelines in the four skills for use by educational and other institutions.

Before the discussion of the implications of this approach for classroom instruction a brief historical background of the program is appropriate.

In the fall of 1980 following participation in an oral proficiency testing workshop at the FSI in Arlington, VA, which included administration and evaluation of interviews and observation of classes at the Institute, the author conducted interviews with selected students back at U.S.C. This growing interest in testing coincided with a surge of interest among department heads, including the chairman of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and the Dean of the University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, in the creation of training and evaluation procedures in Foreign Languages which would provide a more reliable indication of a student's actual ability to perform in the language than does his traditional letter-grade and course-completion record. The program which was initiated attempted to respond to those concerns. The guidelines for this then-experimental sequence were these:

- The course would strive to develop student competence in all four skills, but especially in listening comprehension and speaking.
- Students would receive an FSI-type oral exit examination. Appropriate ways to convey the results of this examination to future employers or graduate schools would be sought.
- The student's ongoing course advisement would be determined by the number and type of courses he would need to achieve *his* proficiency goals as determined by his academic unit, be it an S-1 (now ACTFL Intermediate), S-3 (ACTFL Superior), or any point between.[2]
- The course would be team-taught by instructors chosen for their special interest in the program and their ability to develop creative ways to elicit oral practice in the classroom.
- Student population would be limited to students who could convince the staff of their sincerity in desiring to develop proficiency in Spanish. (Individuals merely attempting to fulfill the College's language requirement would not be admitted.)
- Rather than attempting to create special sections of currently offered courses, an entirely new sequence would be created.

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[2]Provisional generic as well as content-specific descriptions of performance for three languages—French, German, and Spanish—have been published in the pamphlet *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines: A Design for Measuring and Communicating Foreign Language Proficiency* available from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 579 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York 10706.

The offering as proposed was well-received by the Chairman of the Department and the Dean of the College and the first course in the sequence, Spanish 111, was approved by appropriate committees and the Faculty Senate in the spring of 1982. To those who may be considering implementation of a similar program in other institutions, the following advice is offered: Get support for the project at the highest levels early in the planning process. If the need for the project is not perceived unilaterally by superiors, implant the need first and then respond with the program which fulfills the need. The prospect of a nationally-accepted evaluation procedure and the concept of proficiency-based instruction are very attractive to administrators weary of attempting to explain how FL students who cannot demonstrate competency in the language have earned grades of "A" and "B." Of course, if it has not already been done, some faculties will need to avail themselves of the oral proficiency testing training now being offered at conferences and workshops. The credibility of the program at U.S.C. is enhanced by the fact that a very large number—nine, in four languages, perhaps the highest figures nationwide—of the faculty have participated in workshops directed by FSI or ACTFL/ETS, and one faculty member is very active at the national level in the tester-training program.

Once the Spanish 111 course was approved, it was necessary to make its existence known to the University community. The author solicited as a team partner for the course one of the junior faculty members who had already established herself as an outstanding teacher. Her article, entitled "From Text to Context: Spontaneous Group Role-Playing," and located elsewhere in this volume is a discussion of activities for elicitation of spontaneous oral performance that she developed for the Intensive Courses. To publicize the course, with the aid of secretarial help and a word processor, specific student groups were targeted which it was felt might provide the type of motivated and capable students for whom the course was designed. Letters were written to students majoring in other languages, to students in upper-level course in other languages, to Faculty Advisors in foreign languages and in other departments and colleges, and to students in the University's Honors College. Professionally designed multi-color flyers and posters were printed. (They are very attractive. Many of the faculty use them as office decorations). The posters were placed in conspicuous spots prior to the pre-registration period. Announcements were placed in the University's staff bulletin and in the student and local city newspapers, and announcements were made over the University and city radio stations. It had been decided that a heterogeneous class population would be sought, so the fact that the course was offered at the noon lunch hour was emphasized in publicity directed to the outside community. Students could not register for the course without the computer code number which was given only to

those who were deemed appropriate for the course following a personal interview with one of the instructors. This intensive publicity drive resulted in about forty-five inquiries. Approximately twenty-five applicants were judged acceptable and nineteen actually registered and appeared. A rigorous first several days of activities were planned, and by week's end twelve somewhat apprehensive but excited students remained. Among this group were a local optometrist and an attorney, both of whom continued in the sequence and now advertise in the yellow pages "Se habla español", a nurse who left midway in the second course to join the Peace Corps in Guatemala, two faculty members, two graduate students, and the remainder traditional undergraduates. Of the twelve, ten continued in the next semester to study Spanish, a percentage enormously greater than that of the credit-equivalent traditional Spanish 101-102 sequence. The drop-out rate remains much lower at all levels of the Intensives sequence than in corresponding levels of the regular sequence. The concern for publicity is less intense now than in the beginning, since a sizeable number of the students now come to the course by word-of-mouth referrals. Special populations are still targeted with personal letters; for example, names are solicited from the faculty of "A" students in the Spanish 102 course as possible recruits for the 211 course. Outstanding students who begin in the regular track are allowed and encouraged to shift to the Intensives while less talented or motivated individuals who enter the Intensives are shifted at the appropriate level into the less rigorous regular sequence. Native speakers are not permitted to take any of these courses. Currently the student population in all courses is approximately two-thirds undergraduates with the remainder being graduate students and individuals from the University and local communities. A medical doctor, several professors and University administrators and a corrections worker are among the non-traditional population this semester.

The general structure of the courses and the method of division of responsibilities in the team-teaching concept is important to the success of the endeavor. Each course meets five days a week at the same hours (12:20-1:10 MWF and 12:30-1:45 TTH) for one semester. Spanish 111 awards seven credit hours, which completes the College's FL requirement, while both 211 and 311 award six credit hours. Each course has four instructors: two staff-level members, currently one professor and one instructor in each course, and two native-speaker graduate teaching assistants who lead thirty-minute "free conversation" groups one day a week. The basic division of responsibility is this: one instructor teaches on MWF and is responsible for presentation of structure, drills, dialogue practice, and testing while the T-Th instructor "recycles" the grammar and works with role-playing, dialogue adaptation, group activities, A-V programs, composi-

tions and supervision of the conversation groups. This structure fills several needs: it minimizes overlapping of responsibilities and simplifies course coordination; it provides for a different kind of student preparation on alternating days and creates a distinct daily "personality" based on activities; it allows teaching teams to be formulated on the basis of teacher personality and area of expertise. Instructors experienced and excellent at "affective" activities teach on T-Th while those expert at presentation and practice of structure teach on MWF. An interesting by-product of this format has been the way the staff has learned from each other through their interaction. For example, the author started out as the "grammar man" in 111 but now, several semesters later, is teaching 111 T-Th using some of the techniques picked up from the junior faculty member.

The text materials selected for use in the first two courses may at first seem to be inappropriate for an aura.-oral approach. In 111 and part of 211 the basic text is Heath's *Basic Spanish Grammar* and its *Spanish for Communication Workbook*. The grammar book is very traditional; it has few exercises and the explanations are in English. Yet these two books are appropriate because students introduce the grammar to themselves at home while in-class practice on MWF is almost exclusively based on oral communications skills. Fine points which are seldom dominated at this level are not introduced by this text, nor by the instructors. Instead, those elements of structure which convey information are concentrated upon, and a high premium is placed on acquisition of useful vocabulary. In 311, presentation of idiomatic expressions is emphasized and several "conversational readers" are also employed. Students are requested to subscribe to the Spanish-language newspaper from Atlanta, *Mundo Hispánico*, which they enjoy reading and discussing.[3] There is no laboratory attendance requirement but supplementary listening tapes are available and recordings are used in class. An optional self-correcting grammar workbook is recommended which most students choose to utilize.

Student motivation to good daily performance is provided by strong peer pressure and the knowledge that the day of reckoning—the final oral interview—looms before them. Group identification is built by means of *tertulias*, complete with excellent food and beverages served in lieu of class twice during the semester, and through other group activities such as the sponsorship of the International Students coffee hour where "11" students mingle with students from several South American countries. The in-class

[3] *Mundo Hispánico* is a monthly periodical which focuses on social problems encountered by Hispanics living in the southeastern U.S. In the classroom, it is used for student reports and for material for class discussions in the warm-up period. The address is Box 12808, Atlanta, GA 30324.

activity most highly regarded by the students is the thirty minutes a week they spend in small groups with the native informant. The informant does not correct their grammar and they enjoy the unstructured and non-pressured interaction of these situations.

Proficiency-based evaluation calls for proficiency-based instruction. Students are not sent into the final oral interview, which comprises 25% of the final grade, without adequate experience in similar situations. Several times during the semester students drop by for informal, ungraded conversations with the instructor. At least one preliminary oral interview which is graded and recorded is administered. An excellent learning device is for the students to transcribe these tapes and then correct the grammar on the script. The classroom role-playing, conversation groups, and student presentations totalling an average of one and one-half hours per week also prepare the students for spontaneous production of language in the interview situation.

This young program has had several effects on the operation of the Division of Spanish and Portuguese and the Foreign Language Department generally. Perhaps the most significant factor from an administrative view is that enrollment in the intensive Spanish courses has reversed a three-year trend of a larger enrollment in French courses than in Spanish. In Fall '83 and again in Spring '84 the forty Spanish Intensives students (actually 40 x 2 since Intensives courses are for six or seven credit hours rather than three or four) made Spanish numerically the most popular language at U.S.C. for the first time since 1980. The student population at upper levels has also increased due to the 311 course.

The sequence has also increased the status of the Spanish Division in the eyes of other language units who now seek to draw upon the Spanish experience in setting up their own programs. It has had a positive effect on morale. People are interested in and excited about teaching in the program. (Nine staff members have applied for the six teaching slots for Fall, '84.) Everyone enjoys teaching talented and motivated students, and the incentive for improvement in personal methodology is great in these classes. At least one other department in the university is considering a rigorous proficiency requirement for its majors, in part because of the knowledge that such proficiency can be achieved through coursework here at the University. (One of the individuals leading this movement is a former student of Spanish 111-211).

The Spanish Division hopes to move forward in this program by expanding the "service" function which the unique structure of the Intensive courses can provide to other departments. With a minimum of additional staff, it is possible to drop into the T-Th slots vocabulary and activities appropriate to specific content areas in a program entitled

"Spanish for Professional Preparation." The possibility of offering intensive courses in Spanish for Health Careers, Social Work, Business, International Service and perhaps Law Enforcement is likely. Initial favorable response has been returned from the leadership in several of these areas.

The program, of course, still has some problematic features. The primary one is related to the issue of proficiency as opposed to achievement testing. Because the final examination is administered by the teaching staff for the purpose of grading (a necessary motivational device in our view) and the same interview tape is later evaluated for proficiency, it is very difficult—probably impossible—to control the "achievement awareness bias" of the interviewer and examiner. What is needed is separate testing, but it is difficult even with our resources to ask colleagues to conduct the laborious evaluations for which they receive no extrinsic reward. Our goal is the creation of a testing cadre who would be rewarded with reduced teaching and other considerations. Another problem is that extensive use of the oral ratings by the University-at-large awaits developments on the national scene.

One additional concern is that some of the 311 graduates have no appropriate next course to enter. The traditional sequences pick up with three-hour culture and literature courses which do not emphasize the communicative mode in the same way as the Intensives. And finally, as programs grow, the initial control which creators can exercise is diminished. Inevitably, the increase in courses creates new demands for facilities and staff time. For example, three specially-equipped AV rooms—with *realia*, maps, screens, and built-in tape decks– are now needed, and only one is available. Similarly six native-speaker GTAs instead of two are presently needed.

In general, however, the Spanish Division, the FL Department and the College are very pleased with this program. For more information on the U.S.C. program or to share you experiences with Intensives with us, please write the author at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208.