

Moving forward: Revisiting the *Spanish for High Beginners* course¹

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ABSTRACT

EN This paper presents a case study on the redesign of a Spanish for High Beginners (SHB) course at a large metropolitan university in Texas, USA. The first section presents a discussion on the diverse nature of students who can benefit from an intensive first-year Spanish course and the challenges that these learners' mixed abilities pose for instruction. The second section describes the redesign process of the SHB course, including placement procedures, the Spanish Language Program sequence, and changes in the syllabus to integrate communicative and transcultural competences by implementing a combination of focused instruction, collaborative learning and task-based approaches. The last section introduces a short presentation of four activities implemented in the redesigned course, which provide paths for future development of advanced beginners' integrative tasks. The final section focuses on the results of an exit survey measuring students' perceptions of the course. The successful implementation of changes and its outcomes demonstrate that this course could be a relevant solution for Spanish programs at tertiary institutions with diverse populations, helping to solve challenges of placement, articulation, and time-to-graduation effectiveness.

Key words: INTENSIVE SPANISH, SPANISH FOR HIGH BEGINNERS, COURSE REDESIGN, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING.

ES Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso sobre el rediseño de un curso de español para principiantes avanzados (SHB) en una universidad metropolitana del estado de Texas, EE.UU. La primera sección plantea una discusión sobre la variedad de estudiantes que pueden beneficiarse de un curso intensivo de español de primer año, así como los retos que la heterogeneidad de niveles entre el alumnado conlleva. En la segunda sección se describe el proceso seguido para rediseñar el curso SHB, incluyéndose aquí los procedimientos de admisión, la secuenciación de contenidos, así como los cambios efectuados en el plan de estudios con vistas a integrar competencias comunicativas y transculturales la enseñanza mediante una combinación de instrucción centrada en la forma, aprendizaje colaborativo y enfoques basados en tareas. En la última sección se presentan cuatro actividades implementadas en el nuevo diseño del curso que promueven el desarrollo de tareas integradas para principiantes avanzados. La sección final se centra en los resultados de una encuesta de salida donde se valoran las percepciones del curso por parte del alumnado. La implementación con éxito de los y los resultados obtenidos demuestran que ese curso podría ser una solución satisfactoria para los programas de español en instituciones con un alumnado diverso, ayudando a resolver los retos que plantean la nivelación, la implementación y la efectiva temporalización del curso en la obtención un grado universitario.

Palabras clave: ESPAÑOL INTENSIVO, ESPAÑOL PARA PRINCIPIANTES AVANZADOS, REDISEÑO DE CURSO, APRENDIZAJE COLLABORATIVO.

IT L'articolo presenta un caso di studio sulla rielaborazione di un corso di spagnolo per principianti di livello avanzato (SHB) in una grande università in Texas, USA. La prima parte presenta un'analisi dei tipi di studenti che possono trarre vantaggio da un corso intensivo di spagnolo al primo anno e delle sfide che le diverse competenze di tali alunni rappresentano per l'insegnamento. La seconda parte descrive il processo di riprogettazione del corso in termini di procedure d'inserimento, organizzazione dei contenuti e cambiamenti al piano didattico, al fine di integrare competenze comunicative e transculturali attraverso un insieme di insegnamento mirato, apprendimento collaborativo e approccio *task-based*. Nell'ultima parte si presentano quattro attività ideate nel corso che aprono la strada al futuro sviluppo di *task* integrati per studenti di livello intermedio. Infine, l'ultima parte si sofferma sui risultati di un'indagine che rileva le percezioni degli studenti sul corso. Il successo dei cambiamenti proposti e i risultati ottenuti dimostrano che il corso può essere una soluzione importante ai programmi di lingua spagnola nelle università con utenza diversificata e che può contribuire a risolvere questioni di efficacia di inserimento, di articolazione e di tempi di conseguimento della laurea.

Parole chiave: SPAGNOLO INTENSIVO, SPAGNOLO PER PRINCIPIANTI DI LIVELLO AVANZATO, RIPROGETTAZIONE DEL CORSO, APPRENDIMENTO COLLABORATIVO.

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1. Introduction

A quick look to the 2013 catalog of Spanish courses recognized by the Board of Texas Higher Education Coordination Board finds that *SPAN1305: Intensive Beginning Spanish* was scheduled for deletion in Fall 2014. The THECB simply states: “The following courses were under review and are now deleted. The courses are ineligible for state funding if offered after August 31, 2013” (THECB, 2013, p. 10). In other words, the course is no longer part of the official Spanish courses of Texas and cannot be, therefore, used for transfer among higher education institutions. The decision was reached in the August, 2012 draft description of courses and learning outcomes mandated by the THECB. The recommendation for deletion of *SPAN1305: Intensive Beginning Spanish* from the catalogue was based on low enrollment: Only 385 students had enrolled in that course in Texas in 2010. A second argument supporting the removal was “lack of applicability to a degree” (THECB, 2013, p. 5). Many degree plans in tertiary institutions of Texas include a foreign language requirement, which calls for completion of two semesters at the intermediate level; therefore, language courses dealing with beginners’ levels are not counted toward the requirement, i.e., they are not “applicable” for a degree.

Coincidentally, this state-level administrative decision was reached at the same time that a large metropolitan university in the south of Texas was redesigning that precise course, *Intensive Spanish for High Beginners*. The motivation for the redesign was related to changes in the student population, uneven enrollment in the Spanish courses, and the re-organization of the four-semester Spanish course sequence. Instead of choosing the easiest solution (i.e. eliminating the course from the catalog, thus reducing the number of offerings), the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston (main campus) approved a proposal to re-design the course to solve some of the issues.

The goal of this article is to describe the redesign and re-organization process of a Spanish for High Beginners course, seeking to address the wide diversity of incoming college students in a large Spanish Program in a metropolitan university in Texas, USA. The course redesign was based on collaborative learning and task-based approach, taking advantage of the particular strengths that a diverse population brings to the classroom, while enabling learners to move up in the proficiency scale. The main goals of the redesign included: a) creating an inclusive learning context for a very diverse group of learners; b) incorporating integrative tasks, with an emphasis in oral communication, that motivate students and advance their proficiency to the next level; c) aligning goals and outcomes with the Spanish courses sequence, and d) encouraging development of learning strategies that relate already-known content to a more performative access to the Spanish language, with particular emphasis on oral skills.

The redesign objectives were multifaceted and related to instructional and administrative areas; the changes were planned to: ameliorate placement problems based on inconclusive assessment of Spanish for High Beginner (henceforth, SHB) learners (Hudson & Clark, 2008), accelerate time to graduation, help transitioning of transfer students into the Spanish Program, and provide learners with an attractive curriculum whose tasks and content motivated them. The redesign process was conducted via constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003; Livingstone, 2014), which offers a dynamic framework to ensure the connection among learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and evaluation process: “It is an approach to curriculum design that optimizes the conditions for learning, where the teaching activities of the teacher and the learning activities of the student are both directed towards the same goal” (Livingstone, 2014, p. 5). Modifications in all components of the course curriculum, including placement procedures, teaching framework, assessment and teacher preparation were carried out with successful results: students participating in the pilot not only satisfactorily reached learning outcomes but expressed deep satisfaction in the exit survey.

The article is divided in three main sections: first, a discussion on the concept of “High Beginner,” including the description of the profile of learners who can be placed into the SHB course; second, a sequential explanation of the redesign process which was developed in summer/fall 2012, including changes in enrollment procedures, course content, assignments and assessments; third, a introduction to the language tasks students completed during the pilot semester and a short presentation of the students’ comments gathered in an exit survey.

2. High Beginners in the college Spanish classroom

Literature in language learning defines “false beginners” (in this article High Beginners, HB) as those language learners who are placed or register themselves in beginner language classes but have already

acquired some knowledge—declarative or procedural—of the foreign language in different contexts (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Kuriyama, 2014; Nakamura, 1997; Sohn & Shin, 2007). Richards and Schmidt (2010) provide a general definition generally found in most of the literature on HB: “False Beginner: a learner who has had a limited amount of previous instruction in a language but who because of extremely limited language proficiency is classified as at the beginning level of language instruction” (p. 216). This definition does not include learners whose contact with the language happened in naturalistic environments—for instance, in the contexts of heritage language acquisition or when traveling extendedly abroad—which is the case of many Spanish students. There are many individuals entering Spanish Language Programs at the college level who possess such experience. Some of them have previous formal instruction at the secondary level, where Spanish continues to be the most popular choice (72% of all foreign language students in High School decided to register in Spanish classes, according to the ACTFL Foreign Language Enrollment Survey, 2011). Others have been in contact with Spanish in a naturalistic context, for instance at home where a relative speaks the language, or in the workplace (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005; Sohn & Shin, 2007). And still others have lived abroad for a period of time or have traveled extensively without necessarily receiving formal instruction.

Richards and Schmidt’s initial definition can be modified considering that HB, although located “at the beginning level of language instruction” (p. 216), constitute a very heterogeneous group with diverse abilities and needs. SHB are as diverse as their backgrounds and present unique challenges for course design and instruction. This diversity affects all interacting components of the course: the students; their abilities, motivations and needs; the goals, content and structure of the course; the instructional intervention; and the instructor’s role. Gascoigne Lally (2001) summarizes this description, seeking to help instructor recognize the diversity found in beginning classes:

Many instructors facing an heterogeneous mix do not consider the various sources of ‘prior language experience’ that may composite their classes: in the case of ‘false beginners’, the group may include: students who have a Spanish-speaking background; English students who lived and were educated in a Hispanic context; students who completed a number of Spanish courses at the high school; students who are transferring language credits from other tertiary institution. (p. 18)

The presence of HB learners in beginning foreign classes has been studied since the early 1960s, and continues to be an unresolved issue³ with the potential to become more acute:

As more and more foreign languages are offered in high schools and more colleges require them for entrance, the potential for bringing false beginners to college classes grows. For Spanish the situation is aggravated by its rising popularity. Heritage learners, who might be considered a special case of false beginners, provide a new dimension in Spanish and in other languages as well. (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005, p. 172)

An answer to this issue could be the careful implementation of an intensive HB course designed to accommodate a diverse population, maximize time and costs, and provide a clear pathway to more advanced proficiency without boring or overwhelming the students. As Arnold (2007) summarizes:

Despite several years of FL study in high school, students often return to beginning language study in college. While some of them take first-semester classes together with true beginners, many universities have created specific review courses for these false beginners. (p. 113)

A few tertiary institutions in Texas currently follow this recommendation and offer such a course: Texas Tech University offers *SPA1607: Intensive Spanish First Year*, described as a comprehensive, one-semester review of first-year Spanish. University of Texas at Austin created in 2013 the intensive *SPA601D*, which is indicated for true and false beginners; Baylor University offers *SPA1412: Accelerated Elementary Spanish* to students who had previous Spanish coursework at high school; Texas A&M University includes

³ This study does not focus on the issues of elementary language courses with a mixed population of true beginners and high beginners; this topic has been studied in different academic contexts, considering issues of motivation, student anxiety, language achievement, assessment and pace of instruction (see Frantzen & Magnan, 2004, 2005; Klee & Rogers, 1989; Magnan & Pierce, 1996).

SPA140: Alternate Beginning Spanish, which presents an accelerated review of first-year content. In spite of this list, most colleges and universities do not offer first-year Spanish in an intensive course, and the modification of the official state catalog would surely discourage institutions that could benefit their students by offering this course.

Determining the proficiency level of this diverse group is not an easy task and there are no clear guidelines to determine their level. Helgesen (1987) describes HB students' can-do abilities considering that "false beginners understand the meaning of a great deal of language and are able to engage in controlled, form-based (accuracy) activities, but their skills are very limited when they get into meaning-focused (fluency) situations" (p. 24). In the particular case of Spanish, this description mostly includes second-language learners (Collentine, 2007; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Gascoigne Lally, 2001; Harlow & Muyskens, 1994). These students have taken two or three years of Spanish at high school and are therefore familiar with basic content of the language. They have written in the language, are able to produce some sentence-level answers and can understand heavily manipulated passages in the target language. Their skills are essentially receptive, but they are able to follow classroom instructions, introduce themselves and provide basic information on immediate topics. They can remember and recognize some structures and vocabulary, and more importantly, they may have developed initial strategies for language learning. However, they are not well prepared for advancing to the intermediate level, which is commonly the level needed to complete the foreign language requirement for most degrees. This issue regarding "misplacement" has been noted not only in Texas but in different areas of the USA:

Parents and the general public are disturbed by the inefficient use of educational resources when students unnecessarily repeat coursework. For example, Schwartz found that 43% of California students who had completed two years of language study in high school began study of the same language at the introductory level in college. A more recent investigation in Florida revealed that 38% of students in beginning Spanish courses at the post-secondary level had successfully completed two or more years of Spanish in high school. (Gascoigne Lally, 2001, p. 18)

Another group of students who may be included in SHB courses, normally as a minority (10% of students in the actual course here described), are international students whose native language belongs to the Romance family; speakers of Italian, Portuguese and even French can test out of basic classes because of their overall knowledge of common structures and words, but are not able to move beyond the beginner level. However, their command of a Romance language makes them different from true beginners; they "do well" in controlled form-based activities and are also able to understand and respond to some target language input when it includes cognates and similar structures to their native languages.

Finally, a third group of learners may be included in SHB courses: Spanish Heritage Learners (SHL) at the low end of the bilingual proficiency continuum (Valdés, 2001), also labeled as "receptive" (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005) and "passive" Heritage Learners (Arnhart, Arnold, & Bravo-Black, 2001). These are learners who possess very limited Spanish proficiency but maintain strong connections with their cultural background. They normally register in Spanish classes seeking to strengthen that connection, although "their acquisition process will most parallel that of a regular second language learner" (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005, p.13). They are often able to understand spoken Spanish and manage to communicate in basic situations but are not familiar with Spanish literacy and struggle with simple reading and writing tasks.

The number of SHL has continually increased in the past two decades (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas & Albert, 2011; Fry & López, 2012; Lacorte & Canabal, 2003), as more Hispanic students continue their education and enter college. For instance, Texas' population includes a 38% of people from Hispanic origin, most of them self-reporting as Spanish-speakers; 41.6% of the Harris County population, where the University of Houston is located, is Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). These percentages highlight the increasing enrollment of Hispanics in college classes in Houston. While it is possible to offer a number of dedicated Spanish classes for SHL with more advanced proficiency, "receptive" or "passive" learners can benefit of L2 instructional approaches and interactions with non-native speakers in SHB courses if their particular language abilities, needs and motivations are recognized and valued: "Respect and interest in the language and cultural experiences that these students bring to the classroom may have a positive effect on the overall levels of motivations and attitudes among participants" (Lacorte & Canabal, 118, p. 2003).

The two most relevant frameworks for language learning and teaching, the American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) Standards and the European Common Frame of Reference (CEFR) do

not specify a level of competency directly related to High Beginners; however, the descriptors used to define the A1 (CEFR) and the Novice High (ACTFL) levels can be considered a good account of HB linguistic abilities when they start the language course:

- A1: Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. (CEFR, 2001, p.24);
- Novice Mid (Speaking): Communicate minimally and with difficulty by using a number of isolated words and memorized phrases limited by the particular context in which the language has been learned. When responding to direct questions, they may utter only two or three words or an occasional stock answer. They pause frequently as they search for simple vocabulary or attempt to recycle their own and their interlocutor's words. When called on to handle topics by performing functions associated with the Intermediate level, they frequently resort to repetition, words from their native language, or silence. (ACTFL, 2012, p. 9)

Considering these descriptions, it is evident that HB learners cannot simply be placed into an “SPA 101” language course designed for true beginners, as their different abilities are well beyond initial content, they have started to perform in the language and, in some cases, they have strong cultural connections and personal experience with the language. Intermediate level classes, however, are beyond their skills, which need to expand before attempting a more complex curriculum.

Although there is no consensus among researchers on the need of separating “false” and “true” beginners (Christiansen & Wu, 1993; Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; Loughrin-Sacco, 1990), the particular context of college level Spanish in the US and the kind of students entering these courses requires such separation if the intended goals of foreign language education are to be met. Despite administrative and instructional issues—which may encompass advising, placement, course content, assessment and particularly, instructors’ training—a specific course to accommodate this heterogeneous group of learners is a logical and sensitive answer.

3. Redesigning for diversity

The redesign process and subsequent implementation of a SHB course was conducted in the Spanish Language Program at the University of Houston (central campus), the flagship campus of the Houston University System in Texas, US. This large metropolitan institution has more than 40,700 students registered in 300 graduate and undergraduate programs. The student body is one of the most ethnically diverse in a research university in the USA, with large percentages of Hispanics (27%), Asian Americans (20%), African Americans (10%) and international learners⁴ (10%). The Spanish Language Program (SLP) offer courses for those students pursuing a Major or Minor degree in Spanish, as well those students who need to complete the Foreign Language Requirement for their individuals degrees. Considering the students’ ethnographic diversity, the SLP is divided in two tracks: Spanish for Second-language learners and Spanish for Heritage Learners. Students are initially placed into these tracks by means of a short survey, which separate them to take different placement exams: Spanish second-language learners complete the *S-CAPE*⁵ test while Spanish heritage learners complete the *Spanish for Heritage Speakers Placement Exam*, developed in-house. Table 1 presents the different levels where students can be placed; Table II shows enrollment trends.

⁴ These numbers correspond to the Fall 2014 semester, the most current available data.

⁵ S-CAPE is a Spanish computerized adaptive placement exam developed by Brigham Young University. Its main focus is on lower-division courses and it includes items to measure grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Table 1
Spanish Language Program structure

Sequence	Spanish Second Language Program	Spanish as Heritage Language Program
First Year	Beginning Spanish I Beginning Spanish II Spanish for High Beginners	---
Second Year	Intermediate Spanish I Intermediate Spanish II	Spanish for SHL I Spanish for SHL II
Third Year	Spanish Oral Communication Advanced Spanish	Public Speaking in Spanish Written Communication for SHL

Table 2
Enrollment 2009-2012

Course	2009	2010	2011	2012
Beg. Spanish I	388	421	471	518
Beg. Spanish II	324	342	387	449
Spanish for High Beginners	189	164	89	82
Intermediate Spanish I	493	534	528	547
Intermediate Spanish II	392	449	449	457

The existing SHB course underwent an extensive redesign in 2012, which was piloted in the fall of that year and later in spring 2013. The redesign process was the response to several issues. The first was declining enrollment and high attrition rates in the existing SHB. As Table II shows, registration for this course declined by almost 57% between 2009 and 2012, reducing the number of offered sections and causing last-minute cancellations. A second issue related to the growing number of Spanish Heritage Learners with receptive abilities who could not be placed into the Heritage track as their Spanish abilities would not reach an advanced intermediate level. Third, instructors noticed an increasing number of students who found themselves in the "Beginning I" course although they had previous experience with the language. Finally, instructors were concerned about student engagement and interest in the SHB course, which could explain to some degree the notable decrease in enrollment.

The redesign sought to create a receptive context for the SHB diverse population and to give students a different approach to basic Spanish, as proposed by Tomlinson (2007):

An obvious example is the false beginners, whose apparent lack of competence belies the time he/she has spent trying to learn the language. Such a learner needs a fresh start with a different approach rather than being asked to do the same thing all over again. (p. 324)

Carrying out a "fresh start" was the main drive to redirect instruction and learning towards a task-based model, while seeking to create an inclusive classroom for the diverse SHB population. Modifications in the areas of advising, placement, objectives, activities, and assessment were implemented, as follows.

Placement and advising: In order to implement the redesign, a first step was taken in the area of placement. The traditional SHB course was open to any student with two or more years of Spanish at the high school level, and to any Spanish Heritage Learner whose oral and written competency were below the expectation for the Spanish for Heritage Learners I (second-year) course. Enrollment in the SHB course was changed to allow multiple entry-points, which matched the diverse population the course was aiming for. The key change was to combine the placement exam score with students' language experience in order to provide different entry points. In addition, entrance to the class was also open to native speakers of Romance languages (mostly Portuguese, French and Italian) who had obtained similar scores in the S-CAPE exam; this inclusion attracted a number of students majoring in World Languages who saw the course as a great opportunity to complement their degrees. The following lists the placement requirement to enroll in the SHB course:

- S-CAPE: 250-315 + two or more years of Spanish High School in the past three years.
- S-CAPE: 250-315 + two or more years living abroad in a Spanish-speaking country.
- S-CAPE: 250-315 + Romance Language Proficiency [Italian, French, Portuguese].
- Receptive Heritage Learners [39 points or less in the *Spanish for Heritage Learners Placement Exam's* lexical recognition task].

Several meetings were conducted with undergraduate academic advisors to discuss the new placement procedures and to request their collaboration in detecting and assisting prospective SHB students in the enrollment process. Advisors agreed that one-semester intensive course would help students in the graduation process because of the reduction in time and costs, and it was also a good transition for those transfer students who felt unprepared for taking the Intermediate Spanish courses. Instructors teaching the Beginning Spanish I class also received information about the course and were encouraged to contact those students who did not fit the true beginner profile. These meetings were also important to continue demystifying the “easy A” conception that affects enrollment in basic language courses. As Loughrin-Sacco (1990) reports, “for many false beginners, retaking elementary foreign language in college is an opportunity to enhance their grade point average” (p. 89). He refers to previous studies which had showed these students placed themselves in lower courses or even willingly tested poorly in placement exams so they could be included in the beginner class. Informing advisors and instructors of the multiple issues that false beginners bring to a true elementary course, as well as promoting the SHB course as the most adequate setting for these learners, was a fundamental step in the redesign process.

Course objectives and content: A review of the learning objectives focused on the proficiency level required for successfully advance to the Intermediate level (the equivalent of A2 level [CEFR] or Novice-High level [ACTFL]). Main goals were consolidated in order to: 1) advance previous Spanish knowledge, 2) introduce and reinforce language learning strategies, and 3) foster self-confidence in a collaborative context. After completing the course, learners were expected to:

- 1) Be able to communicate effectively in everyday life situations, including basic interactions such as greeting, talking about daily activities, making purchases, ordering a meal, making basic travel arrangements, giving simple instructions and recommendations, and reporting information.
- 2) Be able to understand simple oral and written passages, and infer specific information from simple texts including news excerpts, advertisements, short interviews and cultural reports.
- 3) Develop basic writing skills to report information, describe people and places, and elaborate a sequential narration.
- 4) Gain familiarity with the Spanish-speaking cultures and communities both in the USA and abroad, by reading and discussing information on different Spanish-speaking countries and by connecting with the Hispanic community in the Houston area.

The SHB course was organized in seven main units which included linguistic, functional and cultural topics that directly relate to the course objectives and the progression towards the intermediate level. The following table summarizes the course content organization.

Table 3
SHB content and sequence

Unit	Functions	Vocabulary	Structures	Culture
1	Greetings Introduce yourself Request personal information Talk about pastimes	Personal information Personal interests Pastimes & hobbies	Present tense Basic nominal phrase Agreement Basic questions	Free time activities in the Spanish speaking-world
2	Requesting information Talk about preferences Expressing agreement /disagreement	Transportation, travel and lodging Tours and excursions Hours, dates, calendar	Sentence structure Present tense Verbal phrases Adjectives	Ecotourism in Central America
3	Talk about your family Describe your house Talk about your daily routine	Family and personal relationships Household items & chores	Reflexive verbs Direct complement Adjectives II	Families and personal relationships in the Spanish speaking-world
4	Talk about foods and meals Explain basic recipe Interact in a restaurant	Meals and food items Cooking instructions & methods. Measures Restaurants & bars	Future tense Direct and indirect complements	Traditional Latin-American ingredients. A national recipe
5	Talk about courses, disciplines & professors Provide information about your school/ university Discuss plans for the future	Academic disciplines & subjects University and school spaces Professions	Preterite tense Affirmative and negative words Verbal phrases II	Two Latin-American universities
6	Talk about fashion and clothing Shop for new clothing Narrate best/worst shopping experiences	Stores, shopping Clothing & fashion Sizes, styles, prices	Preterite tense Imperfecte tense	Traditional Caribbean clothing Shoppings in Spain, Venezuela and Chile
7	Plan a celebration Invite people to event Narrate childhood celebrations	Celebrations & traditions Holidays	Preterite tense Imperfecte tense Past tenses contrast	Comparing holidays and celebrations in the US and the Spanish speaking-world

Activities and assessment: The SHB course met five hours per week, in a two- or three-day schedule. The number of hours allowed students enough time for interaction with the instructor and peers, to have access targeted instruction on lexical, grammatical and functional areas, and to carry out different activities that prepared them to fulfill the more complex tasks required in the course. Incorporating the integrative tasks, as discussed in the following section, was the most relevant change to the curriculum; until the redesign process, the SHB course followed a more traditional approach to language learning based on the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Another relevant component of the redesign was the addition of independent oral practice outside the classroom. Students were required to attend five sessions of the “Spanish Conversation Table” at the Student Support Center. Tables were organized in two levels (beginner and intermediate), with a maximum of 6 students per session, and were conducted by graduate students of Spanish. Each session was 50 minutes long and provided a sequence of different oral activities: after brief reviews of target vocabulary, participants played memory games, create dialogues, read short news from different Spanish countries and connected with other Spanish learners broadening the classroom community. The Conversation Tables provided a unique opportunity to increase learner autonomy, and their performance was solely measured by active participation. This provided learners with a more relaxed environment to try out their Spanish and engage in different interactions with other learners from the Spanish program.

Additionally, three formative tests were conducted in the semester, replacing the former six exams based on the textbook chapters. The three tests included listening and reading passages as the foundation for pre-communicative activities, which were necessary in the organization of the advanced tasks, and included highly contextualized questions. Writing was reduced in these exams as students were already producing a fair amount of writing in the preparation activities and advanced tasks.

Lastly, the final examination was extensively modified to reinforce oral communication outcomes. Until the redesign implementation was conducted, the final exam was a traditional pencil-and-paper, comprehensive written assessment covering all content of the course. This exam was replaced with an oral examination where students needed to tap into their overall language proficiency in order to fulfill an oral task tied to their language level. The assessment was performed in two steps: first, students completed an individual short interview with the instructor (about 5 minutes); then students were paired up to complete an oral task (about 10 minutes) focused on information exchange. The oral examination was video-recorded by the instructor, who then assessed and graded each performance individually. The implementation of this final exam was very successful, expanding students' oral skills and showcasing the advancement of their Spanish proficiency. The following section describes the articulation of collaborative work as a key classroom component for success.

3.1 Collaborative learning in the SHB classroom

Creating a learning environment where cooperation frames all interactions (student-student, student-instructor, student and class) was a fundamental piece in the successful development of the redesigned SHB course. Cooperative activities were included since the first day, and promotion of group work strategies was integrated into the course content. Activities were designed to ensure group interaction in each session, to prepare students to carry out the more complex tasks, and to encourage higher participation rates, regardless of their specific abilities and knowledge of the target language. As Thomas (2006) explains in her approach to French for HB,

activities such as group investigation are likely to encourage shy and low performance students since they have the advantage of requiring the participation of all group or pair members to carry out a task, allowing each member to do something according to one's abilities. (p. 153)

As the SHB course was made up of learners with mixed abilities because of their prior linguistic experience, heterogeneous grouping was considered the most beneficial approach to tap into their diverse skills in Spanish and to facilitate collaboration.

The benefits of cooperative learning are more tangible when it comes to written work. Involvement in cooperative dyads can improve the quality of students' performance on a written task. Weak students can use more advanced learners as sources of information, commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both oral and written formats. (Xanthou & Pavlou, 2008, p. 4)

By assigning learners with different ability levels in the same group it was possible to provide learning opportunities for low-level students as well as more advanced students, as the activities reinforced what they already knew or provided new perspectives on the content. For instance, SHLs can easily understand basic spoken discourse in Spanish, and could provide vocabulary definitions or model oral production to L2 learners. When it comes to writing and structures, the roles reverse: as L2 are more familiar with metalinguistic vocabulary and grammar structures, they were able to coach heritage learners in the focus-on-form activities or when editing a writing piece. In other cases, students in the group had the same ability level, but the diverse experiences with the target language provided access to different strategies for learning and communicating. The number of learners (N=20) in the redesigned section surpassed size recommendations for language classes (ADFL, 2001; Schiming, 2013; Zarker Morgan, 2000), but still allowed a number of groupings in which each student had the opportunity to interact with all classmates.

In order to ensure a collaborative environment, information about each learner was gathered beforehand. Before the first day of class, students registered in the SHB course completed an online survey about their background on the language, their goals and their expectations for the class, and basic personal

information⁶. This survey was a first step into getting to know each student and finding out their previous contact with Spanish. A set of questions was designed to measure such experience, including a list of known languages, years of Spanish courses at the high school level, use of the language at home and abroad, and self-reporting competence in understanding the language.

The population of the class (N=20, 14 females and 6 males) included a majority of L2 learners (n=12) who had taken two or three years of Spanish in high school. Five students were SHL with basic levels of competency in oral Spanish, and one student had taken two semesters of Spanish at another tertiary institution but wanted to “refresh” her knowledge before moving to the intermediate level. The class also included two international students whose native languages were French and Italian, and who had lived for some time in Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia. Regarding university level, 60% of students were sophomores, 20% juniors and 20% seniors. The majority indicated they normally spoke English (n=13) while the five SHL indicated they spoke some Spanish with their grandparents but not “at home.” The two international students reported their common usage of French, Italian and English for communication. Regarding expectations, most of them answered with very general comments such as “learn Spanish,” “improve my Spanish,” “get ready for the last Spanish classes”; some of them indicated they wanted to complete the requisite for graduation. The responses to the question 16 about their interest in different Spanish skills were mostly focus on “speaking” (n=17), “culture” (n=10) and “listening” (n=8), showing that learners considered oral communication the most relevant component to develop.

During the class period students were divided in different pairs or small groups (three to four participants) considering the particular activity they were performing; this distribution gave the students the opportunity to closely work with several classmates through the semester, creating a low-anxiety environment as they got to know each other very well. The distribution in groups for the different tasks was based on the student survey responses; each group combination, which changed by task, included L2 learners with high-school experience, heritage learners who had experience with the language at home, and students transferring from another tertiary institution. In some cases, the group included international students with a Romance language background. This rotating combination of backgrounds facilitated access to different types of knowledge which were needed to complete the task, and provided students with a richer learning experience. Interdependence was modeled into the tasks to promote participation, interaction and communication; individual students could not complete the task without interacting and collaborating with peers. This cooperative format typifies Johnson, Johnson, and Smith’s (1991) description of interdependence, which aligns individual attainment with group work success: “there is positive interdependence among students’ goal attainments and students perceive that they can reach their goals if and only if the other students in the group also reach their goals” (p. 13).

From the decision-making initial steps (planning for the task) until the final product delivery, students needed to actively participate in the group, negotiate responsibilities and collaborate in the task development and completion. As Cohen (1994) posits: “The objective is to ensure that a group will be created because members are dependent on one another to achieve group goal (positive goal interdependence) and will need to use each other’s resources to attain that goal (resource interdependence)” (p. 21). In addition, interactional skills were included in the assessment process: Learners’ ability to cooperate with classmates and actively participate in each group project was weekly evaluated in a four-point scale: great, good, weak and no-interaction. Students received this brief evaluation as part of their overall Participation grade, and they could discuss with the instructor and classmates different strategies to improve their collaborative work.

4. Moving forward: Task design for the SHB course

This section describes four tasks designed and implemented by the instructors of the SHB course during the semesters of fall 2012 and spring 2013. Each task was related to the topics developed in the course and the overall outcomes described in the previous sections. Although the syllabus was not completely restructured with a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach, the use of tasks became a central component in the design. One of the greatest strengths of this approach in the beginner language class is the diversity of options it offers, and how its flexible design can be reshaped to promote particular outcomes and language development (Brown, 2007; Norris, 2009). “TBLT is not monolithic; it does not constitute one single methodology. It is a multifaceted approach, which can be creatively applied with different syllabus types and

⁶ See Appendix A.

for different purposes” (Willis, 2004, p. 3). As Gonzalez-Lloret and Nielson (2014) emphasize, there are several ways to implement TBLT and the proximity to real-world task can be adapted according to learners’ needs and interests, as well as course general objectives. Furthermore, Norris (2009) points out that “tasks also have the advantage of offering learners some reason for communicating, beyond practicing to do so, in that they came replete with actual outcomes, criteria for success or failure, even tangible results” (p. 587).

Tasks designed to target the diverse SHB learners require a clear structure and differentiated support, according to individual needs. Learners at this level have need of clear description of assignments, step-by-step instructions, collaboration from peers, and direct instructional intervention to succeed in completing communicative tasks. Sequencing each task in several sub-tasks as well as providing diverse supporting material, such as charts, check-lists, online content, rubrics and models helped them achieve each task. Students conducted different guided activities, including activities for understanding—“*Estas actividades demuestran la comprensión de textos escritos u orales, pueden ser dirigidos a la comprensión denotativa o la connotativa, pueden demostrar comprensión de información explícita o implícita y sirven para hacer resúmenes o evaluaciones?*” (Moreno García, 2011, p. 135)—as well as developmental activities—“which provide opportunities for meaningful language production based on the learners’ representation of a text” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 63). Providing the mixed-ability class with activities which demanded all students to communicate with their classmates in order to give and receive new information proved to be helpful for these learners with different Spanish skills.

In order to provide students with consistent support, all tasks were clearly described and modeled with examples: providing a final product as a model (for instance, a restaurant review, a comedy script or a short story) helped learners to focus on what was needed to complete the task and what resources each individual and the group needed to collect. In particular, presenting culturally relevant materials to exemplify task’s development and outcome, served very well as a development guide for more independent performance. As an example, the second writing task required students to visit and review a Hispanic business in order to compile information for a brochure. As part of the preparation activities, students read current online advertisements of different types of Hispanic businesses in Houston, and summarized the information they found: location, hours of operation, products/services provided, costs, etc. They evaluated the information found on the website and then compared their findings with their group to decide which was the best place to visit. This activity prepared them for the actual visit as their initial review would utilize similar vocabulary, structures and functions as the development activity.

Each task was completed in a period of about three weeks, with most of the work done outside the classroom. Each class period included 15 minutes dedicated to the tasks, which allowed students time to work in groups organizing materials, planning the activities, designing the presentations or writing. These 15-minute sessions were structured as a workshop and the instructor become an advance resource, coach or audience, depending on particular needs of the groups. Having this time available allowed students to fulfill the preparatory sub-tasks and evaluate what work needed to be done outside the classroom.

Although an important part of the work was completed by the team, students were graded individually in each task. All final products included some individual production which made easier to evaluate each student individually; there were also “group points” added to the final grade. In addition, the final examination was based on an individual oral performance, which targeted the topics and activities each student developed during the semester.

4.1 Sample tasks⁸

This sub-section presents a description of some tasks implemented during the redesign period. Students completed four tasks during the semester targeting oral and written communication, and instructors modified them in subsequent semesters according to their own interest and resource availability. For instance, an interesting variation to the “show and tell” oral description was implemented in Spring 2013. After a field trip to a Latin American art exhibition in a local museum, the instructor modified the initial task: instead of describing a personal

⁷ “Those activities that demonstrate comprehension of oral or written texts, can be directed to understanding denotative or connotative meanings, can demonstrate understanding of explicit or implicit information, and serve to write summaries or evaluations” [my translation].

⁸ I would like to thank Emily Bernate, Mercedes Fernández-Asenjo and Eugenia Ruiz, instructors of the Spanish for High Beginners course, who collaborated in the redesign process and successfully implemented the changes in their classrooms.

object, students had to describe their favorite painting in the exhibition after doing some online research on the artist, painting style and cultural context of the work. This activity was particularly popular among students, who presented their descriptions with rich visual information and spoke more extensively than in previous activities.

Escritura A: "De compras en Houston"

Task: promote Hispanic businesses with a brochure

Objectives: find information about Hispanic business in the Houston area; write a review; design a promotional brochure.

Instructions:

Part A: Your group will decide what relevant stores you will present in the brochure. You have to make sure there are different type of stores (for instance, restaurant, general store, market, boutique, shoe store, etc.), and all of them are part of the Hispanic community. You will write a short review of one of these Hispanic businesses following this plan: first, visit the place and talk with clerks, managers or waiters to find out more information about the business. Take some pictures showing interesting areas or objects. Then, describe your visit using the present tense. Provide information about location, hours, prices and activities. Recommend (or not) the place.

Part B: You and your team will prepare the promotional brochure to promote the Hispanic business industry. Write a brief introduction providing information about the city and then arrange the reviews to showcase what the Hispanic business offer. Include photos, images or websites to complete the brochure.

Assessment: The brochure will be graded on: content (30%), organization (20%), target vocabulary and structures (30%), original design (10%).

Escritura B: "Contando historias"

Task: narrate a story about a comic character

Objectives: transfer visual content into linguistic discourse; write and perform a dialogue; recreate a story from a dialogue.

Instructions:

Part A. After reviewing the three comic options, discuss and select one per group; this visual material will be the basis for the dialogue and narratives. Talk about the characters (names, physical traits, personalities, etc.) and explain what happened in the graphic story. Look for unknown word to describe the situation. Working together, create a dialogue (about 5 minutes) among the characters, imagining what they would say to each other; make sure you use formal or informal forms of addressing according to the characters' relationship. Practice and represent your dialogue in class.

Part B. Now that you know more about the characters, select the one you find more interesting. Using the information from the dialogue and the visual cues, write a short story (about 300 words) telling what happened with the character after the conversation was over. The story should include background information, a sequence of events and some time-markers. Share your story with your group and compare characters' 'lives'.

Assessment: The story will be graded on: content (40%), organization (20%), target vocabulary and structures (20%), originality (20%).

Presentación A: "Show and tell"

Task: describe a personal object

Objectives: present detailed information on a personal object; explain relevance of object in life

Instructions: You will present in front of the class a favorite object, and describe what it is, when /how you acquired it and why is important to you; you can bring the object itself or bring a photo. To start your description, you need to look for specific words that will allow you to provide a full description of the item. The presentation is about 3 to 4 minutes. Although you are expected to practice, you may not read during the presentation. Your partner will be your first audience and he/she will comment on your presentation to improve it.

Assessment: The presentation will be graded on: content (40%), organization (20%), target vocabulary (20%), structures (20%).

Presentación B: "¿Dónde puedo vivir?"

Task: Promoting housing options to freshman students

Objectives: describe a house /apartment / dorm. List and describe household items; provide pros/cons of living on campus; give general recommendations on housing

Instructions: You and your classmate will produce a short video to promote the housing options UH offers to new international students. You can base your video in the two options provided, or select your own alternative. The presentation should last 5 to 7 minutes. Although you are expected to prepare and practice the presentation, you may not read cue cards for the video. If it appears that you are reading, you will be asked to present your project in class.

Housing option 1: UH dorms. You and your partner will visit any of the new UH dorms and showcase the facility. Present a very detailed description of the space, rooms, household items, furniture, etc. Provide costs and benefits. Include information on services students' can access.

Housing option 2: You are hosting a foreign exchange student at your house. Describe your household and give a tour of the home. If you choose this option, you will need to use a house that is large enough to present several rooms, their contents, and talk about the activities you usually perform in each space.

Assessment: The video will be graded on: discourse content (25%), vocabulary (25%), structures (25%), fluency (10%), and creativity (5%).

4.2 Student voices

A week before the end of the semester students completed an open-ended, seven-question, anonymous survey⁹ in order to evaluate the course outcomes, activities, materials and their personal gains. Students ($N=20$) answered the exit survey with very positive comments regarding instructional effectiveness, content, activities and materials, and they recognized the fundamental role of the instructor in the successful development of the course. Most students (70%) agreed that working in groups to complete complex communicative tasks was highly beneficial as the group provided support and helped lessen anxiety and stress during interactions. Critical evaluation of aspects they perceived as incomplete or inadequate was well-justified with statements that presented some kind of solution, which indicates the degree of interest and commitment to the class.

We include below a representative selection of comments offered by students who successfully completed the course:

⁹ See Appendix B.

- 1) Regarding expectations:

“The class met my expectations, I was taught a great deal of Spanish.”
“Yes, I really enjoyed this class! I really liked when we learned as a group.”
“The class was great! I expected it to be even more accelerated so it made it easier to manage.”
“I liked it very much. I enjoyed when we worked in groups and spoke with each other.”
- 2) Regarding content and activities:

“The course covered all topics well. We had great group discussions and field trips.”
“I think the class covered what was meant to be covered very well. I enjoyed talking about the Spanish countries.”
“It was great when there were guest speakers and they talked about their country. I would recommend this class because of lots of good content.”
- 3) Regarding instruction:

“The class is very well taught and the instructor speaks a good deal of Spanish.”
“I learned a lot because my professor was great; she took the time to explain and gives time to practice.”
“I would recommend the teacher to anyone, she was very good and fair, she knows a lot about Spanish,”

Although the exit survey served to corroborate positive aspects noticed during the implementation, analysis of students’ comments present limitations: low number of students, incomplete answers, and the survey optionality are limiting factors. However, it should be noted that the two sections implemented the following semester (Spring 2013) showed similar results both in terms of point average grade and positive comments in the exit survey, indicating the changes made to the course had produced notable outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was to detail the redesign process and the integration of cooperative pedagogy in a SHB course. The diverse group of SHB learners needed an approach that was flexible, dynamic and attentive to their distinct skill levels and Spanish backgrounds. Placing these learners into an adequate course and providing such an approach became an important task that prioritized learning needs beyond clerical considerations. Loughrin-Sacco (1990) warns of the far-reaching consequences of “misplacing” language learners: “Students’ experiences at the elementary level often influence their decision to pursue or terminate further foreign language study” (p. 90). Gascoigne Lally’s (2001) frank statement regarding the impact of misplacement in students’ performance echoes this statement and emphasizes the relevance of placement in language courses at the Higher Education level: “The poorly placed student, for instance, often finds him or herself in a classroom where she or he is overwhelmed or under-challenged. In either case, the misplaced student generally loses interest in the subject and eventually abandons language study” (p. 18). This is particularly true for the SHB learners, and their interest and commitment to the language can rapidly be extinguished when entering an unfitting Spanish course.

More research targeting linguistic, cultural and socio-affective aspects of these particular learners is clearly needed. Few studies have focused on this particular group of learners, and consideration of different pedagogical approaches needs to be investigated to conform to specific instructional models for diverse learners who are progressing towards the intermediate level. Furthermore, longitudinal studies comparing progression to advanced levels considering true and high beginners as well as long term development of the second language would certainly impact placement, course design, assessment and instruction in contexts of high diversity, including traditional, international, immigrant and heritage students.

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Appendix A

SPANISH PROGRAM - STUDENT SURVEY

1. Please type 'YES' to indicate that you understand the following statement: _____

If a roster audit, at any point during the semester, reveals that the information provided by you in this survey is incorrect or misleading, you will automatically be dropped from this Spanish course, and will not receive credit and/or reimbursement.

2. Your full name:

3. Your university ID:

4. Your contact phone number:

5. Your university email:

6. Your Major(s) is:

7. Please select your university level:

1. Freshman 2. Sophomore 3. Junior 4. Senior 5. Other

8. Have you taken Spanish classes before? Please list the courses you have successfully taken:

9. If you have taken Spanish classes before, please indicate semester and year of your last course:

10. If you have lived and/or studied in a Spanish-speaking country, list the places where you lived/studied. If you have not, please enter 'NA':

11. What language/s do you speak at home?

12. What language/s do you speak with your parents?

13. What language/s do you speak with your grandparents?

14. What do you expect from this class?

15. What are your favorite activities in a language class?

16. What Spanish areas are more relevant to you? (Select all that apply):

1. Speaking 2. Listening 3. Reading 4. Writing 5. Culture

17. I acknowledge that I meet all the prerequisites for this Spanish class by the following (please circle):

a. Placement exam (bring results to your instructor the first day of class).

b. Completion of required courses of Spanish ('C' or better grade).

c. Valid transfer credits (bring a copy of your records to your instructor the first day of class).

Appendix B

SPA1505 - EXIT SURVEY

Please take some minutes to answer the following questions. This survey is a great help to improve the class.

1. Did the class meet your expectations? Please explain your answer.
2. What activities were the most interesting for learning Spanish?
3. Were there some topics you would have liked to see in the class?
4. In your opinion, this class needs more...
5. Did the book and materials facilitate the class objectives?
6. Did you instructor promote learning Spanish? Please explain your answer.
7. Would you recommend this class? Please explain your answer.

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