Spanish for You: Student-Centered and Languages for Specific Purposes Methods in Lower Division Spanish

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This article investigates a project that used student-centered teaching and languages for specific purposes to increase university students' motivation to study Spanish and willingness to communicate. After reflecting on their personal goals and interests, students were required to choose a purpose or context in which they might use Spanish in their future. Then students were encouraged to seek opportunities to foster their own language and culture learning related to the unique purposes that each student had selected. Data sources included an anonymous online survey with Likert scale responses and open-ended written responses, plus personal observations of the teacher. Results indicated that many students' perceptions of Spanish speakers and their cultures changed in positive ways and that students were more willing to communicate with native speakers. However, students reported only a marginal increase in their motivation to continue studying Spanish. The author concluded that student-centered teaching and languages for specific purposes can be effective in lower-division Spanish but may require adjustments on the part of students and more guidance than anticipated from instructors.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. is undergoing a dramatic shift in the ethnic makeup of its population. Current estimates indicate that more than 34 million people in the U.S. report speaking Spanish at home, making it one of the largest Spanish speaking countries in the world (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). According to the most recent estimates, Hispanics were the largest minority group in the U.S., totaling over 50 million, constituting the second largest Hispanic population in the world, behind Mexico and just ahead of Spain (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Not surprisingly, the role of the Spanish language has expanded dramatically in U.S. society, and, if previously cited estimates are accurate, proficiency in Spanish will become even more important in years to come. This situation highlights a tragic paradox in teaching Spanish as a foreign language in the U.S., namely that despite frequent opportunities to speak Spanish in a domestic setting, many students in first and second year university courses in the U.S. feel their skills have little value outside of fulfilling general education requirements. Students may feel this way for several reasons: their course work may not expose them to the growing population of Spanish speakers and/or may not help them see why communicating with them would be valuable. This may be due to the type of instruction that is used in many foreign language classes, which does not often make an attempt to connect courses with the wider community of speakers of the language or go beyond instruction in linguistic competence to include cultural competence. Similarly, instruction in foreign language courses often does not highlight the value of language study as humanistic pursuit. Thus, students often continue to see their university experience

through the lens of career preparation (See Siskin, 2002, for an in-depth discussion of these issues). Subsequently, a large portion of students who participate in Spanish or other foreign language courses discontinue their study after completing two to four semesters.

Additionally, many students who complete four semesters of college-level study have an intermediate level of proficiency and yet feel that their skills are so poor as to be almost useless outside the classroom. Simply put, students often fail to see the point of studying Spanish or other foreign languages and lack confidence that their skill level would enable them to do anything useful in the target language. This is not to say that we as language teachers should necessarily emphasize the utilitarian benefits of studying Spanish or any other language over the refining humanistic benefits (Siskin, 2002). Instead we need to teach in such a way that our students begin to enjoy both the humanistic and utilitarian benefits of language study.

In order to achieve the humanistic and utilitarian objectives, the author created a student-centered project for intermediate-level Spanish that fostered studying Spanish for specific purposes. Doing so allowed students to develop cultural and linguistic skills for use in a specific context of their choosing. The rationale was that students, when given both freedom and guidance, would do the best job of discovering how Spanish could be useful and relevant in their lives beyond the walls of the classroom. This would also help students to see that, while imperfect, their growing language skills can be highly useful in bridging cultural gaps and accomplishing important tasks.

The present paper documents whether or not this project reached these objectives and how the use of student-centered teaching and languages for specific purposes affected learning and motivation.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Nature and Benefits of Student-Centered Teaching

The intent of student-centered teaching and learning is to give "students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study" (Gibbs, 1992, p. 23). Student-centered teaching necessarily fosters learner autonomy, which is defined as one's capacity to direct their own learning (Schwienhorst, 2008) and is characterized as a process where students engage in "reflection and awareness (the intentional learner); interaction and collaboration (the communicator), and experimentation … (the researcher)" (Schwienhorst, 2008, p. 12). Student-centered teaching, then, with its emphasis on autonomy and reflection, is thought to have a variety of benefits for learning, including increased motivation among students, greater ability to learn independently, and frequently greater retention and deeper processing (Brandl, 2007, p. 111). Student-centered teaching is also thought to increase motivation because it focuses on the "needs, skills, and interests of students…and promote(s) …choice, and cooperation" (Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2010).

Relevance to Second Language Teaching

Student-centered teaching is considered foundational to communicative language teaching (Peyton et al., 2010). This is logical for several reasons. First, the main purpose of

communicative language teaching is to help students develop communicative competence, or in other words, "the ability to interpret and enact appropriate social behaviors (Brandl, 2008, p. 5)." Additionally, communicative language teaching emphasizes learning to navigate situations from real life that require communication in the target language (Brandl, 2008, p. 5). Communicative language teaching, therefore, goes hand-in-hand with student-centered teaching's emphasis on connecting instruction with learner's lives (Peyton et al., 2010).

Second, truly successful learners in formal education necessarily obtain a level of independence (Little, 1995). Independent learners are often more able to "transcend the barriers between learning and living" that so often plague formal education (Little, 1995, p. 176). Becoming an autonomous user of the language outside of the classroom requires a vast amount of skill and knowledge, more than is likely to be acquired by classroom study alone. Thus, those who go on to use the target language outside of the classroom need to continue to learn on their own. By allowing students more freedom within the classroom using student-centered methods, learners will be more prepared to learn on their own and continue to increase their communicative abilities.

Third, both autonomy and communicative language teaching require interaction (Nunan, 1991, p. 279; Schwienhorst, 2008, p. 18-19). Autonomous learning underscores the importance of both independence and interdependence (Schwienhorst, 2008, p. 18-19). It would be a mistake to view learner autonomy or student-centeredness as an individualistic undertaking where the learner works in solitude. Rather, student-centered, autonomous learning implies that students seek out others in order to have the learning experiences that most benefit them. Thus, learners who have autonomy pursue collaboration with peers and/or teachers with the stipulation that each party has some latitude to negotiate how learning takes place. This type of autonomous interaction parallels much of the prevailing thought in the field of language teaching, which encourages "learning to communicate through interaction in the target language" (Nunan, 1991, p. 279). To clarify, conversational interaction in a communicative classroom or with expert speakers outside of the classroom allows learners to negotiate much of their learning by influencing the pace, length, and often the topic and other aspects of the conversation. Autonomous collaboration can also build relationships with more expert speakers and native speakers inside and outside the classroom, which further aids students in becoming lifelong learners (McBride, 2009, p. 36).

Student-Centered Teaching and Identity

The ability of autonomous learners to apply their knowledge to contexts outside the classroom could be due to the fact that student-centered teaching encourages a deeper awareness of learners' identities across genres and settings. As students engage in activities based on their own interests and choices, they combine their learning in the classroom with their lives outside of it. In this way, teachers' student-centered guidance helps students to "write themselves into being" (Boyd, 2007, p. 2) and take their learning with them wherever they go.

Student-Centered Teaching and Action Research

Several teacher researchers have documented their efforts to implement a student-centered approach in lower-division tertiary Spanish courses (Bloom, 2004; Luke, 2006).

Luke's (2006) study created space for student-centered activities within a beginning-level university Spanish course through the use of inquiry cycles. The structure of the course allotted large amounts of class time for students to pursue their own questions and topics regarding the language. Students appreciated the autonomy afforded them and felt that the student-centered nature of the class increased their interest in the target language. However, some students reacted negatively and expressed a desire for more structured and perhaps teacher-centered activities such as exercises from the book or grammar or vocabulary instruction.

Bloom's (2004) work explored a Spanish-for-nurses course offered through the nursing college at a large public university. It was structured so that the first half of each class period was teacher-centered with whole-class activities. The second half of each class was dedicated to self-directed activities. Like Luke (2006), Bloom encountered tension between the student-centered and teacher-centered aspects of the class with some students using their autonomy productively while others did not.

Languages for Specific Purposes

Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) has been defined as "an area of applied linguistics that focuses on the analysis and teaching of language in order to meet specific language needs of non-native speakers of the language." (Upton & Ulla, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, LSP "course content and class activities are geared closely to professional goals" (Grosse & Voght, 1991, p. 182). This intensive focus on students' needs in LSP can be highly motivating to students both within and outside the university setting (Bloom, 2004; Duff, Wong, & Early 2002).

Recently, the world has experienced dramatic changes in terms of technology, international education, immigration, and the need for globalized education. This interconnectedness has heightened the demand for individuals with foreign language skills in specific areas and research on how LSP can meet this demand (Grosse & Voght, 2012). The Modern Language Association has called for a change in the existing structure of language departments in the U.S. university towards a "more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses (Geisler, et al., 2007, p. 237)." Courses in LSP can aid language departments in realizing this goal of creating a more coherent curriculum when implemented strategically as one part of an undergraduate program. Specifically, by taking LSP courses that are thoughtfully integrated as part of the curriculum, students are able to see that the linguistic and cultural knowledge gained through their coursework can actually be brought to bear in many relevant, non-academic contexts.

Due to these benefits, LSP continues to be used widely and evolve in both its scope and depth (Lafford, 2012). Approximately 62% of U.S. universities offer courses in languages for specific purposes covering traditional topics such as languages for business, medicine and law. The range of courses related to languages is expanding to include an array of subjects, including Hotel, Tourism and Restaurant Management; Education; and Criminal Justice (Long & Uscinski, 2012).

With this proliferation of topics and courses, scholars continue to call for research and collaboration in all areas of LSP fostering deeper understanding of theory and methodological practices in this important area (Sánchez-López, 2010). This seems prudent

given that Languages for Specific Purposes in the U.S. faces many challenges such as resistance to interdisciplinary collaboration, logistical issues, problematic assessment, and insufficient funding (Grosse & Voght, 2012).

Ethnographic Interviews

Ethnographic interviews as part of foreign language study have been used for decades to help foreign language students gain greater cross-cultural understanding (Bateman, 2004; Robinson & Nocon, 1996). In this use of ethnographic interviews, students seek out native speakers of the target language and spend time asking questions about their culture and often their experiences with U.S. society as well as other topics of interest. For this portion of the project, the students almost universally chose international students from Spanish-speaking countries. In this project, students were encouraged to begin interviews with what is referred to as a grand tour question. A grand tour question is broad and open-ended and allows interviewees to employ their own cultural constructs and speak to things that are most relevant to their experience (Seidman, 1998). Students listen during the interview and later write a transcript of the interview and a reflection on what they learned. These types of ethnographic interviews can foster positive cognitive, affective, cultural and behavioral outcomes (Bateman, 2004).

Additionally, open or semi-structured ethnographic interviews allow students to guide the interview towards their language and culture learning needs. This is similar to the emphasis on students' needs in Languages for Specific Purposes and student-centered teaching. Thus, this study examines the effects of a project employing ethnographic interviews and languages for specific purposes activities through a student-centered lens.

METHODS

Research Question

How does participation in a student-centered, Languages for Specific Purposes project affect the following:

a) university-level Spanish students' motivation to continue learning Spanish,

b) their plans for future use of the target language, and

c) their perceptions of Spanish speakers and their cultures?

Research Design

The methodology employed in the present study exemplifies action research using both quantitative and qualitative methodology. Action research is also called participatory action research because researchers are involved in a very direct way with the groups being studied, such as social workers that study the communities they serve or teachers studying learning in their own classrooms (Berg, 2004). Although the fruits of action research can be relevant in many settings, its main purpose is to "uncover or produce information and knowledge that will be directly useful to a [specific] group of people" (Berg, 2004, p. 195). The term action research then seems to fit this study well because, as a teacher in one of the classes and

supervisor of the others, the author was clearly not a passive outside observer. Additionally, the primary goal of the study was to gain insights that would be of direct benefit to students.

Context

This project was implemented in the winter and fall semesters of 2008 at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah after obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects research. The university is a private institution of approximately 30,000 students located in the western United States in a medium-sized city. Roughly 80% of the population in the area speaks English as their first language while 10% speaks Spanish as their first language.

The lower-division Spanish courses at this university tend to attract students who are majoring in either English or education and often have a few years of high school Spanish. In the upper division courses, most students have returned recently from one and a half or two years in a Spanish-speaking country as volunteers for a religious organization. They generally return with skills in the Advanced-Mid range according to the ACTFL Guidelines and are able to bypass the lower-division program entirely. Thus the lower division students without these experiences are often at a serious disadvantage as they progress to higher-level course work. The difference in skills can be discouraging and often leads students without extensive out-of-class experience with the language to discontinue their study of Spanish.

Another important aspect of the context of the study is the nature of the lower-division program at the institution. For many years, the program consisted of four semesters of coursework after which students would take upper division courses. At the time of the study, the program contained a year-long sequence for true beginners where students with little to no prior experience with Spanish began. However, the program also contained a year-long sequence for false beginners or low-intermediate students, and a third year-long sequence which acted as a bridge to upper division coursework. This third year-long sequence continued to develop general proficiency and grammatical knowledge but also introduced longer literary and cultural readings in order to prepare students for the type of coursework they would encounter as Spanish majors or minors. Heritage speakers of Spanish also take the placement test to determine the appropriate course for them to take. Depending on their level, they may be in the year-long sequence for false beginners. It should be noted, however, that due to the demographics of the university and the surrounding area, at the time of the study there were few heritage speakers who entered lower-division courses.

The structure of the lower-division program at the time of the study had several benefits. First, true beginners felt more confident in a course designed specifically for students at their level. Similarly, students with some experience were funneled into the false beginner/low intermediate course and thus had the chance to develop their skills at a faster rate. Also, students in the third year courses were somewhat more advanced than they would have been had they followed the former system, and they were better prepared to participate in the upper-division courses.

Even so, students in the first years of study faced an uphill battle. Because of this, the Spanish for You assignment was designed to give them encouragement and motivation by helping them to see that even their nascent skills could be extremely valuable outside of the language classroom.

Participants

Sixty students participated in the study, which included 57 females and three males. These participants were drawn from five sections of the intermediate Spanish course titled Spanish 106, approximately equivalent to a fourth-semester Spanish course at most universities. Students in this course are generally in the Intermediate-mid range according to the ACTFL Guidelines. The researcher was the instructor of one of the sections and also served as the supervisor of the other instructors who were all graduate students in a Master's program at the same institution. Students were almost universally between the ages of 18 and 26 with one exception, a returning student in her fifties. Seventeen of the sixty students reported having traveled to a Spanish-speaking country or had some contact with Spanish speakers at home or in their community.

Data Sources and Collection

Data came from three sources: students' assignments as described below, my personal observations as an instructor and supervisor, as well as an end of the semester survey given to students in the courses, which included both closed-ended Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The end of semester survey was anonymous and administered online to students in courses that participated in the Spanish for You assignment. The survey contained open-ended questions such as "What changes did you experience, if any, in your perceptions about Spanish speaking people and their cultures?" as well as closed ended questions with Likert-scale responses (see Appendix A for complete instrument).

Implementing the Project

The assignment, dubbed "Spanish for You," consisted of five steps summarized briefly in table 1 below.

Table 1
Summary of Steps of Spanish for You Assignment

Assignment Steps	Requirements	Example Activities
Select area of interest	Students chose an area on which to focus their project and explained their choice briefly in writing to their teacher.	Students expressed interest in Spanish as a nutritionist, teacher, museum guide, foreign service worker, etc.
Interview native speaker	Students interviewed a native speaker of Spanish regarding the students' area of interest and cultural differences generally.	Students often interviewed international students on campus or aides in the conversation lab.

Interview or site visit in area of interest	Students interviewed someone who uses Spanish regularly in area of interest and/or visited a location related to their area of interest where Spanish is used.	Students interviewed local doctors, cold called people at consulates, visited bilingual classrooms, etc.
Create & record a dialogue	Students wrote a dialogue that might occur in their area of interest and record it with a native speaker.	Students wrote dialogues between a photographer and a Spanish-speaking family, doctor and patient, museum guide and patrons, etc.
Reflection, presentation	Students wrote a 1-2 page reflection over what they learned linguistically and culturally and then made a brief 2-3 minute presentation to the class.	Students shared specific details about their experiences, changes in cultural perceptions, and new language abilities.

To introduce the assignment, instructors explained to their students some of the demographic changes occurring in the United States focusing on the increasing number of Spanish speakers in many regions. They then explained that it would be increasingly likely that students would work and live in close proximity to Spanish speakers and that knowing some Spanish, even at a very basic level, could help students to bridge the gap between the two cultures whether at home or abroad. From there instructors explained that students had the opportunity in their class to develop Spanish skills for use in whatever area seemed most useful or interesting to them and shared a list of possible topics ranging from health-related professions, to teaching, travel and tourism, skilled trades, international law or business, or humanitarian service. Next, the instructors explained the various segments of the assignment.

Step #1. Select a Context or Area of Interest in which Students Would Like to Use Spanish in Their Own Lives

First, students took some time to think about when and how students might want to use Spanish in their future. Then they wrote a brief paragraph explaining what area they had chosen, which they turned into the instructor later that week. This was done to encourage students to make a selection early in the semester and give the teacher an opportunity to provide some guidance to the students early on in the process.

Step #2. Interview a Native Speaker of Spanish

Next, during class, teachers explained the parameters of the interview portion of the assignment, including the purpose of the interviews, the length and structure, what was to be

turned in and how to find native speakers. The instructors also prepared students to conduct interviews with native speakers by presenting a short video with examples of interviewing techniques, *From the Inside: Ethnographic Interviews in the Language Classroom* by the National Language Resource Center (1997). Following this instruction, students found a native speaker of Spanish and spent roughly 30-40 minutes interviewing them. The interviews were to include both general cultural questions and questions related to students' area of interest. This was done to provide a more contextualized perspective about their efforts to use Spanish outside of the classroom and provided some cultural knowledge as they proceeded with the project.

The first portion of the interview had a broad focus relating to the person's experience in the U.S., opening with a grand tour question, such as "What is it like to be a Guatemalan in the U.S.?" or "What was it like for you when you first arrived in the U.S.?" Using such sweeping types of questions gives the participants the chance to "reconstruct their experience according to their own sense of what was important" (Seidman, 1998, p. 88).

The next portion of the interview transitioned to the students' area of interest. For example, roughly a third of students in first- or second-year Spanish courses are education majors and expressed an interest in learning Spanish to use it in their careers as teachers. So after asking a grand tour question, they often asked their native speaker informant various questions relating to differences that he or she had noticed between the school system in their home country and the U.S.

Instructors suggested various ways that students could find native speaker interviewees including approaching their conversation lab attendants, who were all native speakers, as well as contacting the university's English language school for international students, attending one of several Spanish language congregations, or visiting any of the clubs on campus related to Hispanic culture. Instructors also made themselves available to students if they needed further assistance. In addition to these options, many were able to find a native speaker among their acquaintances at the university or even by calling someone that they knew from home before attending the university. Overall, very few students had difficulty finding a native speaker to interview.

Students were also instructed to use Spanish to conduct their interviews and to use English only when they had trouble communicating in Spanish. They were also reminded that most of the interviewees spoke some English and would be sympathetic and appreciative of their attempts to learn Spanish, having gone through the language learning process themselves. After the interviews, students provided a written summary of the interview in question-and-answer format and reflections on any insights they gained from the experience.

Step #3. Interview a User of Spanish in Your Area of Interest, or Visit a Location Where Spanish is Used in Your Area of Interest

This portion of the project provided students with the option of visiting a site where the target language is used in the student's area of interest and/or interviewing someone who is proficient in the target language and uses it in the students' area of interest. For the site visit option students were to observe for approximately an hour and then create a one- to two-page set of observations and include their thoughts and impressions including any culture differences that they may have noticed. Students were encouraged to offer themselves as

volunteers if appropriate in their situation and to express thanks to the people they interacted with.

These activities were designed to give students an opportunity to learn more about the use of Spanish outside of the classroom in a context that was of interest to them. Students were given the option of an interview or a site visit in order to make the assignment more feasible logistically and more applicable to the needs and interests of each student. For example, one student was very interested in art and imagined being involved with museums as a guide or curator. Taking the initiative, she found a Latin American art shop and spent an hour or so looking at the art and asking the owner questions. In her observations she noted the differences between the type of art in the shop and the European art she had previously studied. This student may not have known whom to interview about using Spanish in the context of museums and art, but, given a little more liberty, she found another option that was meaningful and feasible for her.

Another student knew of a couple, both retired doctors, proficient in Spanish who had spent significant amounts of time in Peru volunteering their skills. The student was able to spend some time speaking with them over the phone and learned how their knowledge of Spanish and the medical field had affected their lives.

Step #4. Create and Record a Dialogue that Would be Useful in Your Area of Interest

During this portion of the project students were asked to write and record a dialogue in which they carried out a task in the target language that would be valuable and relevant in their area of interest. The dialogues were approximately two pages and were written in such a way that one of the roles was read by the student and the other role by a native speaker. Dialogues ranged from a photographer taking a family picture of a Spanish-speaking family to a student discussing life with a troubled teen at a youth group. For the written version, students also noted a minimum of five new context specific words, phrases, or grammatical structures that they had learned during the semester. Students were encouraged to create a dialogue that was not only linguistically accurate but also culturally sensitive. The written and recorded versions of the dialogues were graded on the basis of the quality of the Spanish, the relevance of the task to the area of interest, and cultural sensitivity. For example, some students who were interested in the medical field wrote dialogues that incorporated ideas about body image or nutrition that were different than perspectives on those topics in mainstream medicine in the U.S. They were graded on the following: (1) having included these cultural differences and (2) whether or not they wrote the dialogue in such a way that encouraged respect for these differences in the treatment of these patients.

Step #5. Reflect and Present

At this point in the project, students had carried out a variety of learning activities that had hopefully given them cultural perspective and linguistic practice related to a specific area of interest. The next step in the project was for students to reflect on those experiences and deepen their learning. Reflection was included because it can act as the basis for self-evaluation and growth (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Students completed a two-page paper that included reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of their Spanish skills, linguistic improvements, cultural insights, and any changes

they may have experienced in their levels of anxiety or confidence in using the target language. The assignment also asked students to provide candid feedback about the structure of the assignment including any suggestions for improvement. Last, students prepared a brief presentation of their efforts throughout the semester to share with the class.

The project in its entirety constituted 15% of students' overall grade in the course with each portion of the project worth 3-4%. Each portion of the assignment was graded using a rubric, which was standard across each of the participating sections of the course.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

The first step in the analysis was calculating descriptive statistics based on students' responses to the Likert scale questions from the end of the semester survey. These results are summarized in table 2 below.

Table 2
Results from Quantitative Survey Questions

	Mean (SD)	Mode	Median
How useful was each step of the Spanish for You project… **not useful 1 2 3 4 very useful**			
Interview with native speaker	2.86 (.74)	3	3
Interview with someone in the area of interest/site visit	2.97 (.79)	3	3
Dialogue written and recorded	2.47 (.93)	2	2
Written Reflection	2.31 (.88)	2	2
Presentation	2.4 (.92)	3	2
More likely to use Spanish w/ native speakers outside of class **1 2 3 4** **strongly strongly** **disagree agree**	2.7 (.60)	3	3
More likely to continue to improve my Spanish skills **1 2 3 4 5** **strongly strongly** **disagree agree**	3.35 (.971)	3	3

These results indicated that students felt that some parts of the assignment were somewhat helpful and that others were somewhat less helpful. Additionally, the results indicate that the project overall had some positive effects on students' willingness to use Spanish outside the classroom and the likelihood that they would continue to improve their Spanish skills. The following sections will discuss these findings in greater detail and report relevant aspects of the qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions as well as the author's experience.

Motivation to Continue Studying Spanish

According to the survey, students were slightly more motivated to continue learning Spanish after participating in the project, with the group averaging 3.35 out of 5 with 5 representing strongly agree. A plurality of students, twenty-five out of sixty, agreed or strongly agreed that the Spanish for You project helped to motivate them with 24 undecided, while only 10 disagreed and only 1 strongly disagreed. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of students' responses with somewhat more of the responses falling on the agree side of the scale.

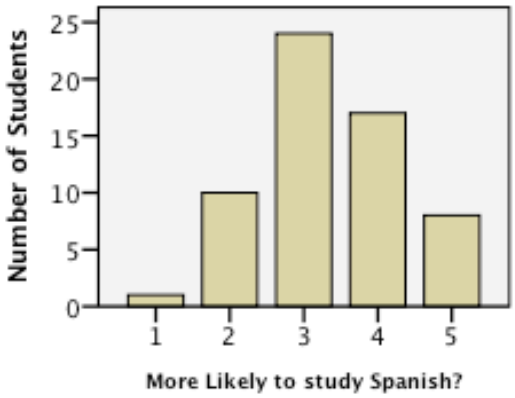

Figure 1. Frequency Chart Depicting Reported Effect of Project on Students' Plans to Continue Studying Spanish.

The opened-survey questions shed further light on these results. Many of the students who indicated that they are more likely to continue to study Spanish seemed influenced by the realization that their Spanish could play a role in their future plans. These students echoed Charles, who said, "I really think the most useful thing about this project was realizing that the time we are putting into learning a language now is really going to pay off in our future careers and lives."

On the other hand, many students' future plans to learn Spanish were unaffected by Spanish for You. Their open-ended survey responses tended to indicate that other factors outside of the course such as a family connection with the language or the requirements of their major, or simply finding Spanish classes enjoyable, were more important in their decision to continue studying. For example, Carla stated, "While the Spanish For You

project was a lot of fun, it didn't boost my desire to take more Spanish classes. Only a love of the language itself could really do that." Michelle commented, "…the class did that for e, not the project," suggesting that the experience in the classroom was a more powerful motivator than Spanish for You.

Some of these results can also be explained through pre-existing motivation. As Carol stated, "I was planning on taking other courses before this project and the project didn't change that at all," suggesting that the project did not change the student's existing motivation to continue studying the language.

Last, one or two students felt that the project may have actually decreased their motivation. As Cheryl stated, "I was planning on continuing in Spanish before, if anything it dissuaded me because it was so much work on top of all my other math classes." However, it should be noted that only two of the fifty-nine students made any comment suggesting that the project decreased their motivation to take Spanish.

Use of Spanish Outside of Class

The project did seem successful in fostering greater willingness to communicate with native speakers outside of their university courses. Approximately sixty-percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to use Spanish outside of the class than they were before the Spanish for You project, with the mean response being 2.7 out of four. The results of this analysis are summarized below in Figure 2.

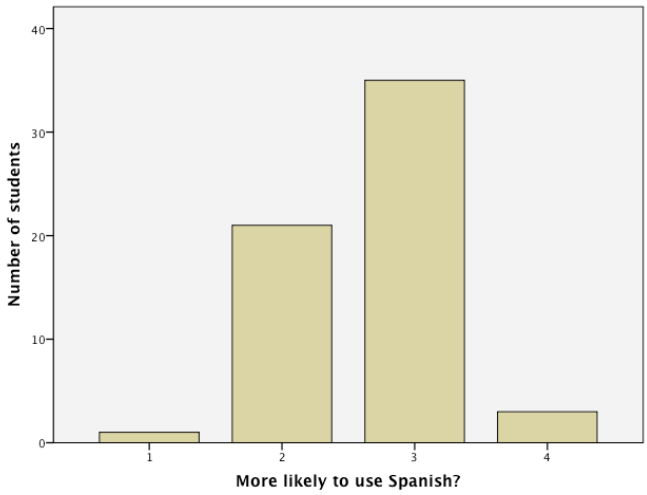

Figure 2. Frequency Chart Depicting Reported Effect of Project on Students' Willingness to Use Spanish.

These results are further clarified by examining the students' comments from the survey. Students cited a variety of reasons for being more likely to use Spanish outside the classroom. Comments from students who reported increased willingness to communicate in Spanish indicate that the experience boosted their confidence through improved language skills and cultural understanding.

Sarah felt that through the project she "learned a lot of vocab that involved [her] topic…" and stated that now she was, "…able to talk in Spanish about what I'm studying." Shaun similarly commented that the project helped her to, "…feel more comfortable in the language…" which has given her, "…a little more nerve to address people in Spanish." A related comment by Jan indicated that she is, "…still not completely comfortable with just going up and speaking Spanish with natives, but" stated that she is "…more comfortable with my ability to be understood than I was before."

Often, the interview with a native speaker helped them to realize that Spanish speakers would generally be sympathetic to their attempts to communicate in the target language. Cheryl mentioned, "I am more likely to speak with another native speaker because I realized that for the most part they will be very understanding and patient with me." Marsha provided a related insight by stating, "I am now less wary of practicing my Spanish with Spanish speakers. I was afraid before that they would be impatient!"

Some students felt that lessons regarding culture increased their confidence. Carey indicated that knowledge about specific aspects of the target culture increased her willingness to communicate stating, "I now have more cultural knowledge about medical systems in Spanish speaking countries…" Carl replied more generally explaining that he is "much more comfortable speaking with native speakers because I can understand their culture a little bit better."

Students' Perceptions of Spanish Speakers and Their Cultures

In fact, Carl's comments demonstrated one of the greatest benefits of the project: increased understanding and appreciation for Hispanic cultures. The author calculated that eighty percent of students reported a change in their understanding of the culture(s) of Spanish-speaking people after analyzing students' open-ended survey comments. The specific insights varied widely which probably reflects the open nature of the assignment and the students' range of interests and prior experience with Spanish speakers and their cultures.

Several students commented on how similar and yet how different Hispanic culture is from U.S. culture with comments such as "I realized that there are many aspects of the Spanish culture that I do not know about, and I have a greater desire to learn more" or "[o]ur culture [presumably mainstream U.S. culture] goes hand in hand with the Spanish language, so much so that I would say that it is pretty much a part of our culture."

Others discovered that "there are many different Spanish cultures." Jane noticed the variety in Spanishes and the subsequent relationship between language and culture, "the reality of how many different "types" of Spanish there are. Different cultures have different phrases and words. It's very interesting."

Additionally, students expressed a change in view toward immigrant populations in the U.S. Will stated that "I just noticed that the average white American doesn't really understand what it's like to have to enter the school system as a non-native English speaker." Jennifer also reported a radical change in her perspective, stating, "I used to think that we should round up and deport all of the illegal immigrants in this country. After completing this project, I have come to realize that illegal aliens are people too, and I want to help them."

Such comments suggested that students gained valuable cultural insights thereby illuminating the survey results, which showed that 80% of students reported positive

changes in cultural understanding, 20% reported no change and no students reported a negative change. At the same time, they also indicate that often times students' cultural knowledge is nascent and limited. For example, one student commented that "[o]verall, I grew to love the Spanish culture even more. Taking these Spanish grammar classes has not only taught me how to speak properly but also about the Hispanic culture. Then, doing this project brought that enjoyment and love to a new height." This student had obviously developed great enthusiasm for the language and related cultures but likely overestimated his ability to "speak properly" and understand Hispanic culture. Even so, the effect of the project on students' cultural attitudes seemed very positive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Student-Centered Methods are Motivating but Students Need Help and Guidance

Many students were unfamiliar with the level of autonomy that is allowed in the type of assignments described here. This was apparent as students often failed to select an area of interest that was meaningful to them. If a student selects an area that has little or no meaning to them personally in order to simply "get it done," the whole assignment tends to lack meaning. This means that the instructor must take care to read the students' explanation of their choices and give prompt feedback and encouragement.

For example, in one of the sections taught by the author, one of the students had already graduated with a bachelor's degree but was so interested in learning Spanish that he returned to take a night class twice a week. In chatting with him, he casually mentioned that he would maybe someday like to work in the Foreign Service and live abroad. A week or so later, the assignment had been explained, and he had chosen to focus on learning Spanish to use in hotel cleaning since he had worked with Hispanics at a hotel during his undergraduate days. After reading that, the researcher, as his instructor, asked if he had any intention of going back to work cleaning hotels, to which he replied no. The instructor then suggested that he focus on the use of Spanish in the Foreign Service and that this would give him the opportunity to explore those kinds of things as a career and would probably be more relevant and interesting for him. This kind of common-sense guidance created a more meaningful project. As part of his assignment, he interviewed an employee at the Salvadoran embassy and gained insights into the nature of such careers. At least in small part due to this experience, he entered graduate school and embarked on a different career path.

The experience of this student highlights the ways that student-centered methods can increase the motivation of students to intensify and extend their language study. By giving some autonomy and guidance to this student he was able to connect the study of Spanish to the current of his unique motivation. However, being unaccustomed to this type of autonomy, the synergistic efforts of teacher and student were required to create a true spark. This finding is in line with prior research on student-centered teaching, which emphasizes "bidirectional feedback and guidance . . ." (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003, p. 332).

Instructors Need Guidance in Employing Student-Centered Methods

It was also interesting to note that the researcher and other teachers needed to adjust to more student-centered methods in the same way that students did. As mentioned previously, the author taught one section of this course but instructors under his supervision taught the other sections of the same course. These instructors were graduate students who were teaching Spanish courses as part of their studies. They were enthusiastic and generally received excellent evaluations.

However, they, like their students, were unaccustomed to autonomy in their classes. They did not generally realize how much guidance they needed to give to students and that students would not automatically delve deeply into the subject. This is evidenced by the fact that many students did not seem to grasp that Spanish could be useful for them even when there was an obvious connection to their future professional or personal interests.

One student planned to be a teacher and/or principal in the U.S. but somehow did not make the connection that skill in Spanish could be highly useful in that arena. She stated, "I am only taking Spanish for a G.E. [general education requirement] and I don't really think I will use it in my future career (being a teacher/principal), so I felt that it was really hard for me to find a way to make Spanish apply for me. I feel it was limited to only being really useful to the students who want to do something more specifically with Spanish in their career." Although it may be difficult to know what efforts this student's teacher made to help her see the connection, it is very possible that she did not receive much guidance in the early stages of the project. Such guidance could have made the project much more meaningful both now and in the student's future career. Such comments dovetail with Little's assertion that students will not automatically accept responsibility for their own learning or "reflect critically on the learning process" without the guidance of the teacher, which in turn requires teachers' to have enough autonomy and skill to do so (Little, 1995, p. 176).

Speaking with Native Speakers is Extremely Valuable for Intermediate Students, but Students Need Guidance for Interviews to be Meaningful

Although students faced many obstacles, such as difficulties with the language and anxiety related to speaking about cultural topics, the vast majority of the students overcame these obstacles and had a valuable experience linguistically and culturally. However, it was clear that students needed more practice and instruction in how to elicit information beyond superficial responses. Students often asked a meaningful question to which the interviewee would give a sincere but brief response, but too often students would simply move on to the next question on their list, thus missing an opportunity for deeper understanding of their interviewee's perspective. Because of this, subsequent iterations of the project have included instruction and practice in carrying out meaningful interviews. Future classes might also benefit from seeing transcripts of sample interviews with annotations indicating where students could gain greater insights by asking additional questions or modifying their responses to interviewees' statements.

Culture and Language Learning Benefit and Motivate Each Other Reciprocally

Through their participation in the Spanish for You project many students increased their willingness to communicate and reported some change in cultural perspectives. One interesting finding that emerged was that students' began to notice the relationship between language and culture. In turn several students felt that learning about the culture motivated them to learn more of the language and vice versa. One student commented, "I hadn't ever really thought about Spanish speaking people in their own culture, just about me learning the language. So the project helped me to change my focus a little bit, and in a good way." Her comment suggests that she has started to see that language learning needs to be situated in an understanding of the cultural context of its speakers.

Another student, who is a heritage speaker, shared that as she developed a "higher ability to communicate" she made, "more personal connections with the culture" and stated, "I feel more identified with it now." At least for this student, increased ability to communicate led to feeling more a part of the culture.

Several other students found aspects of Hispanic cultures inviting and admirable which led them to want to participate more in Hispanic communities in ways that would further their language study. One student was able to "see how they[native Spanish speakers] interact in church settings" and stated that he wanted "to participate in a Spanish community more." Similarly, another student stated that "[t]hey [Hispanics] are much more open and inviting to outsiders than we typically are as part of the American culture. I want to travel to a Spanish-speaking country so that I can experience these things firsthand!"

These comments demonstrated the growth and change in motivation and perspective that students of Spanish experience when exposed in strategic ways to the target culture. Although these comments are likely to be sincere, they should be tempered by the fact that many students indicated that they had experienced no change in their perceptions of Hispanic people through the project and that even the positive comments could be somewhat overstated in an attempt to please their perceived audience.

Limitations of the Study

The results of this study seem encouraging and suggest that the autonomy and personalization inherent in student-centered methods can improve motivation in Spanish learners. However, it is important to note that the project as it stands changed some students' motivation to continue learning Spanish but not others. Personal and societal factors still played the major role in students' enrollment decisions despite the generally positive attitudes towards the project.

Additionally, there is the issue of native speakers in the interview portion of the assignment. From the researcher's observations, it does seem that most of the people students interviewed would qualify as native speakers, with the vast majority having been born in a Spanish-speaking country to Spanish-speaking parents and educated in Spanish. However, as it stands, the assignment did not provide students with specific criteria for identifying native speakers of Spanish.

Also, the study revealed that student-centered methods, while beneficial, require the teacher to provide more guidance than is generally necessary with more teacher-centered

methods. Students are not used to thinking about what will be most interesting personally. Because of this, teachers should help them to go beyond superficial thoughts in discovering and building relationships across cultural and social lines.

Other limitations include the nature of the data collected. The study relied heavily on students' self-report data and less on the observations of the researcher. Future studies could add more kinds of data to strengthen the triangulation and thus confidence in findings of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of the study also support those of previous researchers who found that learning languages for specific purposes is often very motivating for students (Grosse & Voght, 1991). In the present study students rated highly the portions of the project, which asked them to learn Spanish for a specific purpose, such as visiting a place where Spanish is used in their area of interest, or interviewing someone who uses Spanish regularly in their field. Additional research exploring how to incorporate more of such methods into lower-division language courses would be beneficial for program directors and instructors.

Future research could also examine ways in which teachers can best help students find their own motivation and how to help students get past the superficial in their thoughts on culture so that more students can experience the joy of meaningful communication in a second language. Such research holds the promise of being able to invigorate language study in formal settings with students' personal motivation thus benefitting themselves and society throughout their lives.

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APPENDIX A: SPANISH FOR YOU SURVEY

Please enter your name, Last, First

Please tell us your major and minor or if you are undeclared, what majors you may pursue.

Please enter your instructor's name from the semester in which you participated in the "Spanish for You project."

Have you ever traveled to a Spanish speaking country or had extensive contact in your community with Spanish speakers or family?

Please indicate below how useful each part of the "Spanish for You project" was for you.	
Interview with Native Speaker	Not Useful Slightly Useful Useful Very Useful
Interview with someone in your area of interest/Site Visit	Not Useful Slightly Useful Useful Very Useful
Dialogue-Written and Recorded	Not Useful Slightly Useful Useful Very Useful
Reflection at end of Project	Not Useful Slightly Useful Useful Very Useful
Presentation to class	Not Useful Slightly Useful Useful Very Useful

For the question above, please explain your answer briefly and candidly.

For the following question, indicate how true the statement is for you.
I am more likely to use Spanish with native speakers outside of the classroom than I was before I participated in the Spanish for You project.
1 2 3 4 5
strongly disagree strongly agree

For the question above, please explain your answer briefly and candidly.

For the following question, indicate how true the statement is for you.
In the future, I will be more likely to maintain or continue to improve my Spanish skills either on my own or in classes.
1 2 3 4 5
strongly disagree strongly agree

For the question above, please explain your answer briefly and candidly.

What changes did you experience, if any, in your perceptions about Spanish speaking people and their cultures?

If you have any other thoughts or comments about your experience with the "Spanish for You" project please share them here.