



Using Student Choice in Foreign Language Teaching to Make Connections to Other Disciplines

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Abstract

Five standards have been established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages to guide instruction in U.S. schools: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (“the 5 Cs”). Perhaps the most difficult of these standards to implement is Connections: Standard 3.1 - *Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language*. This article describes the implementation of this standard in a high school Spanish class through the use of print and non-print media, student choice, differentiated instruction, and videotaped student presentations. Students completed a questionnaire to identify their preferred school subjects and interests. Then, the teacher grouped students with similar interests and challenged them to devise a project that would increase their knowledge of the topic from the perspective of Spanish-speaking cultures and through the use of Spanish to acquire new information. Students gathered information from Spanish and Latin American websites and from local Spanish language print and non-print media. Presentations included videos, simulated interviews with well-known political, entertainment, and sports figures from the Spanish-speaking world, simulations, PowerPoint presentations, music, and book and live theater reviews. Established rubrics were used to evaluate students’ projects. Students reported increased motivation to continue studying Spanish.

1 Introduction

The presence or absence of student motivation is a crucial factor in developing proficiency in a foreign language. Intrinsically motivated students find internal satisfaction in learning how to communicate in the target language, while those who are extrinsically motivated (or unmotivated) plod through their language classes as a means to satisfy an academic requirement (see Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Motivated students are more likely to develop a sense of self-determination and seek ways to develop their language proficiency through their own efforts, rather than relying on a teacher or curriculum (Ushioda, 2008). An important challenge for foreign language teachers, therefore, is to find ways to increase students’ internal motivation.

This paper describes how a teacher of Spanish in the United States found a way to not only develop her students’ self-motivation, but also to meet an important goal for foreign language education. Through her efforts, two third year high school Spanish classes experienced autonomy by directing their language learning efforts towards their own interests and goals.

2 Background

Foreign language instruction in primary and secondary schools in the United States is based on five goals established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). These goals are: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, commonly referred to as “the 5 Cs” (ACTFL, 2006). One of the most challenging of these goals for teachers to implement is Connections: *Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information* (ACTFL, 2006, p. 3). This goal has two Standards:

Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures. (ACTFL, 2006, p. 3).

The Connections standards call upon students to use their knowledge of other school subjects as they engage in interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication in the target language. In addition, students expand their prior knowledge of other disciplines by accessing new information through the target language. This ability to use and further develop discipline-specific knowledge has in the past been considered possible only for advanced level language learners. Asking teachers to accomplish this goal with school-aged students with limited proficiency in the target language is an admirable but difficult undertaking! However, by incorporating students’ interests into projects that address the Connections standards, teachers are more likely to motivate students to make extra efforts to accomplish the task.

The ACTFL Connections goal bears similarities with content-based instruction (also known as Content and Language Integrated Learning, or CLIL) in English as a Second Language (ESL) education. The goals, however, are different in that content-based instruction for ESL is designed to help students make a successful transition to the all-English curriculum, whereas the foreign language goal of Connections is intended to help students “use their developing language skills to go beyond the requirements for class work and pursue topics further for personal interest, unrelated to the limits of academic life” (ACTFL, 2006, p. 53–54). It may be that such differing goals elicit different types of motivation: the ESL model may motivate students by holding out the carrot of academic success in the target language, while the FL model may motivate students by providing access to the development of their personal interests.

Since students can be expected to have a variety of interests, how can the teacher implement the Connections standard through content-based lessons that are equally motivating for all students? One way is to differentiate instruction so that students can explore their own content interests either individually or with a small group of classmates with similar interests. Differentiated instruction is based on four major principles: student choice, connections to students’ prior knowledge, teaching students how to learn, and providing for multiple learning modes (Blaz, 2006). In this project, students were given a choice about how they would use the target language to meet the Connections standard based on their own background knowledge and interests. Multiple learning modes were addressed by allowing students to choose whether to present their reports in a speaking, interactive, or writing mode. However, the principle of learning strategy instruction was not addressed explicitly. Providing guidance on learning strategies to help students find, organize, and present information could have enhanced their performance in their individual projects (see Chamot, 2009).

By providing students with choice in a topic of language study, teachers are fostering both intrinsic or self-motivation and an independent approach to learning. As Ushioda (2008) indicates:

A fundamental pedagogical principle in promoting learner-regulated motivation rather than teacher-regulated motivation is that learning needs to be driven by learners’ own personal needs, goals, and interests. This entails involving learners in making informed choices and decisions about their learning and in setting their own goals and learning targets, and thus fostering feelings of personal responsibility (Ushioda, 2008, p. 27).

3 The project

The second author, a master's student in foreign language education at The George Washington University, was at the same time teaching Spanish at a private school in the Washington, DC area. She found that many of her students were displaying signs of low motivation: bored attitude in class, failure to complete assignments, and complaints about the uselessness of continuing to study Spanish, perceiving it to be completely irrelevant to their future career plans.

Desiring to remedy these negative student attitudes, the second author brought this situation to the attention of one of her professors in a graduate class (the first author). Together they devised a plan to implement a project that would use print and non-print media, student choice, differentiated instruction, videotaped student presentations, and a performance-based evaluation rubric. The goals of the project were to increase students' self-motivation and to address the ACTFL goal of Connections, as described above.

4 Procedures

Participants in the project were 26 high school students in two parallel Spanish III classes. The students were aged 15 through 17 and all were native speakers of English. The project took place during the spring semester. At this point in the Spanish sequence, students had studied major grammatical structures of the language and had developed a basic vocabulary sufficient for talking about everyday topics. However, they were still making a number of errors, especially in their oral production. In terms of ACTFL proficiency level, most students were at about the Intermediate High level¹.

A Student Interest questionnaire developed by the first author was translated into Spanish by the second author (see Appendix 1 for the English version). The questionnaire included all school subjects and activities with the exception of foreign languages. Students completed the questionnaire to identify their preferred school subjects and interests, thus activating their prior knowledge about specific subject areas. They identified the three topics of greatest personal interest and then conducted Google searches to identify websites in Spanish about each of the three topics. The URLs of the websites were submitted to the teacher for her review and approval.

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Next, the teacher grouped students with similar interests and challenged them to devise a project that would increase their knowledge of the topic from the perspective of Spanish-speaking cultures and through the use of Spanish to acquire new information. Students then developed individual or group proposals consisting of one to two paragraphs in Spanish that included the following information: reason for and value of their proposed project; challenges or problems they expected to encounter; and how their project would be presented to the class. The teacher reviewed and commented on each proposal, suggested additions or changes, and met with students to further explore their ideas. Students revised their proposals after receiving feedback from the teacher and then began working on their projects. In this way, students set their own goals and the teacher helped them make these goals specific and achievable (Curtin, 2009).

Students gathered information from Spanish and Latin American websites and from local Spanish language print and non-print media. Presentations and written reports included videos, simulated interviews with well-known political, entertainment, and sports figures from the Spanish-speaking world, simulations, PowerPoint presentations, music, and book and live theater reviews.

In the meantime, the teacher sent a letter home to parents describing students' proposed projects and explaining what new knowledge and skills students would gain from working on them. The teacher also requested written parental permission to videotape student presentations, assuring parents that the videotapes would only be used in teacher education university classes or for conference presentations (see Appendix 2). All parents agreed and signed the permission form.

Students worked on their projects at home and during designated portions of their Spanish class for two weeks. The teacher monitored their progress and provided suggestions as needed. In addition, the teacher provided students with copies of the school district's analytical rubrics for: Presentational Tasks (Speaking); Presentational Tasks (Writing); and Interactive Tasks (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2004). Copies of these rubrics appear in Appendices 3, 4, and 5. The teacher reviewed the relevant rubric with students so that they would fully understand the criteria on which their presentations would be evaluated. The rubrics describe four performance levels on five to six different measures, as indicated in Table 1.

Type of Measure	Presentational tasks (Speaking)	Interactive tasks	Presentational tasks (writing)
Task completion	X		X
Content of Message		X	
Comprehensibility	X	X	X
Quality of Interaction		X	
Level of Discourse	X		X
Fluency	X	X	
Vocabulary	X	X	X
Language Control	X	X	X

Table 1: Evaluation Measures on Rubrics

5 Results

Students who had opted for oral presentations or role plays presented their projects to the class in Spanish and were videotaped by the teacher, who then completed the rubric for Presentational Tasks (Speaking) or Interactive Tasks for each presentation. Students choosing written projects handed them in on the same day and these were evaluated by the teacher using the rubric for Presentational Tasks (Writing). The results of the teacher's evaluation of students' performance or product are shown in Table 2.

No. of students in group	Presentational tasks (speaking): Average score = 93.2%	Interactive tasks: Average score = 86.8%	Presentational tasks (writing): Average score = 89.6%
1	95%		
1	91%		
1	100%		
1	82%		
1	98%		
2		92%	
2		93%	
2		87%	
3		86%	
2		90%	
4		80%	
1			78%
1			88%
1			92%
1			100%
2			90%

Table 2: Student scores on project

Scores ranged from a low of 78% (1 student) to a high of 100% (2 students). Projects involving presentational speaking received somewhat higher scores than interactive or presentational writing projects, but the differences are relatively small. In general, all students earned satisfactory ratings on their projects. Brief descriptions of the projects are provided below under each category.

Presentation tasks (Speaking)

- A student who had a strong interest in mathematics and engineering took the part of a robotics engineer presenting his new invention, a fire-fighting robot. The presentation was illustrated with a colorful PowerPoint display.
- A student took on the role of an activist for the protection of several South American animals in danger of extinction. She showed slides of the animals and argued persuasively for their protection.
- A student used Spanish language websites to investigate the history of the development of computers, then played the role of a professor lecturing to his class on this subject.
- A student developed a multimedia presentation on the life and career of the Cuban-American salsa singer, Celia Cruz, that included a biography, a video of the singer during a performance, and a translation of one of her most famous songs.
- A student took on the role of the Colombian pop singer Juanes. He dressed like the singer, adopted the singer's mannerisms in his explanation of his music, and finally imitated Juanes by singing one of his songs and accompanying himself on the guitar.

Interactive tasks

- Two students took on the roles of Evo Morales, President of Bolivia, and a diplomat from a country opposing the production of coca in Bolivia. The debate concerned the historical and cultural importance of coca and its uses by Bolivians versus the use of coca in the manufacture and eventual export of cocaine.
- Four students presented a simulated TV show based on the ESPN program *Around the Horn* in which a moderator questioned three Hispanic sports figures about their teams' wins and losses.
- Two students simulated interviews with two Dominican baseball players and discussed their similarities and differences.

- Three students went to a local professional football (soccer) game, then investigated outstanding Spanish-speaking players. They created a poster about the three players to illustrate their discussion.
- Two students presented an illustrated talk on yellow fever and the contributions of Dr. Carlos J. Finlay in discovering the source of and cure for the disease. They also composed and sang a funny song about protecting oneself against yellow fever.
- Two students videotaped a simulated interview with the Colombian pop singer Shakira.

Presentational tasks (Writing)

- A student used Spanish language websites in the United States to investigate the efforts of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to obtain the support of Hispanic and Latino voters in the 2008 election. She then wrote a report comparing the appeal of each candidate to Spanish-speaking voters.
- A student attended a play in Spanish (*En busca de la sonrisa perdida*) at the Gala Hispanic Theater in Washington, DC, and then wrote a critical review of the play.
- A student wrote an essay comparing and contrasting two football (soccer) teams, one from Spain and the other from the United Kingdom.
- A student researched the life and work of the Mexican-American writer, Sandra Cisneros. She then wrote and illustrated a review of *The House on Mango Street*.
- A student researched the life and achievements of the Argentine Nobel Prize winner César Milstein and wrote an illustrated report about his scientific discoveries and contributions to molecular biology.

The variety in students' choice of topics reveals profound differences in their interests and in the areas in which they wanted to extend their knowledge. By providing an opportunity for student choice, the teacher was able to successfully integrate the ACTFL goal of *Making Connections* into her curriculum. In addition, by differentiating instruction to meet students' interests, she provided them with the opportunity to develop a sense of self-determination and intrinsic motivation (Unrau, 2008; Ushioda, 2008).

6 Suggestions for future research

The project described has documented a successful classroom intervention that allowed students to choose a topic to explore in the target language. This approach allowed these students a great deal of flexibility and choice, though the teacher maintained points requiring her approval, thus ensuring that students' projects adhered to the criteria established in the rubrics used to evaluate their work. The teacher reported that several students who had previously indicated that they would not enroll in the next level Spanish class changed their minds after the project and expressed the intention to continue their study of Spanish because they now saw how developing a higher level of Spanish proficiency could be useful in their future lives. Though no formal evaluation of changes in student motivation was carried out, these anecdotal reports are encouraging.

However, replicating this project within a research perspective could provide insights into a practical approach to differentiated instruction in the foreign language classroom and its effects on student motivation. For example, classroom-based research could investigate questions such as these:

- What changes in student motivation can be attributed to student choice of project versus teacher-assigned project?
- What are the differences in student performance on projects conducted individually and those undertaken by groups?
- Do more students in foreign language classes that differentiate instruction continue to higher levels of language study than students in classes that do not differentiate instruction?
- Do Presentation (Speaking) Tasks elicit a higher level of target language proficiency than

Interactive Tasks or Presentation (Writing) Tasks?

- Would similar results be found with a language other than Spanish? With a Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL) such as Arabic or Chinese?
- What learning strategies do students use while working on and presenting a self-chosen topic?
- Would explicit learning strategies instruction related to the tasks selected by students improve their performance on the assessment measures used?

Answers to these and other questions related to differentiated instruction in the foreign language classroom could provide much-needed information about effective instruction for students' individual approaches to learning and motivation.

Notes

¹ The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines – Speaking describe language learners' speaking proficiency at levels ranging from Novice Low (“...no real functional ability and, because of their pronunciation, they may be unintelligible.”) (ACTFL, 1999) to Superior (“...able to communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversation on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives.”) (ACTFL, 1999). The Intermediate High level is described as follows: “Intermediate-High speakers are able to converse with ease and confidence when dealing with most routine tasks and social situations of the Intermediate level. They are able to handle successfully many uncomplicated tasks and social situations requiring an exchange of basic information related to work, school, recreation, particular interests and areas of competence [emphasis added], though hesitation and errors may be evident.” (ACTFL, 1999)

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Student interest survey

Dear Student: An important goal in studying a foreign language is to learn how to use that language to explore your own personal interests, including the content subjects that you find most interesting and relevant to your future studies. Please complete this survey so that we can develop some connections to your other classes and areas of interest.

Name _____ Date _____

1. Rank the following subjects in order of your preference. For example, write a 1 next to your favorite subject, a 2 next to your second favorite, and so on.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art | <input type="checkbox"/> English - Composition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> U. S. History | <input type="checkbox"/> English – American Literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> World History | <input type="checkbox"/> English – British Literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Geography | <input type="checkbox"/> English – World Literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government/Civics | <input type="checkbox"/> Technology/Computer Science |
| <input type="checkbox"/> General Mathematics | <input type="checkbox"/> Music (specify _____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Algebra | <input type="checkbox"/> Sports (specify _____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Geometry | <input type="checkbox"/> Economics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Calculus | <input type="checkbox"/> Psychology |
| <input type="checkbox"/> General Science | <input type="checkbox"/> Vocational (specify _____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Biology | <input type="checkbox"/> Health |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify _____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physics | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Earth & Space Science | |

2. Select your top three choices and identify a topic in each that you are particularly interested in:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

3. Conduct a Google search for each topic linked to [Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Spanish) and find a website that provides information about your topic in the target language. Write the URLs below:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Thank you for this information! You will have an opportunity to explore the connections between topics that interest you and the language you are studying.

Appendix 2: Español III Profesora Genovese

Dear Parents,

As one of the Spanish III class's final assessments, I have asked the students to do a creative research project in Spanish related to their individual areas of interest. This project is in line with the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language's third standard:

Connections

- Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.
- Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

Some students have chosen to present their project in written form; others have decided to do an oral presentation. I would like to film the presentations to keep as a record. They will not be posted on the internet or used for commercial purposes. Presentations of high quality may be presented at an educational conference or in the context of a graduate school class.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Bruna Genovese
Upper School Spanish Teacher
XXXX School

I _____ give permission for the presentation of my printed name of parent/guardian son/daughter _____ to be filmed during the week of May 12, 2008. I acknowledge that the footage may be used at an educational conference or in the context of a graduate school class.

date

signature

Appendix 3: Level 3 Presentational Tasks (Speaking) Analytic Rubric

Task Completion

- Superior completion of the task; content-rich; ideas developed with elaboration and detail.
- Completion of the task; content appropriate; ideas adequately developed with some elaboration and detail.
- Partial completion of the task; content somewhat adequate and mostly appropriate; basic ideas expressed but with very little elaboration or detail.
- Minimal completion of the task; content frequently undeveloped and/or somewhat repetitive.

Comprehensibility

- Content readily comprehensible, requiring no interpretation; pronunciation enhances communication.
- Content comprehensible, requiring minimal interpretation; pronunciation does not interfere with communication.
- Content mostly comprehensible, requiring interpretation; pronunciation may occasionally interfere with communication.
- Content barely comprehensible, requiring frequent interpretation; pronunciation may frequently interfere with communication.

Level of Discourse

- Variety of complete sentences and of cohesive devices.
- Emerging variety of complete sentences; some cohesive devices.
- Use of complete sentences, some repetitive; few cohesive devices.
- Predominant use of complete yet repetitive sentences; no or almost no cohesive devices.

Fluency

- A. Speech sustained throughout with few pauses or stumbling.
- B. Speech sustained most of the time; some hesitation but manages to continue and complete thoughts.
- C. Speech choppy and/or slow with frequent pauses; few or no incomplete thoughts; some sustained speech.
- D. Speech halting and uneven with long pauses or incomplete thoughts; little sustained speech.

Vocabulary

- A. Rich use of vocabulary with some idiomatic expressions.
- B. Adequate and accurate use of vocabulary for this level.
- C. Somewhat inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary and too basic for this level.
- D. Inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary.

Language Control

- A. Control of basic language structures with occasional use of advanced language structures.
- B. Control of basic language structures.
- C. Emerging control of basic language structures.
- D. Emerging use of basic language structures.

Adapted from: 2004 Foreign Language Program of Studies, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA.

Appendix 4: Level 3 Presentational Tasks (Writing)**Analytic Rubric****Task Completion**

- A. Superior completion of the task; ideas well developed and well organized.
- B. Completion of the task; ideas adequately developed.
- C. Partial completion of the task; ideas somewhat developed.
- D. Minimal completion of the task and/or content undeveloped.

Comprehensibility

- A. Text readily comprehensible, requiring no interpretation on the part of the reader.
- B. Text comprehensible, requiring minimal interpretation on the part of the reader.
- C. Text mostly comprehensible, requiring interpretation on the part of the reader.
- D. Text barely comprehensible.

Level of Discourse

- A. Paragraph-length discourse; variety of cohesive devices.
- B. Emerging paragraph-length discourse; variety of cohesive devices.
- C. Variety of discrete sentences; some cohesive devices.
- D. Lists of discrete sentences, some repetitive; few cohesive devices.

Vocabulary

- A. Rich use of vocabulary with some idiomatic expressions.
- B. Adequate and accurate use of vocabulary for this level.
- C. Somewhat inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary and too basic for this level.
- D. Inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary.

Language Control

- A. Control of basic language structures with occasional use of advanced structures.
- B. Control of basic language structures.
- C. Emerging control of basic language structures.
- D. Emerging use of basic language structures.

Adapted from: 2004 Foreign Language Program of Studies, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA.

Appendix 5: Level 3 Interactive Tasks**Analytic Rubric****Content of Message**

- A. Content rich; ideas developed with elaboration and detail.
- B. Content adequate and appropriate; ideas developed with some elaboration and detail.
- C. Content somewhat adequate and mostly appropriate; ideas expressed with very little elaboration or detail.
- D. Content minimal and/or frequently inappropriate; ideas repetitive and/or irrelevant.

Comprehensibility of Message

- A. Message readily comprehensible, requiring no interpretation; pronunciation enhances communication.
- B. Message comprehensible, requiring minimal interpretation; pronunciation does not interfere with communication.
- C. Message mostly comprehensible, requiring interpretation; pronunciation may occasionally interfere with communication.
- D. Message barely comprehensible, requiring frequent interpretation; pronunciation may frequently interfere with communication.

Quality of Interaction

- A. Consistent engagement in the interaction; ability to sustain and advance the conversation.
- B. Consistent engagement in the interaction; ability to sustain the conversation.
- C. Some engagement in the interaction; some ability to sustain the conversation.
- D. Minimal engagement in the interaction; little ability to sustain the conversation.

Fluency

- A. Speech shows few pauses or false starts.
- B. Speech shows some hesitation but speaker manages to continue and complete thoughts.
- C. Speech choppy and/or slow with frequent pauses; few or no incomplete thoughts.
- D. Speech halting and uneven with long pauses or incomplete thoughts.

Vocabulary

- A. Rich use of vocabulary and appropriate use of idiomatic expressions.
- B. Adequate and accurate use of vocabulary for this level.
- C. Somewhat inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary and too basic for this level.
- D. Inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary.

Language Control

- A. Control of basic language structures with occasional use of advanced structures.
- B. Control of basic language structures.
- C. Emerging control of basic language structures.
- D. Emerging use of basic language structures.

Adapted from: 2004 Foreign Language Program of Studies, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, VA.