

## **Finding your “Spanish Voice” through popular media: Improving students’ confidence and fluency**

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*Abstract: This article shares an innovative advanced course design that incorporates cultural connections and comparisons, interpersonal communication, and a relaxing classroom environment to facilitate learning and language development. By using authentic texts as the medium for learning, it provides a case example of an upper-division curriculum that focused on cognitive skills, elicited conversational dialogues, exposed and promoted the use of different registers, and tapped students’ existing schema around stimulating topics to foster engagement, reflection and enthusiasm. We advance that a curriculum that focuses on the affective domain over discrete academic or grammatical objectives can develop students’ sense of linguistic creativity and language ownership, thus improving their confidence and level of competency in the target language.*

*Keywords: motivation & engagement; learning ownership; creativity and language learning; Spanish language learning; authentic media materials*

### **Introduction**

This project sought to address two noted shortcomings in foreign language (FL) instruction: a lack of true cultural studies and a curricular emphasis on written communication in academic genres over conversational proficiency. In 1996, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages developed the *Standards of Foreign Language Learning*, a framework for FL instruction with five major objectives: *Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities*. Though these “5 Cs” of FL learning include broad objectives focused on a more integrated approach to language learning and use, there is a decided gap between theory and implementation, with much classroom instruction at the upper-division focusing on canonical texts and academic language proficiency. However, the 5 Cs are not mutually exclusive, and a well-developed curriculum can address them critically and in tandem.

### **Curricular Critique**

Even though most language students cite communication as a primary goal (Antes, 1999; Magnan, Murphy, Shahakyan & Kim, 2012), they also cite effective oral communication in the target language as their greatest challenge. Though the *Standards* state, “while grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, it is the acquisition of the

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ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom" (p. 2), students complain of not being able to link classroom learning with real world communicative exchanges (Pomerantz, 2002). Students further note that the emphasis on academic language – the formal or scholarly register of Spanish used and expected in the collegiate environment – fails to recognize registers and communication norms that are appropriate and necessary for interpersonal communication (DeFeo, 2010; Godley, Carpenter & Werner, 2007; Pomerantz, 2002; for a discussion problematizing the use of elite registers, see also Leeman, 2005; Kubota & Saito-Abbot, 2003; Villa, 2002). Language, being interactive and dialogic, requires knowledge of “grammar and vocabulary” – to use the ACTFL *Standards* terms – but to communicate effectively also requires that speakers have a broader sociolinguistic or extralinguistic knowledge base.

Brumfit (1984) observed that this knowledge is not developed in the FL classroom because it regards fluency and accuracy as oppositional (for a discussion about the interpretations of FL fluency see Schmidt, 1992). He juxtaposes these objectives:

[T]he demand to produce work for display to the teacher in order that evaluation and feedback could be supplied conflicted directly with the demand to perform adequately in the kind of natural circumstances for which teaching was presumably a preparation. Language display for evaluation tended to lead to a concern for accuracy, monitoring, [and] reference rules... In contrast, language use requires fluency, expression rules, a reliance on implicit knowledge and automatic performance. (p. 51)

Though he challenged the bifurcation of instruction nearly three decades ago, an appropriate and implementable solution still eludes many FL educators.

Since the 1970s, attempts to reform the FL curriculum to refocus attention on communication rather than grammar have been unsuccessful for the most part (Burke, 2007). Many teachers continue to focus primarily on grammar and translation, using writing as the means for evaluation and English as the medium of instruction when designing curriculum and teaching lessons; as a result students develop inadequate levels of communicative competence, which requires not only grammatical competence, but also pragmatic competence (Savignon, 1983; Savignon, 1991). Leo van Lier (as cited by Gutiérrez, 1997) noted that “[t]he question of correctness masks the fact that language use is a living process that we need to appreciate and learn to understand better, not merely judge by a list of rules printed in a grammar book” (p. 35). Thus, although communicative approaches to language learning (approaches that look at language in context and attend primarily to task achievement and social interaction) have been preferred since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; language teachers are, at best, still negotiating a balance between a structuralist approach, focusing on mastery of language structures, and a communicative approach in which learners intuit those structures through their repeated exposure to and use of them (Bell, 2005).

The role of language as the medium for real-world interactions also conjures another curricular challenge: authenticity. Although there is an ongoing debate about pertinent issues including definition, adaptation, and simplification (see MacDonald & Gilmore, 2007; Badger & Dasli, 2006; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Chavez, 1998), there seems to be a consensus on the importance of using authentic materials and tasks in the FL classroom to bridge the gap between metalinguistic knowledge and students' ability to

participate in the real world (Guariento & Morley, 2001). However, as with the structuralist versus communicative debate, knowing the theory does not change the praxis. Although textbook editors have sought to select and adapt authentic materials, the results have been, in general, unsatisfactory (Guariento & Morley, 2001). As they are marketed to a wide variety of classrooms and purposes, textbooks are forced to become mainstream or sterile representations of language and, without a discrete target audience, are often over-generalized. The standardization of instructional materials, along with an emphasis on correctness and academic language use, diverge from the spirit of the 5 Cs and detract from their holistic and culturally competent intent.

Noting these challenges, several authors have problematized the lack of cultural understanding developing from the Spanish FL curriculum (see O'Neill, 2000), and the literature reveals that these shortcomings could be addressed through a revision of the existing curricular approach. Compitello (2008) argues that cultural studies can help students develop critical thinking skills and reflect on sociocultural issues in their undergraduate experience, and recommends that this be achieved by extending the curriculum beyond literature and text. Ellisondo (2000) posits, "there is an urgent need to move from traditional undergraduate curricula to more engaging programs thereby capturing the challenging (post) modern articulations between language, culture, and social narratives" (p. 133). These ideas are echoed in the recommendations offered by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (Geisler, 2007).

Heeding this call requires not only a shift in texts, but also a change in the language used to examine them. As students transition from intermediate-level FL classes to upper-division courses, the language structure shifts from the target of instruction to a tool for creative and complex expression (Lee, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Though the upper-division curriculum requires application of language competencies, the type of language used in these exchanges may not lead to communicative competency in real contexts. Cummins' (1984) distinction of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) from Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) notes that the classroom, being highly abstract and decontextualized, promotes a register of Spanish reserved for academic discourse but not readily transferrable to other authentic contexts.<sup>4</sup> Students who wish to apply language outside of the classroom will need to develop BICS as well as the cultural fluency – knowledge of language's role as a "system of representation" for perception and thinking" (Bennett, 1997, p. 16) – to participate in social exchanges.

The curricular challenges in meeting communicative language objectives are further hindered by challenges in the learning environment itself. Caine, Caine, McClintic & Klimek (2009) advance the concept of relaxed alertness as the ideal psychological state for learning, defined by challenge and stimulation within a comfortable and safe environment. The abundant scholarship about language anxiety suggests that this is not the norm in the FL classroom. The negative impact of stress on learning is observable in any discipline but, unfortunately, "the adult language learning environment often causes considerable stress and anxiety" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 75), and several studies have noted that high levels of anxiety usually have a negative effect on the language

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<sup>3</sup> The need to infuse more critical cultural study into the lower-division curriculum is a worthy and necessary conversation, but it is outside of the scope of this project, which focused on upper-division curricula.

<sup>4</sup> We are making reference to the register R3 (formal, literary, scholarly). From a linguistic perspective, registers are classified into R1 (colloquial, casual), R2 (standard, polite), and R3 (formal, literary, scholarly).

acquisition process (see Wum, 2010; Marcos-Llinás & Garau, 2009; Ewald, 2007; Gregersen, 2003; Horowitz, Horowitz & Cope, 1986). The emphasis on correctness over the message in communication detracts not only from complex ideas and discussions, but also increases a sense of threat.

### **An Alternate and Responsive Course Design**

Communicative approaches to language instruction are better theorized than implemented, thus we drew from educational theory to develop a pedagogical methodology.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing that developing fluency in a FL requires attention both to the nuances of language use that allow for more communicative competence and also to the social and affective realms, the instructor used authentic texts to construct the curriculum for an advanced class. Her objective (and challenge) was to foster students' sense of engagement through creativity and ownership of their learning process, encouraging them to develop idiolects that reveal their personas, hence enhancing their motivation and confidence, and ultimately improving their communicative competence and ability to interact with others.

The curriculum design was adapted from the task-based approach advanced by Nunan (1992) and Estaire & Zanón (1994). Their approach draws from Bruner's (1985) instructional theory in which the learning tasks are "scaffolded," whereby students complete a series of increasingly complex tasks, each incorporating and building on skills and competencies developed in the previous activities.<sup>6</sup> The activities demanded by this curriculum were communicative in nature, "focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1992, p. 10). In this model, the aforementioned decontextualized structure, memorization, and individualized work are substituted with the prioritizing of context, communication, and group work (Cerezal, 1997). Interaction is a pivotal element, with an emphasis on learning through social exchange (Ellis, 2003).

The resulting curricular approach used authentic texts as a medium for creating an environment of relaxed alertness, developing BICS, and exposing students to culture. Guariento and Morley (2001) suggest that authentic texts can also augment students' interest and motivation, and therein its goal was not to study certain linguistic components isolated from experience, but to attain dexterity and proficiency within a communicative context. By de-emphasizing direct language learning goals and focusing rather on comprehension of texts and the learning environment, it was suspected that language development and students' ability to apply Spanish in their daily lives would emerge naturally and as a denouement. Figure 1 provides an overview of the structural framework for the course.

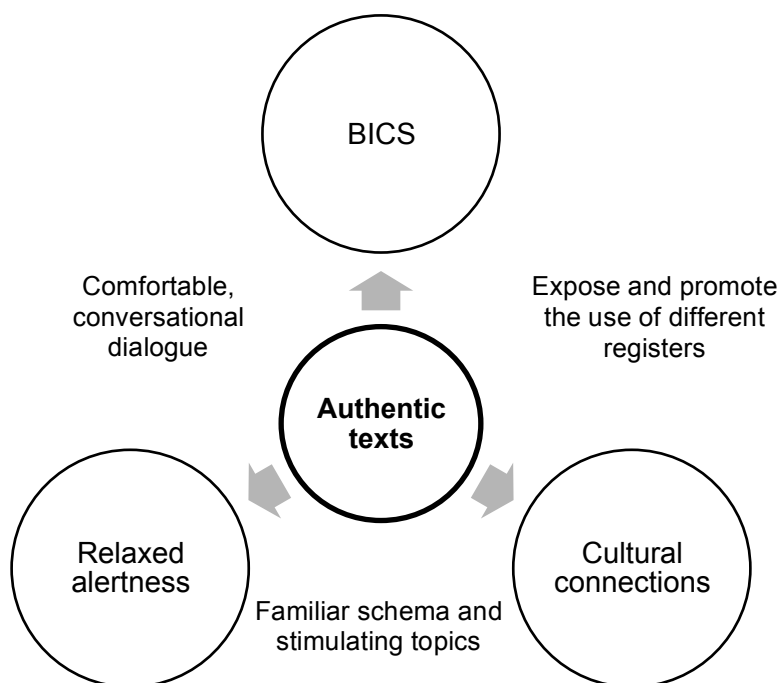
Course outcomes were for students to explore and relate to representative contemporary texts, to consider them within their own experiences, and compare that to the cultural and sociohistorical context in which they were composed. Students were also expected to demonstrate analytical skills in Spanish through engagement with cultural

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<sup>5</sup> The 2007 MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages indicated that some colleges and universities have begun to restructure their programs to include a more broad understanding of language study (Geisler, et al., 2007), but many institutions still continue to perpetuate a more linguistic-based model.

<sup>6</sup> Saville-Troike (2006) notes that in the FL classroom, this can be achieved when students are exposed to language at a level higher than their own level of production, and as they work with classmates to negotiate and construct meaning at a higher level than they could produce independently.

artifacts, and to apply appropriate disciplinary approaches (e.g. historical, cultural, artistic) and terminology in investigative analyses executed in the target language. Though emphasis on language development was an aim in the previous iterations of the course, the expectation was that students would develop their language proficiency not as a discrete outcome, but rather as a byproduct of engaged exposure in a relaxed environment. Thus language proficiency or discrete grammatical competencies were not preeminent as learning outcomes for this class. The course outcomes are further detailed in Table 1.



*Figure 1.* Framework for course design

Authentic texts were the medium for engaging students in comparisons and connections to culture, for exposing and promoting the use of BICS, and for creating an optimal learning environment of relaxed alertness.

Guariento and Morley (2001) argue that “unless a learner is somehow ‘engaged’ by the task, unless they are genuinely interested in its topic and its purpose, and understands its relevance,” (p. 350) authenticity of materials and of tasks may count for very little. The course, *Love in the Times of Cholera: Personal Relationships in the Hispanic World*, focused on themes of relationships, love, and emotions. Table 2 provides an overview of course themes and units. Because these topics are central to the human experience, reflecting on them requires a consideration of our own identities and social mores, and students came to the class with developed schema within which they could make intertextual connections to self, other texts, and the world (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). The cultural and sociohistorical contexts of social issues, humor, tensions, images, and ideology are implicit in authentic texts, and as students reflected on them, they engaged in cultural exploration. Appendix 1 provides an example of a unit plan for the course.

Table 1

Overview of student learning outcomes

Area	Outcomes
Reading	The student is able to identify main ideas and information from texts featuring description and narration.
Listening	The student is able to sustain understanding over longer stretches of connected discourse on a number of familiar topics.
Writing	The student is able to describe, narrate and offer arguments in paragraphs.
Speaking	The student can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to his/her interests including essays or reports (using supporting evidence) and letters (highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences).
	The student is able to navigate communicative tasks: to debate and to express opinion, agreement and disagreement over different topics in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining his/her views.
Cultural knowledge and cultural awareness	The student can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest. Student can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	The student is able to identify representative contemporary artists (writers, filmmakers, song-writers, singers, comic creators, etc.) and relate them to the cultural context in which they were composed.
Cross-cultural understanding	The student is able to identify, address, and navigate within multiple linguistic and cultural registers, to distinguish among multiple Spanish-speaking communities, and to implement appropriate personal behavior according to various social contexts and cues.
Independent and cooperative learning	The student is able to operate individually and collaboratively within the target language.

*Note:* The course outcomes contained no specific mention of grammar or vocabulary, but rather on students' ability to apply Spanish in a variety of contexts. Students were asked to reflect on their progress towards these outcomes, and their responses provided additional data for the analysis.

To create an environment of relaxed alertness, the instructor sought to minimize threat by using texts that would attract and interest students. The variety of texts was chosen to engage different learning styles, and the class structure included a range of activities designed to foster interpersonal communication and collaboration through one-on-one, small group, and large group activities. The emphasis on communication and de-emphasis on grammatical correctness was intended to reduce feelings of language anxiety.

Table 2

*Overview of Course Themes*

Love in the Times of Cholera: Personal Relationships in the Hispanic World	
Unit	Theme
1	Perception of gender (in)differences
2	Romantic love
3	Deterioration (falling in and out of love)
4	Unrequited love & difficulties of love relationships
5	Damaging love
6	Sexuality

*Note.* The course used personal relationships as a major theme, and used authentic texts to explore aspects therein.

To emphasize BICS, the instructor used non-academic but culturally relevant texts that would expose students to language used in a multiplicity of social contexts. These texts not only exposed students to a variety of registers, but also to the cultural context in which they were created. The texts used in class included comics, songs, articles, short stories, movies, short films, advertisements, and radio and newspaper interviews, and required students' analysis and evaluation of them. The texts exposed students to different registers and dialects, and as students interacted with and reacted to these texts, they needed to identify, address, and navigate within multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. With exposure to BICS, students were expected to interpret and employ it themselves as they engaged in discussion about the text. As students worked with authentic texts produced in and by the target culture, they were meant not only to attain language exposure, but also to identify and compare their values. Effectively, the class intended to integrate intercultural understanding by evaluating pre-conceived notions regarding socio-cultural traditions and norms different from one's own.

The course culminated in a final creative project in which the students authored their own print magazines, requiring them to synthesize and employ a variety of language skills and draw from course themes of gender, love, or relationships. Figure 2 provides an image and description of magazine content. For all of the assignments, students were encouraged to use imagination, visual rhetoric, creativity, and humor, so that they could project their personalities while engaging in complex critical thinking appropriate to academia.

### Setting and Method

This project was conducted in the fall of 2010 with an upper-division special topics Spanish class at the University of Alaska Anchorage, which is geographically isolated and located in a mid-sized city with a small population of Spanish-speakers. This project sought to operationalize the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages' recommended approach (Geisler et al., 2007) in a program where this had not been attempted, in a desire to incorporate content and cross-cultural reflection. The ratio of

adjunct to tenured- or tenure-track faculty is 2.6 in the Spanish Department, with the majority of lower-division courses delivered by adjunct instructors.



Figure 2. Photograph of Students' Magazines

The final magazine project incorporated work that students had created throughout the semester and included a main article, brief autobiographies, personal ads, editorials, a comic, a short love story, a horoscope section, advice column letters and responses, a poem, a consciousness-raising advertisement, cooking recipes, and an interview with a Spanish-speaking person about personal relationships in his or her culture.

The class was taught in a face-to-face setting, with enrollment capped at fifteen to ensure a small class size that would allow for extensive student participation. Fourteen students (11 females and 3 males) ultimately enrolled. Though all students in the class were Spanish majors or minors, their prior experience with the language varied. The class contained one native speaker, one heritage speaker, and 12 FL learners, including one who had spent six months studying abroad. All students had at least intermediate proficiency as indicated by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, and had completed at least six semesters of prerequisite coursework which prepared them with the foundational oral and written communication skills needed to engage in this learning environment.

The instructor was a native speaker from Spain<sup>7</sup>, and the course structure was designed to be very different from the lectures and prepared lessons that characterized the students' prior learning experiences in the department. In a typical class session, the instructor presented a topic and discussed it, introducing students to new vocabulary that they would need to use in discussion. In this phase, students were encouraged to share their reactions and impressions from their own experiences and points of view. The instructor then presented a text – such as a comic, song, or film clip – and solicited students' knowledge about its author, or historical context. She provided information to fill in the gaps in students' knowledge of the text, and led students in discussion.

<sup>7</sup> The first author, Dr. Maseda Garcia, was the instructor and course designer; Dr. DeFeo in the facilitated analysis of data collected.



Following class discussion, students used the themes and topics to engage in their own creative projects, using language in a variety of meaningful ways.

As students' prior experiences in the department did not include genuine communicative teaching methodologies, our interest was in students' perception of their own learning experience. As the method was supported by literature and successful implementations at other institutions, we expected that it would facilitate learning. Thus our analysis focused instead on how students characterized their learning and how they compared it to the more traditional learning environment with which they had experience. Our analysis includes observations of students' behaviors in class interactions, instructor interviews with small groups of students, reviews of their work, and their feedback, as solicited via institutional teaching evaluations, surveys, reflective questionnaires, and personal communications. These instruments are included in Appendices 2 and 3.

### **Findings**

Instructor observations and student feedback identified positive impacts from the curricular design and learning environment. Notable effects included gains in motivation and engagement, confidence and self-efficacy, and language and fluency development.

#### **Motivation and Engagement**

Students often complained in their interviews that their previous experiences in upper-division Spanish classes did not afford many opportunities for interaction or engaged participation, and they indicated that they were rarely prompted to utilize cross-cultural comparisons. They were mainly lectured in linguistic and literary aspects, asked to translate, and were offered picturesque cultural representations. In comparison, students repeatedly commented on the interactive and dialogic nature of the class, and thus we considered how the course design impacted student behavior in the course. Their activities and interactions suggested high levels of motivation and engagement as reflected by attendance and participation, their level of interest in the learning process, their creativity and self-expression, and their demonstrated commitment to learning.<sup>8</sup>

Students in the class were not only physically present (12 of the 14 students had perfect attendance and the other two students missed only one class each), but they were also mentally present, as evidenced by their active participation. Class discussions were lively and dialogic; in independent group work, students were consistently engaged and on-task, and the instructor rarely had to refocus their conversations to course topics. Rather, on several occasions, the instructor felt that she had to interrupt or redirect a lively discussion in the interest of maintaining the schedule as delineated in the syllabus. Though participation was active throughout the semester, as the students interacted more and more, camaraderie and openness became increasingly apparent. When students presented their final projects, their classmates asked questions, interjected, and responded emphatically.

Students also demonstrated a commitment to learning in the ways that they extended their learning to independent in out-of-class activities. One student commented

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<sup>8</sup> We understand creativity as the production of artifacts or utterances that show ideation, autonomy, and exploratory behavior that leads to creations that reveal students' independent, individual personas.

that, “the class pushed you to a movement of constant learning.” For example, in the unit about domestic violence, the class reviewed two three-minute clips from the film, *Te doy mis ojos*, (Icía Bollaín, 2003), selected to both elicit dialogue and to employ the skills of inference in textual interpretation. Six of the fourteen students spoke about the movie in detail in their final interviews, attesting that they had independently sought out the film and watched it in its entirety outside of class. Their commitment to learning was also noticeable in their application of the language to personal tasks. Since the class concluded, one student has sent the instructor stories that he wrote in Spanish, and he indicated that the class has inspired him to pursue this interest. Additionally, students indicated that the class inspired them to pursue their studies in other dialogic settings: two students decided to study abroad in Spain, and two other enrolled in a private language schools in the community.

Student comments on the institutional course evaluation and in-class surveys are also indicative of their engagement. On a 10-point Likert instrument administered as part of the institutional evaluation, students’ rated their own interest level as 9.0 for activities completed in class and 8.7 for activities completed at home. They rated the class as a 9.6 for stimulating student interest and a 10.0 for encouraging student involvement by requiring original or creative thinking. Their handwritten comments further illuminate their interest with the learning process; students commented that “all activities we did were interesting,” the class “was very interesting and entertaining,” “very dynamic,” that they “loved the diverse themes,” and that they were grateful for “the freedom of being creative.”

Students’ engagement in the course was also apparent in the creativity they expressed in their written work and oral presentations; their interest and self-expression were evident in the topics they chose to explore. Students’ articles included such topics as the courting etiquette of Latin dance, Yoga for couples, Biblical representations of love, love for social or environmental issues as expressed through activism, psychological abuse in the form of *gaslighting*, domestic gender roles, and essentials for healthy relationships. In these articles, the students made personal connections to course themes and expressed their own opinions as they made intertextual connections between course materials and their own lived experiences. This type of creative expression and critical analysis not only fostered the *Connections* and *Comparisons* components of the 5 Cs, but also contributed to their enjoyment of the learning process. The multiple data sources indicated that the emphasis on dialogue and familiar themes studied within a new cultural and linguistic context created a learning environment that fostered engagement.

Motivation is a key element of language learning, and skills to motivate learners are crucial for language teachers (Finch, 2006; Dörnyei, 2001). Hernández (2010) suggests that authentic target language cultural artifacts are a valuable way to motivate students as they provide them with meaningful opportunities to use target language in a wide range of communicative contexts, and this was affirmed in our experience. The themes of love and interpersonal relationships were not only interesting, but the students’ ability to relate them to their own schema and make intertextual connections contributed to their motivation and engagement. Their new application of language made it adaptable and transferrable to their own purposes, which gave them the agency and ability to apply the Spanish language beyond this specific class.

## **Confidence and Self-Efficacy**

Students indicated that the format of the class and their engagement in dialogic and self-directed tasks also helped them develop confidence. The instructor observed a change in students' behavior as they engaged with the class. At the beginning of the semester, students were frequently shy and reticent to offer suggestions or opinions, limiting their oral contributions to simple sentences that they seemed to rehearse in their heads before raising their hands. As they moved through the course, this behavior changed dramatically. Working from a platform of familiar schema, students made personal connections to the texts, thus some of the class discussions produced emotional responses and heated comments. The emotion in the dialogue was also reflective of the environment of relaxed alertness, and as some of the discussions elicited debates between students, their use of Spanish to advance complex or personal opinions and perspectives reflected their developing confidence.

Student written feedback confirmed in-class observations. One student commented, "I have learned that I need to be brave and try to speak," another said, "I was nervous of speaking, but now I have more trust in my abilities." Student feedback indicated that this confidence extended also to their written expression. A student said,

I was able to write stories more effectively and I was able to express my ideas in the stories that I write. It takes a little edge off of me as a student due to the fact that I was always taught to write in a certain way in my other Spanish classes.

In this comment, the student both expressed confidence in language use and also asserted ownership of the language, suggesting a development of style and voice in his/her written expression.

Although many people have anxiety talking in class or giving oral presentations even in their first language, students in the course freely asserted their opinions and ideas even when they were being video-recorded. The frequency and quality of these communicative exchanges provided evidence for good community and trust in the class, which we attribute to the course design. The use of authentic texts facilitated an environment of relaxed alertness, and within this environment, the students were able to develop confidence in using Spanish and expressing their own opinions.

## **Language and Fluency Development**

Though the course design purposely deemphasized grammatical mastery, our expectation was that students would actualize gains in language proficiency, and observed performance suggests that this was an outcome of the curricular approach. Though language fluency development is difficult to operationalize and measure (Schachter, 1990), in addition to aforementioned observations and student feedback, we were also able to note growth in the students' written work.

Both oral and written language skill development over the course of the semester was noteworthy. Students' mastery of grammatical tenses was observable not only in prepared or rehearsed formal presentations, but also in impromptu conversations and class discussions. Though students had received prior grammatical instruction that prepared them for the academic writing tasks associated with the class, they were not

habituated to dialogue, interaction, or self-expression. The beginning of the semester was characterized by hesitant classroom conversation with limited participation and generous instructor prompting. Their sentence structure was limited to simple verb tenses (mainly present, preterite, and future), short sentences, and basic vocabulary; they regularly defaulted to English when their command of Spanish vocabulary was too limited to express their complex ideas. They comfortably used words that were taught as part of the standardized curriculum of their previous instruction, but their repertoire lacked words necessary for self-expression, evidencing a deficit of language ownership (the exceptions to these observations were the one native speaker, and the heritage speaker in a lesser degree).

Over the course of the semester, the instructor's prominent role in eliciting participation diminished; students were able to use language to interact, asking and responding to questions using a variety of appropriate verb tenses and grammatical structures. In these presentations and conversations, students made some grammatical errors and their conversations contained some natural disfluencies, but they did not jeopardize comprehension. Students used their familiarity with language structure and employed circumlocution to express their points, never defaulting to English.

Students' written proficiency in Spanish also improved over the course of the semester as their writing pieces became increasingly more complex and extensive. They started out by writing shorter pieces that demanded less complicated grammar structures, such as personal ads and horoscopes, which required present and future tenses, and they moved towards more complex pieces, such as film reviews and editorials, which required advanced verb tenses including past and past-perfect subjunctives, more complex syntax, and extended vocabulary. The variety of literary pieces that students wrote demanded a great level of versatility from students, and the end-of-semester magazine project displayed great originality, variety, and the ability to integrate their personal interests and experiences to the main topics of the course.

Student feedback also reflected perceived language proficiency and development. In the standardized course evaluation instrument (not appendicized per copyright), students rated the course's effectiveness in developing oral and written communication skills as 4.8 in a 5-point scale. A student commented that the class helped her "to improve my skills in Spanish," another said that the course helped him "improve how to express myself verbally." Reflecting on her progress, a student commented, "I feel that I can speak much better now than I could at the beginning of the semester," and another: "I was able to learn better how to address creating the structure of a sentence which in turned helped me better to use more accurate verbal tenses." Though language fluency development was neither a course outcome nor target of assessment, the students independently identified it as an outcome of their experience in class.

In their final presentations, students demonstrated oral proficiency by using tenses and vocabulary related to the topics of their own interest. They showed mastery and appropriate use of verb tenses (including appropriate distinction between preterite/imperfect, subjunctive, and conditional), commands, and jargon. Because students chose the topic of their final presentations, the language and verb tenses varied widely, but all students used language suited to their topics. For example, one student talked about self-defense against sexual predators, thus more frequently employing the command form. The fact that students were selecting grammatical structures or specific

vocabulary appropriate for their topic of discussion demonstrates their understanding and ability to apply these grammatical features in real communication.

Though at the end of the semester they still struggled with some tense constructions (such as the third conditional), per instructor and self-assessment, their overall written and oral proficiency in Spanish improved. Students also perceived an improvement in their language fluency, as reported on their self-assessments, and in this realm we identified other salient byproducts of the course design. The psychosocial impacts of the course design appeared to foster increased motivation, engagement, confidence, and self-efficacy, and we believe that these aspects of the course contributed to the observed fluency development.

### **Discussion**

We attribute the observed results – heightened motivation for language learning, and increased confidence, and even language fluency development – to the course design itself. These positive student learning outcomes present an opportunity to discuss the appropriateness and effectiveness of this approach in addressing some of the aforementioned curricular shortcomings. Though the course provides a preliminary single case example of the application of this course design, the merits and successes of the implementation warrant consideration of its broader utility in other educational settings and contexts. It is our intention to further analyze the implications of the study with more thorough collection of data and explanation of methods in a subsequent study.

### **Cultural Exploration**

The use of authentic texts exposed students to a variety of sociocultural discourses, addressing some topics and issues that were new and others that were quite familiar. As the students engaged in discussion around the texts and these topics, they engaged in the process of *Connections* and *Comparisons*, which facilitated a more holistic exploration of the diversity of customs and opinions. Throughout our years of teaching Spanish, students have often asked us about customs or habits of Spanish-speaking people, but straightforward questions and quick responses do not fully transmit any cultural or social traits in depth, and lessen the complexities involved. Working with real-life materials made students more conscious of the nuances of the cultures featured in the texts. One student commented, “I was able to see the differences regarding sociocultural practices, traditions, and norms of those other than my own culture of origin.” As she compared her experiences to those depicted in the texts, she engaged in a more factual process of *Connections* and *Comparisons*. However, she also took notice of significant differences between her own experiences and the countries she studied, noting, “some issues in other countries are more serious than in my native country.” Another student aptly indicated “I was able to view different traditions and customs and compare them with my own and note their differences and similarities[;] this gave me a much greater appreciation for the foreign cultures studied.” More authentic and contextualized representation of culture situated within familiar schema not only allowed personal reflections but also enhanced critical thinking. Awareness of both similarities and significant differences in cultural realities or expectations was a notable result of using texts in this manner.

## **Meaningful and Relevant Conversation**

Our interest in authenticity was not limited to the use of materials in the classroom, but also the students' use of language. As students claimed Spanish as their own and used it as the medium through which they explored their own experiences and expressed their personas, the authenticity of language was augmented. As Herrera and Conejo (2004) note, "language is a tool that the speaker uses to interpret the world, to take a stance within it and therein construct his/her own identity" (p. 3, translation ours). As the students used Spanish to express and explore constituent components of their own identities and values, they found their own Spanish voices. The class design facilitated the sense of ownership and the use of Spanish for authentic communicative tasks. A student commented,

The most important for me, in particular, is that this class has given me a unique opportunity to talk to other people. On top of all the grammar I have learned, I liked a lot that we could finally practice this language with other students. [It] is easier to learn all the grammar and write it in a piece of paper... but it is harder to practice it if we did not have the chance before.

Another student added, "in this class, I was able to practice it in real life examples due to the role plays and other assignments to improve my communication."

## **BICS**

The use of authentic texts also exposed the students to BICS and to Spanish in a variety of discourses and genres. As they watched films, read comics, and read short stories, the students were exposed to interpersonal aspects of communication. In turn, as the students engaged in dialogue and discussion with one another, they employed some of these communicative skills and registers. This approach was intended to promote cooperative social interaction that would produce new, elaborate, and advanced psychological processes that promote effective learning (see Finch 2006), and we were pleased with the students' responses. Students demonstrated a good capacity for collaborating and working in groups, and therein further employed interpersonal communication skills. One student contrasted the Spanish used in the class with academic tasks that are removed from real life; noting that the class helped him/her "improve how to express myself verbally and to write documents frequently used in real life," and another student contrasted the delivery format with other classes s/he had previously, noting that the class provided "an opportunity to explore the language in practice (for the first time)." In this way, the course not only helped the students reach their own goals of better communication and applicability, but also advanced their exploration and learning within the 5 Cs.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

The successes actualized in the class provide an illustrative case study of communicative approaches to language instruction in practice, and support the use of authentic texts in the classroom. Not only are these texts engaging, but they provide exposure to and

facilitate the development of BICS, and they are a medium for cultural learning as students make connections and comparisons, which also bring about high levels of motivation and engagement, confidence, and language fluency. However, developing a curriculum that explores contemporary issues wholly through the use of authentic and popular texts is a time-consuming task, and in order for teachers to access and effectively integrate these materials, they must have significant cultural competence. Teachers will need to be prepared to negotiate and navigate some difficult discussions as students explore themes and concepts including race, class, politics, and sexuality, and instructors may not have the preparation for facilitating these types of conversations. Moreover, this type of organic and responsive curriculum development requires that the teacher have a significant amount of academic freedom; this is generally expected at the postsecondary level, but not always true for secondary educators.

The engaging class discussions, even and perhaps especially when covering difficult topics, suggest that attention to relaxed alertness in the learning environment cannot be overstated. Investing time and making the classroom more inclusive and comfortable for students with a mind to developing community is not a mere social platitude, but rather a teaching strategy that puts students in the optimal position to learn most effectively (Vitto, 2003). Though we fundamentally challenge promoting grammatical “perfection” in language learning, our study suggests that deemphasizing correctness may actually lead to improved accuracy and fluency. As students experiment with and use the language more freely in a method that more closely resembles the deductive process of language acquisition over explicitly taught language learning (Gee, 2001), they engage higher-order cognitive skills and thusly construct their own knowledge.

Though we found the magazine assignment to be an excellent opportunity for students to express their ideas and to experiment with writing in different genres, one shortcoming of this activity was the lack of authentic audience. Daniels & Zemelman (2004) emphasize the importance of audience in writing, and problematize the idea of writing something exclusively for the teacher to read. Though the students’ writing tasks mimicked authentic activities, when the intended reader is the teacher, it becomes an inauthentic exercise. Because this activity was successfully piloted on paper, we recommend that it be taken to the next level – that students develop web pages or blogs that will generate some comments and feedback from Spanish-speakers from other parts of the country or world. Such activities have been lauded as mechanisms for supporting authentic experiential and evidence-based learning (Herrera & Conejo, 2009). If students are to be effective communicators in Spanish, this will mean that they move beyond oral and written activities situated solely in the classroom to interact with people outside of the classroom through technology.

## **Conclusion**

Although there are abundant theories, research, and practical initiatives promoting communicative approaches, student engagement, and authenticity in the development of FL curricula, that dialogue still remains within the domain of binaries: fluency versus acquisition, high culture versus popular culture, authentic versus inauthentic, and teacher versus student. Our academic system requires that students demonstrate, mainly through

written exams, that they have achieved demonstrable and measurable course objectives that generally focus on mastery of discrete language skills. Attempting to use a method that deals more with the communicative side prompts teachers to focus on its supposed deficiencies: the neglect of its opposite in the binary system. This project was conceptualized as a curriculum development exercise – not better or worse, but different and complementary – that offered itself as a response for our specific setting. Some of this responsiveness is to the design or structure of the lower-division classes in our program; though they seek to combine the structuralist approach with a pseudo-communicative method, the reality is that they prepare our students to gain linguistic accuracy (specifically in written communication), but fail to provide a genuine communicative environment.

This applied project indicates that the course design around authentic texts, which included attention to BICS, to cultural connections and to relaxed alertness, can be successful in helping students develop more confidence in expressing themselves, as well as more freedom to use the language for their own purposes. We saw increases in motivation, confidence, language use and fluency, but more than the development and application of linguistic skills, students also profited from other experiences historically missing in the Spanish FL curriculum – culture, interactive communication, and interpersonal communication skills. Developing curriculum like this takes a tremendous amount of time, but we posit that it is worth the investment. Not only was it a good learning experience for students, but it was a pleasant experience for the instructor – she enjoyed the students’ engaged dialogues, interest in the materials, and expressive work, and found herself renewed with energy and motivation for ongoing curricular developments.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Sample unit overview

LESSON 5: Damaging love (domestic violence)

Lección 5: Amores perros. “*Quien te quiere te hará llorar*”

Emphasized structures: commands, subjunctive verb tense

Texts/materials selected for theme alignment and appropriate levels of complexity:

- Phrases and idiomatic expressions, for example, *Quien te quiere de hará llorar* (He who loves you will make you suffer) and *Hay amores que matan* (There are loves that kill).
- A public service announcement (poster) that had been made for *el Día de San Valentín* (2009) by a Spanish feminist organization.
- Song by Bebe: “Malo” from *Pafuera Telarañas* (EMI Music, 2004).
- Film clip: Iciar Bollain’s (2003) *Te doy mis ojos* (Spain: Alta PC & Producciones la Iguala.)

Objectives <i>Objetivos</i>	Assignments <i>Actividades</i>	Final tasks <i>Tareas finales</i>
<p>Use Spanish to discuss sensitive topics, such as domestic violence. <i>Ser capaces de discutir temas peliagudos como el de la violencia de género.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Devise a public service ad against domestic violence (image and text). <i>Organizar una campaña de concienciación sobre el tema.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Use commands in communication. <i>Utilizar el modo imperativo para transmitir nuestro mensaje.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Understand Spanish used in lyrics and text, and use Spanish for oral and written expression. <i>Comprensión oral y escrita.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Acquire new vocabulary. <i>Nuevo vocabulario.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Cooperative learning. <i>Aprendizaje cooperativo.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Comprehension of typical phrases that allude to painful aspects of relationships (according to some cultures). Discussion and cultural comparisons.</li> <li>2. Analysis of image and slogan from a poster – discuss the rhetorical use of color (black, white, purple and pink) and the image (a menacing hand on a woman’s shoulder, the woman’s bruised face, and tape on her mouth.)</li> <li>3. Discussion about social attitudes and legal responses to domestic violence in their countries.</li> </ol> <hr/> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Observation of non-verbal communication in video &amp; description of attitudes.</li> <li>2. Listening comprehension (fill the gap with missing information).</li> <li>3. Lexicon - survey about words that students associate with domestic violence.</li> <li>4. Notice accent and dialect.</li> <li>5. Summary of the story &amp; analysis.</li> </ol> <hr/> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussion and prediction about film theme by looking at movie cover and title.</li> <li>2. Interpretation of two scenes (without sound), and speculate what will happen next</li> <li>3. Watch film with sound, reconsider predictions and predict again.</li> <li>4. Using sentences from movie scenes, fill the gaps with commands.</li> <li>5. Watch scenes (comprehension) and correct.</li> <li>6. Group discussion and role-play - students discuss what they would do if there were a particular character, and they create an alternate dialogue.</li> </ol>	<p>Design a public service ad against gender violence. Create a poster that includes both an image and slogan and make a list of key messages including: (at least)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Commands telling someone to do (or not to do) certain things.</li> <li>2. Commands for someone to NOT do things that will hurt others.</li> </ol> <p>This ad will appear in your magazine.</p> <hr/> <p>Compile two cooking recipes for those who never cooked. Use formal and familiar commands.</p> <p>These recipes will appear in your magazine.</p> <hr/> <p>Upon return of your assignments, use feedback from the instructor and from your colleagues to make modifications for publication in your magazine.</p>

### *Appendix 2. Unit feedback form*

Students completed a progress report anonymously after each unit. The survey was administered in Spanish, but has been translated and condensed for publication.

#### **Rate your learning experience**

- In these lessons, I learned:
- Of all of the *activities* we completed in this unit, what I liked most was:
  - Because:
- The *activity* that I liked least was:
  - Because:
- My level of interest with in-class *activities* (1-10) (1 being none):
- My level of interest with the out-of-class *activities* (1-10):
- The most positive thing about the *unit* was...
- The worst part about the *unit* was...
- Of all of the *texts* (comics, videos, songs, etc.), what I liked best was:
- Because:

### *Appendix 3. Final course evaluation*

Students completed a final course feedback form at the end of the semester. The survey was administered in Spanish, but has been translated and the space condensed for publication.

1. What is your general opinion about the class?
2. What have you learned?
3. What part has been the most challenging (understanding or expressing yourself), and why?
4. What section has been more challenging, and why?
5. What was the part you liked the most, and why?
6. What would you change?
7. Other comments and/or suggestions.

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