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Examining the Connections between Target Community Exposure and Language-Related Motivations in University Spanish Students

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Integrating Service Learning Experiences for Advanced Conversation Students

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Integrating Service-Learning Experiences for Advanced Spanish Conversation Students

Second and foreign language education, like most educational fields, is an ever-evolving area of research. As modern society becomes more and more interconnected and globalized, familiarity with other languages and other cultures becomes not only important but essential to being citizens of the world. Students today cannot afford to be ignorant of other cultures and ethnic groups, and our approach to teaching languages has evolved to reflect that; the field of language acquisition has undergone a significant shift from the grammar-translation method of learning, which focused on the acquisition of grammatical skills, translation of text, and rote memorization of lists of vocabulary, toward a focus on communicative competence, which describes “one’s underlying knowledge of a system insofar as it is observable through performance” (Chang, 2011).

This new focus on the ability to communicate effectively has prompted many teachers to consider new contexts for learning (Hale, 1999). In the now widely-accepted Communicative Language Teaching method, advocated for use in classrooms by the ACTFL (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages), we are focusing much more on the use of the language in its context for the purpose of communication (Omaggio Hadley 2001). Yet the majority of those learning a foreign language in the US do so solely within the context of a classroom, with little real-world experience (Pellettieri 2011), even though the ACTFL recommends the use of “authentic target language experiences and materials” (Use of target language, n.d.). Essentially, the material and language being learned should be placed into its own context, rather than isolated in the abstract setting of a classroom.

Service-learning, the integration of community service activities with academic pursuits and goals, has been increasingly drawing the attention of foreign-language instructors as a means

to provide the opportunity for students to interact with members of the L2 (target language) community (Pak, 2013) and to use authentic language situations rather than artificial situations (Carney, 2013). In the U.S., the opportunity to serve the growing Hispanic population has prompted many universities to implement such programs into their Spanish education requirements. Service-learning can help students of Spanish develop their proficiency in speaking the language while also experiencing various other learning gains, such as increased willingness to communicate and self-confidence, motivation to learn Spanish, understanding of other cultures and diminishing of stereotypes, awareness of social justice issues, and heightened civic responsibility (Pak, 2013; Pellettieri, 2011; Barrett, 2016; Zapata, 2011).

Pellettieri (2011) conducted a study to determine the extent to which participation in a service-learning program had a significant positive change on the willingness to communicate, self-confidence, motivation, and integrativeness of the 18 Spanish learner participants, all of whom were intermediate-level learners participating in a three-semester-long community-based learning program. A survey was administered to these students at the beginning of the first course and repeated at the end of the third to measure learners' willingness to communicate in Spanish (both in and out of the classroom context), their perceived level of competence, their level of communication anxiety when speaking in Spanish, their integrativeness, and their motivation for learning Spanish. Significant positive changes were seen in all observed areas, and the instructor received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the students involved. Although this study happened in a longer period of time, it is an excellent example of the impact that service learning can have when applied to the Spanish classroom.

Caldwell (2007) states the relevance and effectiveness of service learning experiences for Spanish students:

“In order to learn effective communication skills, students benefit greatly from opportunities to transfer the classroom to the community... as foreign language educators in the 21st century, it is our duty to prepare students to enter the global community as engaged citizens and to implement a curriculum that will promote active and responsible citizenship” (464).

Students who are learning a foreign language need a way to contextualize it for their own life experiences; service learning provides this context while also addressing the necessity of educating them about how to be citizens of the world.

The Department of Modern Languages at Olivet Nazarene University states its goals for language proficiency and cultural understanding in this way: “Our mission is to lead students to improved proficiency in world languages through a program that focuses on communication in the target language, real-life practice, and cultural competence in order to equip students to serve God in local and international settings” (K. Leonard, personal communications, 2018). Students learning Spanish are highly encouraged to find ways to step out of their linguistic and cultural comfort zones, to challenge their communication abilities in Spanish and gain valuable and necessary experience outside of the classroom.

Spanish majors are required to fulfill a certain length of immersive study abroad experience in Spanish in order to graduate—an experience that inevitably and dramatically improves their language abilities and, perhaps of equal significance, their willingness to communicate in Spanish. However, students who are minoring in Spanish do not have the opportunity to experience an immersive context in which to practice their communication skills; the majority of their learning and language use remains within the classroom context, where their willingness to communicate outside the classroom does not have the opportunity to develop.

Many students at Olivet who take Spanish classes do so because of experiences they have had with the Hispanic community—mission trips, friends that come from Spanish-speaking families, etc.—in which their ability to communicate with the people around them was severely limited. These students are often those who make the decision to minor in Spanish rather than take on the full major; therefore, they have very little meaningful practice communicating in the contextual, authentic manner that is their goal. Service learning is a way in which these students can have the immersive community experience without having to go to another country to get it.

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