# 17 Sound literature: The pedagogy of reconnection through student-authored audiobooks in the Spanish curriculum

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## Abstract

This article is based on a case study I presented at the elearning Symposium 2014 and focuses on an undergraduate project which had received the Teaching Enhancement and Student Success Fund at the University of Manchester two years before. The project was conceived as an outreach activity complementing the final year core language classes and aimed at engaging students with both reading and listening to advanced texts and enjoying literature through weekly reading groups and audiobooks. Ultimately, through reading and creating literature, the objective was to foster students' intercultural competence after the year abroad. It was thus a student-centred and task-orientated project involving the creation of an audiobook by its participants. To this end, different forms of technology were introduced, each serving a particular purpose and fitting into specific learning goals. In this article I will report on the use of tablet PC technology for marking and giving feedback as well as on the benefits of audiobooks for language teaching in the context of higher education, where they have not yet had an extensive use.

Keywords: audiobooks, literature, tablet PC technology, OERs, productive and receptive skills, creativity, student generated content, personalised learning, intercultural competence.

# 1.      Context/rationale

Owing to time and content constraints in the language curriculum, literature is only covered fragmentarily inside the classroom and few students take on the task of reading for pleasure. What is more, literature tends to be perceived by them as more complex than other subjects and its connections with other disciplines across the curriculum tend to be overlooked. This perception among learners finds its reflection in what can be argued to be considered a pedagogical gap in the curriculum given the fact that the offer of literature courses has generally narrowed. Referring to the Departments of English in the American context, William M. Chace (2009) maintains that the causes for this decline have to do with a failure to make a strong case to undergraduates that knowledge of literature and the tradition in which it exists is "a human good in and of itself" (para. 5). Our initiative to introduce literature in the format of audiobooks and having students then creating their own audiobooks was indeed an attempt to help reconnect them to both written and aural literature. Another essential element of the rationale for this project was based on students' progress and achievements during their year abroad, which is often considered to be one of the most important experiences for language learners from a linguistic and intercultural point of view. However, in a considerable number of cases, this does not happen automatically for a combination of reasons, such as motivation, learning style and personality, home university accreditation and requirements.

On the other hand, those students who experience an improvement in their oral-aural communication skills do not necessarily show a correlation of the latter with other aspects of language performance such as grammar, writing and (inter) cultural skills. Thus, we set up the project with the primary goal of helping students not only to improve their writing skills but also to support their acquisition of a more comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the Hispanic world.

# 2.      Aims and objectives

• To further enhance the linguistic competence of final year language students.

- To promote advanced literacy and an enjoyment of reading, and help create lifelong readers.

- To facilitate content-area understanding and thus improve students' performance across other departmental course units that focus on Hispanic cultural studies.

- To provide students with a set of transferable skills: critical, intercultural, cognitive and creative, in order to enable them to have a better understanding of the world and enhance their employability.

- To help create a sense of community in a discipline that has a high and increasing student uptake.

- To enhance our students' learning experience by putting them at the centre of their learning and offering them extra support.

## 3.  What we did

The participants were tasked with creating their own audiobook and making it available as downloadable media on our course website. There were three requirements: short stories had to be 500-700 words long, they had to be completely original and include at least one Hispanic component. A short reflective paragraph on the narrative choices made and the motivation of each student was also asked for. In terms of assessment, and with a view to have some minimum recruitment, 10% of the final mark for the course was assigned to this project, more specifically, 5% for the written part and 5% for the oral one.

To be noted is the fact that, through the integration into the short story of at least one Hispanic element, the purpose was to try to measure the impact of study abroad on our students' intercultural skills. More specifically, through students' creative process, we wanted to see the degree of cultural awareness and sensitivity to the target culture which they had acquired during their year

abroad. To illustrate this pivotal idea and prepare students to carry out their task, we selected a few short stories from the audiobook collections *Relatos españoles contemporáneos* (de la Flor, 2008), *Relatos del Río de la Plata* (de la Flor & Paúl, 2009), and *Relatos mexicanos* (de la Flor, 2010), making sure they all had a historical and cultural background of Hispanic interest. The selection was also made in terms of language varieties as we wanted to expose students to different accents. After integrating these short stories into our language curriculum, we then created a wider reading/listening schedule for weekly get-together sessions. A few of these weekly sessions were dedicated to pronunciation and fluency as well as to facilitating the understanding of the key elements of short stories in general, i.e. character, setting, plot, conflict, and theme. Finally, students submitted an initial draft of their short story on which substantial feedback was provided before they could submit their final version.

In order to deliver milestones and as a means of communication, the project also involved the use of online technologies, in particular, of some of the standard features in Blackboard such as wikis, voice tools and Turnitin, the latter with the objective of enabling us to detect possible cases of plagiarism and also for administrative purposes, e.g. extension requests. Additionally, to correct and provide feedback on the first draft of the short stories, we decided to use tablet PC technology as we thought it would not only be quicker than other options (GradeMark within Turnitin), but would also provide more of a natural near-pen-and-paper feedback. To this purpose, with a budget of 1000 GBP and some research on the part of a technologist assigned to the project, we were handed two Dell Latitude ST tablet PCs with a 10-inch multi-touch display and a digital pen.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Student involvement and measuring success

The degree of success and involvement on the part of the participants was very high. We initially recruited 50 students out of 140 and, although numbers went

down as students were made aware of the extra commitment they had to make, we ended up with 35. The success in terms of satisfaction was reflected on the student post-project questionnaires (Figure 1), course unit evaluations and informal correspondence.

Figure 1. Post-project questionnaire results
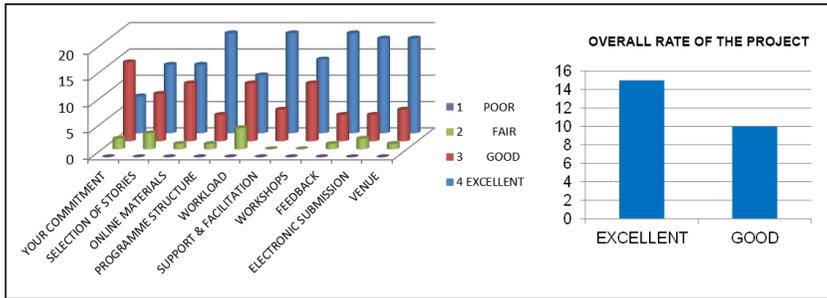


All in all participants valued the extra opportunity to practise creative thinking and writing and improve their oral and aural skills in a more informal atmosphere. One of the outcomes was the creation of a reading community that went beyond the classroom, which was very relevant within the context of the high and increasing student uptake in SPLAS (Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies), and helped us to address the personalised learning agenda which underpinned the Manchester Undergraduate Education Review.

As the project promoted the integration of the main linguistic skills, both receptive (listening, reading) and productive (speaking, writing), it also had a positive impact on students' general performance in language. Although it only contributed 10% to the final mark for the course unit SPLA30210 (final year Spanish language), all participants, except for one, obtained a higher mark in both components of the project than in the written and oral exam of the course, and 7 participants did see an improvement in their oral mark degree classification as a result.

Attendance was very good and participants made regular use of our office hours for informal feedback and consultation, something which was highly valued in

the questionnaires. What is more, even after having finished all their exams, students were still willing to provide us with revised recordings of their stories for publication with extra creative enhancements such as original sound effects. The following are some of the students' comments:

"I loved the audiobooks project. It was touted as a fun extra module that would be beneficial and, although the fun element did disappear quite quickly as the workload came, I really enjoyed the classes and the opportunity to do something creative. Although it was extra work, I'm sure my Spanish has benefitted even a little and I would recommend it to other final year students".

"I really enjoyed the audiobooks project. It was a great idea and it really helped me with my creative writing and pronunciation".

"I gained confidence in speaking and writing. It's a good way to get feedback".

"I would recommend this project because it really helped me with creative writing and I learned some very useful vocabulary that I don't usually come across because I am a MLBM [modern languages and business management] student. My suggestion is having these classes run during the whole year".

"I would recommend this project but I would warn that writing a story is much harder than I anticipated and that you must be prepared to work hard on the drafts. The tutors were enthusiastic and it was a good opportunity to read Hispanic literature. However, a bit more guidance on the creative side would have helped me".

In terms of student production and from the facilitators' point of view, the success of the project was evident in the final product. A good number of students managed to successfully produce unique narrative structures, engaging plots, and complex characters with very original ideas. From the linguistic point

of view, there was a general improvement in the use of syntax and a greater awareness of more complex stylistic issues relating, for example, to Spanish adjective placement. When it came to reading their own short story, students had to concentrate on the prosodic features of the language, i.e. lexical stress, intonation, pronunciation, rhythm and fluency, which gave us an opportunity to assess these elements in very different circumstances than those in which spontaneous speech is produced.

## 4.2. The use of technology: challenges, benefits and lessons learned

The fact that students did not have to go through the traditional submission process was well received, not to mention the savings in terms of both time and printing. From the students' perspective the use of tablet PCs by the tutors meant that they could access our feedback electronically once we had uploaded the marked short stories to Blackboard.

On the contrary, from the tutors' point of view, getting used to the digital pen was a bit of a challenge requiring some practice before being able to make our writing legible. Therefore, the time dedicated to marking and providing feedback with a tablet PC was far longer than what we had originally planned and, doing it within two weeks, which is the official time to return marked coursework, was only possible thanks to the dedication and hard work of the tutors[1].

One of the main advantages was the fact that we could transfer exactly the same symbol-based marking system we use in class which students are familiar with. The visual element was another advantage as electronic ink can be colour coded and thus we could use different colours and styles of underlining according to the type of error. Additionally, we could make use of other common tools such as 'tracking changes', and it also allowed us to change the font size and line spacing in order to adapt them to our own visual

1. I want to take this opportunity to thank both my colleagues Noelia Alcarazo and Oscar García for their invaluable help.

needs. Also on a positive note, the tablets offered us the possibility to insert small comments through Microsoft Word.

I think, however that, we need to be clear about the possible downsides of technology. For example, when it came to giving more substantial feedback, the keyboard on the screen was not the best option for typing and we had to rely on our own PC desktop to add these comments, something which could have been avoided if the tablet had included a USB port to connect a keyboard to it.

It is also worth noting that the speed of the tablet was rather slow. Moreover, we could only use the digital pen on Word documents and not on PDF ones. Another downside was the fact that, once the marking and feedback process had been completed, all these Word documents had to be converted to PDF format before making them available online to students, in order to prevent the correction symbols from moving around.

Finally, although the involvement in the virtual learning environment was not as high as we had expected, our final year language module (SPLA30210) was highly commended in the 2011/12 Best on Blackboard competition, with students making specific comments on the materials and variety of tools made available for the project.

## 5.    Conclusion

The project came to an end with a selection of student-authored short stories being compiled in a special paper publication and disseminated through our Spanish newspaper. What this cohort of students produced is also now available on our final year language course website and forms part of our language curriculum. Thus we pride ourselves in promoting literature through our students' own short stories. However, the amount of work put into the whole creative process both by students and teacher-facilitators sadly outbalances the visibility of the end product and we were indeed very

short sighted not to see its wider educational value and potential benefits for other students of Spanish around the world, not to mention its value as a marketing tool for our own institution[1]. We are now in the process of trying to get in touch with the participants in order to get consent for their work to be openly accessible online, but this is not easy considering they graduated two years ago. However, as the project itself has been embedded into the final year language curriculum, we hope to progressively gather a good selection of student-generated content and ultimately create an Open Access Digital Library with their short stories.

All in all, using tablet technology in this project has opened new horizons to us and made us realise that we have only touched the tip of an iceberg that looks promising, as long as technology is embraced in a flexible way and perceived as a means to enhance the student experience and not as an end in itself. It goes without saying that the functionality of Tablet PCs to provide feedback depends greatly on how powerful these are and, therefore, it is worth investing more money in a model or another piece of technology that is better equipped to suit our learning objectives from the start and may be used for longer.

As far as the use of audiobooks is concerned, they are a very powerful tool for learning languages and a means to reconnect students with literature in various ways. As Burkey (2013) has pointed out, "the aural appreciation of story is the oldest form of literature, and voice captured on audiobook communicates an author's words in a way that recreates the oral tradition" (section "Into the future", para. 2). Thus, the project described above not only managed to successfully balance and integrate receptive and productive skills but was also an attempt to foster a blended type of 'pedagogy of reconnection' (Comber & Kamler, 2004), which is becoming more and more necessary as we progressively move away from what once was the core of our teaching.

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