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Learning Context Matters: Communication Strategy Development through Spanish Interaction[1]

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Abstract:

University studies in the Spanish language are often times confined to the classroom. However, more and more programs have been implementing civic engagement in the Hispanic community into the curriculum to create a service-learning experience. This study sought to determine the effectiveness of service-learning in enhancing communication techniques. Twenty undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky were surveyed at the onset and the conclusion of one semester while simultaneously serving the Hispanic community. The students, on average, increased the frequency of communication techniques after a semester of service-learning. Students who participate in a service-learning program often times see a result of more natural conversations due to these communication techniques. Therefore, programs, such as the one implemented, are very important in the curriculum of Spanish language studies to improve students' overall communication with native speakers.

Introduction:

Acquisition of Spanish as a second language (L2) has become increasingly popular in the United States as the Hispanic population is expected to double by year 2060. Based on the United States Census Bureau, one in three American citizens will be Hispanic. For communication and professional development purposes, many have chosen to study Spanish in a higher-level education setting.

Most courses at the college level are ranked "Intermediate" level Spanish. In this case, students have mastered the basics of Spanish such as grammar and pronunciation, but still are timid while conversing. Often times, intermediate speakers have difficulty understanding the interlocutor and conveying exactly what they are trying to say. Many students at this level of Spanish proficiency have spent most of their L2 studies in a classroom environment with other intermediate speakers.

Community service has long been seen as beneficial and admirable in all classroom settings. Many institutions value community service because it gives a chance for students to give back to their community and learn the lessons of hard work. However, only recently has community service been linked to an academic experience, particularly for foreign languages.

A particular type of community service, "service-learning" (SL) is used for academic purposes. In the words of Stanton, Giles, & Cruz (1999), "Service-learning joins two complex concepts: community action, the 'service,' and efforts to learn from the action and connect what is learning to existing knowledge, the 'learning.'"

Students, in order to join the 'service' and the 'learning,' help the community members in the agreement that they will be learning, while the community members

teach the students in the agreement that they receive service. Normally, students are required to complete academic work that relates to their service learning (e.g., presentations, journal entries) in order to enhance the learning experience.

Theoretically, SL programs for students learning a foreign language theoretically is very beneficial in every situation. However, instructors do encounter varied problems. According to Overfield (1997), four main challenges include the following:

(1) scheduling problems,

(2) insecurity in talking to strangers in social situations,

(3) issues with transportation, and

(4) persistence of the program.

Although these challenges unavoidably exist in certain situations, Overfield identifies the following benefits of service-learning:

(1) awareness of the value of learning the target language,

(2) reflection of learning experiences,

(3) contextual learning,

(4) understanding of the language's role in social identity, and

(5) mutually beneficial parties.

Therefore, issues may occur with specific instances of SL experiences, but students can enhance the understanding of the language and culture. However, the extent of the enhancement is still under investigation.

Literature Review: Service-Learning in the L2 Classroom

The purpose of SL is to allow students to become more comfortable in speaking their L2. It is important that those studying Spanish actually speak the language in

practical settings outside of the classroom. Peter MacIntyre, an associate professor of Psychology, established that there are variables that influence a person's willingness to communicate. Willingness to communicate in a person's native language is governed by mainly personality traits such as their social inclinations. On the other hand, willingness to communicate in an L2 is more often determined by situational factors as well as L2 competence and the desire to learn the target language.

For instance, Pelletieri's study (2011) took the concepts developed by MacIntyre and created her own study which showed quantitatively how intermediate Spanish learners increased significantly their willingness to communicate after three consecutive quarters of community service programs in L2 environments.

In addition to communication, cultural competency deserves much attention when considering service-learning programs. Zapata (2011), for instance, conducted a study at the University of Alberta that attempted to determine the extent to which participants in service-learning programs would view the target language and culture differently. The author used pre- and post-questionnaires in a small-scale study with low-intermediate students (defined as students in at least their fourth semester of Spanish) and high-intermediate students (defined as students who are Spanish minors or majors). The results elucidate that the high-intermediate students demonstrated a higher understanding and a more positive attitude towards the target language and culture. However, no conclusive evidence showed that community-based learning had the same effect on low-intermediate students, who may have been hindered by their Spanish skills.

As the ideas of community service and second language acquisition began to merge, L2 researchers and instructors have incorporated and studied community-based learning (CSL) in foreign language programs such as Spanish at the college level. However, service-learning for the purpose of enhancing language skills has only been popular in recent years (Pellettieri, 2011). Therefore, there are still gaps in the research conducted on the Spanish community-based learning. The present article seeks to compare strategies used to enhance communication with a native speaker before and after experiencing service-learning.

The Study:

The department of Hispanic studies at the University of Kentucky focuses attention on the linguistic growth of its students. The service-learning component has been recently implemented in various classes. Specifically, the Spanish for Professions course sends students to service sites that fit their interests (e.g., a clinic for medical students and an elementary school for education majors).

The literature reviewed demonstrates the research that has been conducted in the realm of service-learning and language acquisition. CSL seems promising as Pellitieri (2011) validates that students' willingness to communicate (WTC) with native speakers increases after participating in such programs. However, the increase in WTC only associates service-learning with the idealization of speaking with natives. The implementation of communication strategies when talking in L2 has never been systematically investigated.

Additionally, the study completed by Zapata (2011) indicates that there may be inconclusive effects of service-learning in low-intermediate Spanish students due to

their competence and desirability of the language. In this manner, this investigation focuses on students who major or minor in Spanish.

Tarone (1980) identified aspects of input which promote comprehension and/or language learning; some aspects include a slower rate, repetition and restatement, and use of gesture. In addition, actions that hinder communication have been identified such as focusing on errors and pretending that there is comprehension. The present study uses these ideals to calculate quantitatively whether high-intermediate Spanish students alter their strategies of communication in L2 after experiencing a service-learning program.

Research Questions:

This study will incorporate these ideals in order to understand better the impacts of service-learning on a student's communication in L2. The questions that will be answered include the following:

1. To what degree is there a change in students studying the Spanish language in their application of communication strategies with native speakers after completing one semester of service in a Spanish-based community?

2. After completing one semester of service-learning in a Hispanic community, How do confidence and the perception of comfort vary while speaking in Spanish?

3. Does a student make more of an effort to create a more accurate understanding of the message conveyed by both the student himself and by the native speaker after one semester of service-learning?

Methods:

The participants were students who enrolled in the 2012-2013 Spring semester of a Spanish service-learning class. The twenty (N=20) students of the Spanish 313 course constitute the sample population of this study. They are Spanish majors or minors; therefore they are high-intermediate Spanish learners. This study is comprised of two data collection sets: pre and post tests. Each survey includes a total of 21 questions.

At the beginning of the spring semester, questionnaires were handed to each student inquiring about conversation methods discussed above. The questionnaires included statements about natural communication techniques (e. g. "While I speak Spanish, I use gesture to help the interlocutor understand me"), strategies to make sure the interlocutor understands the message properly (e. g. "When I feel the interlocutor does not understand me properly I ask questions to check if s/he has understood"), and strategies to make sure the student himself understands the interlocutor (e. g. "When I do not understand the interlocutor I repeat what s/he has said in my own way to ensure that I have understood").

The students were asked to participate in the study but were told that participation had no effect on their grades. The students ranked the occurrence of each strategy that may hinder or promote communication on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being never and 5 being almost always, that is:

1 = Never occurs

2= Rarely occurs

3= Sometimes occurs

4= Often occurs

     5= Almost always occurs

     Then, at the closing of the SL experience, replicate questionnaires were distributed at the end of the semester. The growth of each individual was calculated and recorded on a graph.

Results:

     The analysis first focused on the individual growth of all of the communication techniques in general. The numeric scale in which the students were asked to rank each scenario was first converted into percentages, that is:

     1 = 0%

     2 = 25%

     3 = 50%

     4 = 75%

     5 = 100%

     Then, each individual's response to every scenario was recorded on a spreadsheet and then combined as an average. The same construct was used on the post-questionnaires. The before and after results of each individual were recorded on a graph. As Figure 1 shows, almost every student had a higher average frequency of the communication techniques after their SL experience.

Figure 1. Frequency of Individual Communication Techniques Before and After Service-Learning
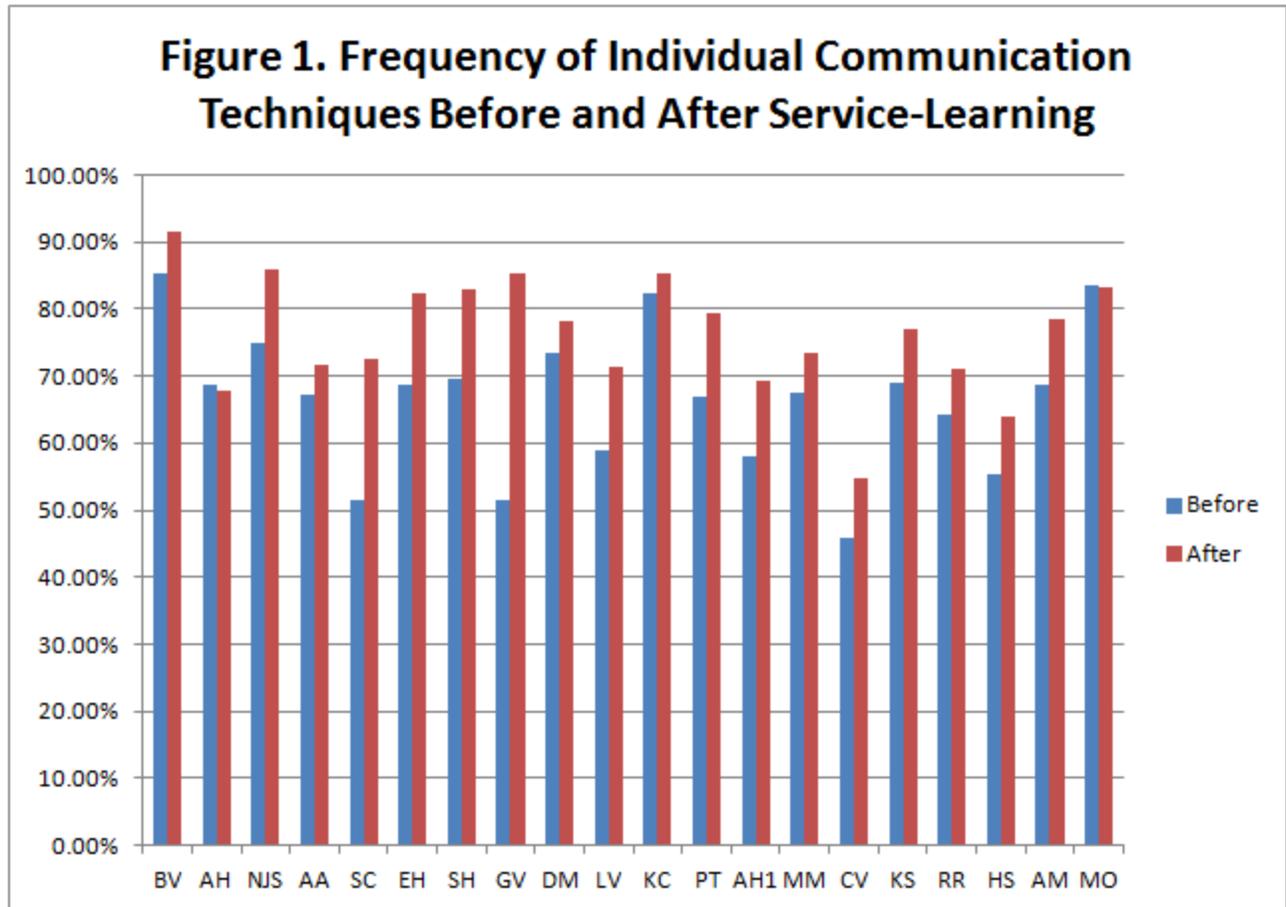

Only two students showed a decrease in the use of Tarone's (1980) communication techniques, but in both cases the frequency after SL is so similar to the before values that they become insignificant. The beginning mean frequency score was relatively high, but the end score was even higher. The students, on average, improved from a 66.56% frequency to a 76.25% frequency of effective communication. This means that the average increase in communication among all of the students was almost 10%. The results indicate a significant positive change in the students from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester.

The analysis then focused on different aspects of effective communication. A student's focus on the fluidity of the conversation, the provision of understanding for the

native speaker, and the provision of understanding for the student himself are all viewed as separate variables. Techniques for the fluidity of the conversation comprised of nine out of the twenty-one items on the survey. Techniques for fluidity included continued flow of the conversation and pre-contemplation of natural sentence structure. Understanding for the native speaker comprised of five out of the twenty-one items, while understanding for the language learner comprised of seven out of the twenty-one items.

Unsurprisingly, the students increased the use of all of the apportioned communication techniques after the completion of a community service project. A calculated average of all of the students in the SPA 313 course determined that the slightest increase was in the familiarity of the conversation (7.07% increase), whereas the most prominent growth occurred in making sure the native speaker understood the message properly (11.75% growth).

Figure 2. Average Frequency of Communication Techniques Before and After Service-Learning
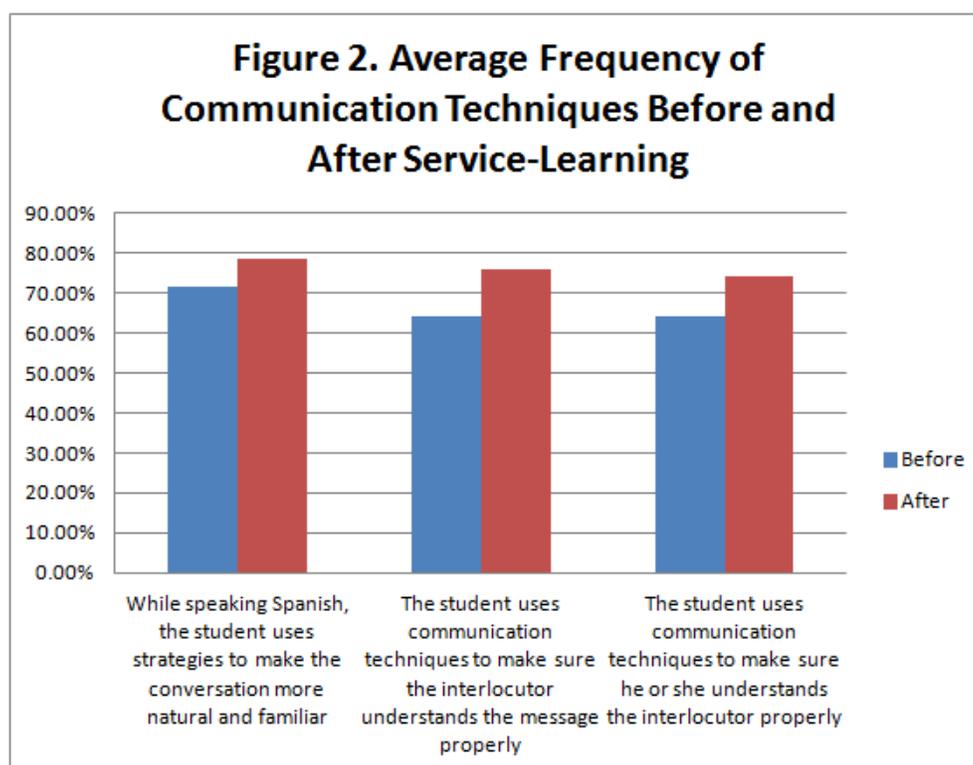
Discussion:

The analysis of the data collection and calculation supports the hypothesis that students consciously and actively control their interaction in the Spanish language. Even when required, service-learning promotes linguistic techniques that improve a student's success in the acquisition of the Spanish language. Similarly, these results could project to the acquisition of any L2, given that the student is high-intermediate in that language.

The students that used Tarone's (1980) communication techniques often initially did not have much room to grow, and a couple even declined slightly. Those who implemented these skills at the beginning of the semester barely increased in frequency if at all. However, those who did not practice these techniques before service-learning made a conscious effort to communicate effectively. High-intermediate Spanish speakers that do not actively use strategies for a more natural conversation have much to gain from service-learning in this area.

There were students that grew significantly and students that even declined in their use of communication strategies, yet the distribution of the differences was fairly normal. Although no two people had the exact same difference in frequencies, the mode and mean both fell in the range from 10%-15%.

There was no significant superiority in the categories of communication techniques. The students as a whole improved in every category, supporting a correlation of all three strategies; that is, if a student improved in ensuring a clear

message for the interlocutor, s/he also improved in creating a more natural conversation.

It is interesting to compare these results to those of Pelliteri (2011), who found a significant correlation between community service and WTC in L2. Not only does service-learning improve a person's prevalence of communication in the target language, it also improves the effectiveness of the person's communication. Thus, the WTC and the use of communication strategies go hand in hand as WTC leads to more interaction in L2 and more interaction improves techniques in their communication. SL improves all of these factors, making them interrelated.

Some improvements could be made to this study, most notably the sample. Twenty participants in the same Spanish class certainly do not represent all college students that are studying Spanish, but it gives a good basis for future randomized and large-scale studies. Similarly, there was no control group to which the results could be compared. Also, it is not possible to claim that the improvements in communication were brought upon solely by community service projects, but there is definitely a significant correlation between the exposure of L2 and communication techniques. The study was not perfect, but can provide reference for future studies that can validate this claim.

Conclusion:

The lack of a randomized participant pool, large sample and control group certainly limit the extensions of the results of this study. However, this pilot study provides a theoretical model for service-learning projects in language departments. The study suggests that Spanish communication is in fact enhanced after being exposed to

a Spanish community. The study, along with other studies, proposes that these

techniques in communication would not be acquired as well in a classroom setting.

Future research can investigate longer-term outcomes and outcomes in the different

Spanish communities (e. g. rehabilitation center versus an elementary school). Overall,

the conversations between the students and native speakers became more natural and

comprehensive after a service-learning project.

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