

LEARNING BY DOING: SPANISH APPLIED LINGUISTICS AS A LIVING LAB

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Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of a sustainable teaching model in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at the University of British Columbia in the Okanagan (UBCO). During the past few years, the growing number of students wanting to learn Spanish has become evident, class size has increased from 30 to 70, but manpower has remained the same. The trade off has been that it has become almost impossible to give immediate individual feedback to the students in the classroom, so monitoring language learning has been affected. In language learning, feedback is understood as any communication between the instructor and the student that provides information about the student's performance in a given task. When this communication breaks, the learning process is affected. So, this eminent class increase promoted the idea of creating a learning space for students taking a course in Spanish Applied Linguistics. Most specifically, the course was designed to engage undergraduate fourth year students in project based learning to foster the integration of teaching and research. Theoretical applied linguistic concepts were introduced in class, and the experiential learning approach was used to allow the students opportunities outside the classroom to enact the concepts learned through classroom observations, tutoring, service learning, creation of supplementary materials and on-going reflection. The paper includes a detailed description on how the course was conducted, what learning opportunities the students were exposed to, and what the overall results of the course were.

Keywords: Experiential learning, monitoring, sustainability

Introduction

The effects of experiential learning in education have been the center of attention in many studies (Amstrong, 2011; Knoll, 2011; and Kolb, 1984). Kolb said that 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. In his cyclical theory of learning, he presented four main stages in which this transformation takes place:

- a) First, the student has a concrete experience.
- b) Second, the student makes observations and reflects upon what he has experienced,
- c) Third, these observations and reflections help to form a new conceptual understanding and interpretation of what the student has experienced.
- d) Last, the new conceptual understanding is used as a guide for new experiences.

Following Kolb's theory, the Spanish Program at UBCO has found a way of formal education that enables the students to integrate the knowledge acquired in the lectures with their direct involvement in the learning experience. Most precisely, students enrolled in Spanish Applied Linguistics (SAL) or Span-441, created a learning community with the vision to assist students in the learning of Spanish as a foreign language.

One of the main characteristics of a community of learning is to share a common goal (Levine, 2005; Goodsell, 2004; Smith, et. al., 2004). In Span-441, the students shared their

willingness to learn how to teach Spanish. What they learn was shaped by the assignments, reflections and assessments they were invited to do. Another shared goal was to help students enrolled in first year large Spanish succeed in the learning of Spanish as a foreign language. The objective of this paper is to explain how the experiential learning approach was used to allow the students opportunities outside the classroom to enact the concepts learned through classroom observations, tutoring, service learning, creation of supplementary materials and on-going reflection. Another objective of the paper is to analyze the impact this approach had on the students' motivation.

Context

The Spanish Program at UBC Okanagan offers between 24 and 27 courses per school year plus 2 first and 2 second year language courses in the summer. First and second year courses are devoted to learning the language and there are two third year courses (Span-301 and Span-302) which include a more advanced study of the language. The other third or fourth year courses cover specializations like literature, linguistics, or translation. Usually, first year classes are large and the numbers start decreasing as the level increases. (Table 1).

Eight hundred and eighty five students are currently enrolled in the Spanish program at UBCO. From these students, 600 are taking courses at the 100 level. At this level, students are graded with two midterm exams, four journals, an oral presentation, two reading comprehension exercises, four online vocabulary quizzes, online exercises (ilrn) and a final exam. Up to end of the second half of the winter semester 2009, Spanish language classes at UBCO ranged from 20 to 30 students and it was manageable to monitor the students' learning in class. Students were given immediate feedback when they were engaged in group discussion, when they answered questions in the classroom, when they completed the exercises assigned in class, and when they wrote their journals. The growing number of students wanting to learn Spanish became evident, class size increased from 30 to 50 and even 60, but there were no new hires. The trade off was that formative evaluation started to be affected.

Table1: Student enrollment in Spanish courses from September, 2014 to April, 2015

Courses	Students per class	Number of classes	total
Language			
Span-101	50	6	300
Span-102	50	4	200
Span-201	40	3	120
Span-202	40	3	120
Span-301	35	1	36
Span-302	35	1	32
Total Language		18	808
Literature & Linguistics			
Span-411	25	1	11
Span-280	25	1	6
Span-380	25	1	8
Span-312	25	1	29
Span-305	25	1	13
Spanish-408	25	1	10
Total Lit and Ling.		6	77
Total		24	885

In language learning, feedback is understood as any communication between the instructor and the student that provides information about the student's performance in a given task. When this communication breaks, the learning process is affected. So, the reality of having large classes promoted the idea of building a sustainable community among student peers, and at the same time providing the students taking Spanish Applied Linguistics with a unique learning experience.

The project

This project's vision was to provide opportunities for hands-on experience on campus in a sustainable way. We started working on very basic theoretical linguistic concepts in class and had the 4th year students observed how the theory was put into practice in a real first year Spanish class. Through these observations, fourth year students started gaining a sense of ownership when they were asked to give first year students feedback on the tasks assigned in class. Immediately, they got excited because they were working on something real. Afterwards, through class discussions, they began to feel a sense of learning community: a group sharing the same values who was actively learning together from each other. At the same time, they were individually very concerned with their own professional development. They were more aware of the problems they had with Spanish grammar, and started being more conscious of the mistakes they made. They tried to be a model for the first year students they were assigned, and each small success was taken to a higher level as days went by.

From each classroom observation task (four in total), the students were asked to reflect upon what they had learnt, to work closely with students whose progression in language learning was less obvious, and to produce language materials to support language learning. Each of the students in Span-441 made a conscious effort to incorporate the Hispanic culture into the materials they created, thus preserving the heritage of the Spanish language. Span-101 classes had only one undergraduate teaching assistant supporting the professor and this proved not to be enough for a class of almost sixty students. Students taking Spanish Applied Linguistics were used as human resources to the fullest and best potential in all classes. The course provided the students with opportunities:

- a) to be involved in the teaching/learning process with the mentorship of a faculty member, thus strengthening the undergraduate experience.
- b) to investigate the factors that contribute to successful language learning.
- c) to create a bank of supporting online supporting materials for first year Spanish language classes.

The course was designed to engage undergraduate students in project based learning to foster the integration of teaching and research. Theoretical applied linguistic concepts were introduced in class, and the experiential learning approach was used to allow the students opportunities outside the classroom to enact the concepts learned through classroom observations, tutoring, service learning, creation of supplementary materials and on-going reflection. This was an essential component of the course evaluation because students needed to examine what they had learned, how they had learned it, and how learning was applied in the first year class they were assigned to observe. All these tasks were intentionally linked to the academic goals of the course.

The specific tasks assigned to the students were:

- a) Assisting first year students: Students were assigned two first year students who they assisted closely throughout the semester.
- b) Observations: Students were asked to observe specific grammatical aspects which first years students were be learning. An observation form guiding them through the process was provided.

- c) Reflective Journal: Entries reflected concerns arising from class lectures, classroom observations, and meetings with the students.
- e) Creation of teaching materials: These materials included handouts, anticipation guides, concept maps, checklists, and other resources the students used to facilitate language learning. The students had to take into consideration that the key to effective learning materials is that they must be effective, efficient, and appealing to students. They should contain text, visuals, and other elements that will assist the diverse group of learners succeed. They should include analogies, scenarios, and examples that are motivating and interesting. Students were told that learning materials should use techniques that stimulate creative and critical thinking, and that they may contain reflective questions or ideas for organizing thinking. The key is providing the scaffolding that students need to be successful in the learning experience.
- f) Research project: The students were given the following choices to develop a research project: Learning Strategies: They had to consider how they encouraged the students assigned to them to develop their learning strategies. Taxonomies of learning strategies had to be presented and related to current trends in Second Language Teaching. Assessment and Testing in the Classroom: They had to discuss current practices and trends in assessment and testing in second language teaching. Specifically they had to examine the fundamental principles of testing and analyze how both formal and informal approaches to testing were used in Span-101. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL): They had to analyze the ways in which computer software was used to develop learners' language skills and examine how CALL related to teaching methodologies. They had to critically evaluate the software used in class and refer to developments in multimedia software and Internet applications that are successfully used in the field of second language teaching. Because the students used their journals and classroom observations and primary source of information for the data collection, no ethics was required.

Results

All the students who took Span-441, eleven in total, were actively engaged with all the activities assigned in the course. Their motivation was so high, that even though they only had to do four observations, the majority came to the Span-101 class at least once a week. The frequency in which Span-101 is taught is three times a week. This means that these 'teaching assistants' were exposed to a teaching experience thirteen times. Because there were so many assistants in the classroom and there was no physical space for them to be in, and because of fire regulations the instructor had to create a schedule for them to visit the class. A group of students came on Mondays, others came on Wednesday and the rest came on Fridays. In all, the Span-441 students assisted a total of twenty two first year students who expressed a huge gratitude for the work their assistants had done. The conceptual understanding and interpretation of what the students had experienced served as the introductory part of each lecture in Span-441. Participation in class was excellent and the students were very motivated to talk about their experiences with the students they were assisting and their reflections regarding the observations they had done in class. It was amazing to see them relate the theoretical concepts they were learning with the reality they were facing in the classroom.

Students created excellent teaching materials such as games, study guides, posters, practice tests, etc. Some students submitted only two materials they had used but others submitted up to ten.

For the final project, three students decided to work on evaluation, two on CALL and six on learning strategies. The students who worked on evaluation reported not being very

pleased with the way oral evaluation in particular was carried out in first year classes. They concluded that interviews were provided a more objective assessment of the students' oral abilities than a memorized dialogue. The students who decided to research on learning strategies were pleased with the progress their assigned students made. For their project, all of them used *Strategies for Success* by Douglas Brown, and followed the activities related to helping their students improve their learning strategies. The two students who investigated how CALL was used in Span-101 concluded that computer support is a way to monitor language learning in large language classes. They saw the value of this means as a way to carry out formative evaluation.

Conclusion

Spanish Applied Linguistics was designed to engage undergraduate fourth year students studying Spanish as a Foreign Language in experiential learning to foster the integration of teaching and research. Through the theoretical applied linguistic concepts which were introduced in class along with the experience they gained by interacting with the students they were assigned to assist, they were able to form a new conceptual understanding and interpretation of what they had experienced. This new conceptual understanding served as a guide when they engaged in tutoring, service learning, the creation of supplementary materials and the research project they submitted at the end of the term.

The initiative also proved to be really useful in regards the students' motivation. Besides the fact that the students put in many extra hours of their time to come to the Span-101 class, observe, and become engaged with the teaching learning process, they expressed their interest in continuing assisting the professors teaching Span-102. This is an indication of the students' willingness to complete the tasks assigned in the course because they wanted to do so. In addition, three students approached their instructor to extend their service to the community. The instructor invited a group of Secondary School teachers to her class on their professional development day. This visit provided the opportunity to establish connections between the Span-441 class and three Secondary School teachers teaching Spanish in Grades nine, ten, eleven and twelve, and at present four students from Span-441 are assisting three teachers in three different Secondary Schools in Kelowna.

Based on the Chinese proverb *Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand*, Spanish 441 wove a new path in the pursuit of sustainability, creating a living laboratory within the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies to support language teaching and learning.

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