

Spanish After Service-Learning: A Comparative Study

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Service-learning has become my answer to an intermediate Spanish student population that is generally motivated to improve—they have, after all, chosen to continue studying Spanish after completing the four-semester basic language sequence—but that tends to view language use as a question of “getting the answer right” in a classroom rather than as a way of interacting with other people here in a small Midwest college town and in their home communities. In my Spanish Conversation course, many of these students are initially limited by two related issues: anxiety about speaking Spanish, and limited experience using Spanish outside of class. Service-learning provides structured opportunities to bridge classroom and real-world language use, allowing these students to combat anxiety with experience, and apply textbook information along with other resources in the process of achieving specific goals alongside a community partner.

Through constant oral and written reflections over the course of each semester, I witnessed the majority of my students gaining confidence, linguistic and cultural proficiency, and awareness of the ways they could use Spanish in their everyday lives and wide variety of future careers—right in line with the findings of a growing number of descriptive articles and case studies.¹ Although longitudinal research has indicated that service-learning fosters academic achievement, self-efficacy, civic engagement, social skills, and identity development (Astin et al 2000, Jones and Abes 2004, Kiely 2004), existing scholarship has not, to my knowledge, investigated long-term effects of service-learning experiences specifically on language learners.

ABSTRACT

To begin to assess the impact of service-learning participation on subsequent use of Spanish, this study compares survey responses of students who completed conventional and service-learning sections of the same intermediate university Spanish conversation course. Their responses suggest that the students who experienced service-learning generally describe themselves as more confident language users who continue their studies and use Spanish in their everyday lives at higher rates. In contrast, students who had completed the conventional sections tended to focus more on information learned and a greater percentage of them reported going on to study abroad.

The present study takes a step toward filling this gap by quantitatively comparing survey responses of my former service-learning conversation students with those of students who took the same course without a service-learning component. In comparison to those who had completed the conventional sections of the course, students who had completed the service-learning sections were—perhaps counterintuitively—less likely to report participation in study abroad, but as might be expected, more likely to report using Spanish within their everyday lives and by continuing their Spanish coursework. The service-learning group was much more likely than the conventional group to identify improved confidence as a factor in their language use after completing the course.

Service Component

Due to limitations in community opportunities as well as the need to align with the conventional sections of the course, the required total number of community service hours for the semester was set at a modest 9. This number was achievable with an average of one hour per week in the community, allowing time to organize the projects at the beginning of the semester, a week off for a holiday break, and time at the end of the semester to prepare for finals. At the beginning of the semester, students were given a list of possible projects and were invited to submit proposals for additional projects featuring oral communication at least 50% in Spanish. In their first meeting, students and their community contacts worked together to complete an activity identifying goals and methods for their projects. Each week students completed a guided reflection, alternating between individual and group, written and oral formats. In addition, I maintained communication with the community partners in order to incorporate their feedback.

The local Spanish-speaking community is small; according to U.S. Census Bureau 2006-2010 American Community Survey, 1,294 +/- 302 residents spoke Spanish at home (2.7% +/- 0.6% of the total population). In order to place 12 to 30 students each semester in service-learning collaborations with native or heritage speakers of Spanish, an eclectic approach was essential; projects involving the local community were combined with a conversation partnership via Skype that developed an international micro-community based on a common desire to improve conversational and cultural proficiency.

In the local community, several continuous partnerships were established. Each semester, a few students served as mentors and ESL tutors for native Spanish speakers enrolled at the local high school. A few participated in a mentorship and conversation group with socioeconomically disadvantaged bilingual young adults pursuing alternative vocational education. One or two students completed additional domestic violence and sexual assault awareness training in order to serve as informal interpreters or collaborate with me on translations for the local Crisis Center. Most recently, we began placing a small number of students at the local bilingual preschool, where they designed and led activities related to their majors (art, biology) and assisted in regular programs. Student-initiated projects have included mentorship through Big Brothers/Big Sisters, teaching salsa dance lessons in the community, assisting with English classes at a local church, and developing materials to facilitate communication between the university equestrian team and the Spanish-speaking workers who cared for their horses. To complement these local opportunities, each semester several students were paired with conversation partners who were students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and wanted to pursue conversational English practice. The conversation partners met via Skype, often in the evenings or on weekends, and participated in extensive

discussions of everything from idiomatic expressions to international politics to recent films. An additional advantage to including this option was that it accommodated the needs of students whose other responsibilities outside of class would not allow them to participate during regular working hours. The need to think more flexibly about community became an opportunity for all course participants to explore the concept together throughout the semester.

Survey Design and Results

The survey was designed under IRB supervision and administered online in April 2011 to all students who had taken Advanced Spanish Conversation at Kansas State University from Fall 2007 to Fall 2010.² Without their knowledge, survey participants were divided into two groups. Group A had completed a service-learning section of the course taught by me; Group B had completed a conventional section of the course, taught by one of several other faculty members. The service-learning and conventional sections of the course were not differentiated by a special title in the schedule or catalog, but my sections were always the only service-learning sections offered. 59 out of 109 students in Group A (54%) and 72 out of 178 in Group B (40%) completed the survey. The online survey was set not to allow respondents to go back and change previously entered answers. All respondents described themselves as native speakers of English, with the exception of one native French speaker in Group A. The demographic makeup of the two groups was remarkably similar (see Appendices for complete survey and summaries of quantitative data). The first survey question after the collection of demographic data asked respondents to select all applicable descriptors of their usage of Spanish before taking Advanced Spanish Conversation. The two groups' prior experiences were also very comparable, with Group A reporting having used Spanish with family and friends or conversation partners at slightly higher rates and in community volunteer work at a slightly lower rate when compared to Group B.

Respondents were next asked to select the three most important things they took away from the class. In Group A, the most frequently selected responses were improved proficiency (78%), improved self-confidence in speaking (69%), and expanded vocabulary (66%). The most frequently selected responses in Group B were expanded vocabulary (84%), improved proficiency (65%), and improved self-confidence in speaking (52%). Thus, the two groups identified the same three results in greatest numbers, but Group A identified gains in skills at higher rates, whereas Group B valued its improvement in learning information at a higher rate. Continuing this pattern, 32% in Group A versus 1% in Group B selected "becoming involved in volunteer work or service-learning for the first time," while 19% in Group A versus 31% in Group B selected "learned about Spanish-speaking cultures."

The next survey question asked respondents to select all applicable descriptors of their usage of Spanish since finishing the conversation course. In this question, the percentages of respondents who reported having used Spanish in volunteer work and in their jobs were nearly identical in the two groups. However, because Group A had reported using Spanish as volunteers at a lower rate prior to taking the course, to reach the final number Group A saw a 150% increase in using Spanish as volunteers, while Group B increased by 50%. Both groups reported having used Spanish with family and friends/conversation partners at slightly higher rates after taking the conversation course, with slightly higher percent increases and higher final numbers in Group A. Strikingly, Group B had a substantially lower percentage go on to take more Spanish courses (76% compared to 90% in Group A) but significantly higher percentages go on to travel or study abroad. Overall, 88% of respondents in Group A and 72% of Group B

reported having used Spanish in their home communities (selecting one or more of the following options: with family, with friends/conversation partners, as a community volunteer, in my job); 47% of Group A and 60% of Group B reported having used Spanish abroad (selecting one or more of the following options: short-term travel, summer study abroad, semester study abroad, year study abroad). These numbers seem to suggest a positive association between service-learning and student retention³ and a tendency among service-learning participants to view Spanish as a skill that is a part of their everyday lives. On the other hand, study respondents who had not taken part in service-learning appear to have been more likely to see Spanish as information to be learned in class and to be used abroad. Responses to the open-ended final question illuminate these differences.

The final question asked if the respondents' experiences in Advanced Spanish Conversation had an important effect on their ability and/or motivation to take part in the activities selected in the previous question. They were asked to explain. In Group A, 83% clearly stated Yes and 17% clearly stated No. In Group B, 67.4% clearly answered Yes, 15.2% clearly answered No, and 17.4% of the answers were ambivalent, doubtful, or did not directly address the question. Thus, Group A seems to have a stronger and more positive conviction about the relationship between the course and their subsequent language use. In both groups' explanations of the relationship between the course and their subsequent language use, by far the most commonly identified factor was reduced anxiety/increased self-confidence. However, Group A respondents were much more likely to make this observation (50% of Group A versus 28% in Group B). Group A's higher retention rates may reflect this awareness of increased confidence and apparent view of language as a skill that can be developed and applied not just abroad, but at home. Some sample responses from both groups vividly illustrate their differing tendencies:

It is very important for people learning a language to have the opportunity to speak the language as much as possible. This doesn't always happen, even in conversation classes; but being partnered with a native Spanish speaker really helped me feel more comfortable practicing my Spanish. Being more comfortable made me more confident and able to use the language skills that I had learned. (Group A)

It helped make me much more confident with native speakers and in class, and decreased the amount of time I spent searching for words in the middle of a sentence—my speech flows much more smoothly now thanks to all the practice on Skype. I cannot recommend the Skype project enough! It was fantastic and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. In spring 2010, I volunteered as an English teacher for Spanish speakers with little to no English skills. It was difficult because I didn't really know how to teach English, but extremely rewarding to explain what the students needed/wanted to know. I also spent a summer working at Chipotle, and I was one of only two Caucasians on staff who knew Spanish more or less fluently. I was always translating things for the other white people I worked with, and my coworkers (and even some Latino customers!) were much more comfortable talking to me in their native language than they were trying to speak English with the English-only staff. I fit right in there! (Group A)

Yes, I believe that the exposure to new vocabulary (and the ability to pick and choose the vocab that we wanted to learn instead of just memorizing a list) as well as the opportunity to discuss important topics in small groups in Spanish helped me gain more confidence in

my speaking abilities. Also the book (Breaking Out of Beginner's Spanish) was extremely helpful in this class, and I still use it to this day. (Group B)

Yes. Advanced Spanish Conversation really improved my vocabulary and forced me to finally talk in a Spanish course. I still am not completely comfortable with speaking, nor do I feel that I am a fluent speaker, but this course made me more brave in Spanish speaking, less timid. Before I really tried to think out everything before I said it making sure the grammar was exact and all. It really has helped me in just short conversations when I travel to Spanish-speaking countries. (Group B)

All four comments assess their learning in the course positively, but the respondents from Group A refer to skills, practice, and language use at home, while the Group B respondents identify information (vocabulary) learned and language use abroad.

Conclusions

This preliminary comparison suggests that even a small number of service hours, when integrated cohesively throughout a semester, can make a significant difference in Spanish learners' reported self-confidence in speaking, perception of language as a useful skill in their everyday lives, and subsequent enrollment in Spanish courses. The data gathered also suggest that, perhaps because of these gains, students with local service-learning experience may be less likely to choose to study abroad. This finding adds complexity to the existing understanding of factors that contribute to student intent to study abroad, which generally associates language proficiency, desire to learn about other countries, and participation in community and diversity activities with higher levels of intent to study abroad (see Rust et al 2007/2008; Stroud 2010). The discrepancy observed here resembles a conclusion by Salisbury et al 2009, who found in their study of data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education: "While a positive attitude toward literacy and increased diverse interactions had significant positive effects on the intent to study abroad, high school involvement in activities that might provide social capital (one's networks for acquiring knowledge) or cultural capital (experiences and information that broaden one's horizons) had a significant negative, albeit small, effect on intent to study abroad". These researchers thus suggest that "there may be different types of social and cultural capital that benefit different types of equally important educational experiences." (p. 139) Since service-learning participation appears to have made my students focus so much on local uses of their language skills that many of them lost sight of opportunities abroad, it is advisable to incorporate additional structured reflection on the international applications and extensions of these skills throughout such a course.

A limitation of the present study is that in addition to the variable being examined—service-learning participation—the two groups differed in one other significant way: instructor. Future research should be designed to compare sections of the same course taught by the same instructor, with the only difference being the service-learning component. A full-fledged longitudinal study following up with cohorts of students at the same time intervals would be preferable to the "snapshot" approach taken here.

Notes

1. See, for example, Hale 1999; Lear and Abbott 2008; Mullaney 1999; Muñoz-Christian 2010; Plann 2002, and Weldon and Trautmann 2003.
2. My sincere gratitude to my colleague Mary Copple for her essential assistance with the survey design and data interpretation for this study.
3. Service-learning participation seems to have a positive effect on student retention in general, as indicated by studies of first-year college students by Keup 2005 and by Gallini and Moely 2003.

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Appendix A: Survey

Survey Description

Prof. Kanost is studying the paths students take in their use of Spanish after completing Advanced Spanish Conversation at Kansas State University. Your completion of this brief survey is optional, anonymous, and highly appreciated. Please direct any questions or concerns—including inquiries about any future published form of this study—to Dr. Kanost. By completing the survey, you indicate your consent to participate anonymously in this research study, the results of which will be presented and/or published in the future. Thank you in advance for your valuable contribution to this research.

Opening Instructions

We estimate that this survey will take 5 minutes to complete. All answers are anonymous. You may choose not to answer a question or questions if you so desire.

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Before we begin, we need to collect some demographic information.

Question 1: Sex

Question 2: Year of birth

Question 3: Native language(s)

Question 4: Number of years of HIGH SCHOOL Spanish completed

Question 5: Major(s) at Kansas State University

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This survey will ask about ways you used Spanish before, during, and after taking Advanced Spanish Conversation.

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First we would like to know how you used your Spanish BEFORE taking Advanced Spanish Conversation.

Question 6: Before I took Advanced Spanish Conversation (SPAN 420), I had used my Spanish in the following settings (check ALL that apply):

- in other Spanish classes
- with my family
- with friends or conversation partners
- as a community volunteer
- in my job
- in short-term travel to a Spanish-speaking country (such as a vacation or mission trip)
- on a summer study abroad program

- on a semester-long study abroad program
- on a year-long study abroad program
- Other:

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Next we will ask about your experience in Advanced Spanish Conversation.

Question 7 : Thinking back on my experience as a student in Advanced Spanish Conversation, the three most important things I got out of this class were (select three):

- became a more proficient or fluent Spanish-speaker
- became more familiar with reading and film analysis techniques
- became involved in volunteer work or service-learning (aprendizaje-servicio) for the first time
- continued my previous involvement in volunteer work or service-learning (aprendizaje-servicio)
- expanded my vocabulary
- gained self-confidence in speaking
- got to know my classmates
- improved my pronunciation
- learned about Spanish-speaking cultures
- Other:

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Lastly, we would like to know how you have used your Spanish AFTER finishing Advanced Spanish Conversation.

Question 8: After I finished Advanced Spanish Conversation, I have gone on to use my Spanish in the following settings (check all that apply):

- in other Spanish classes
- with my family
- with friends or conversation partners
- as a community volunteer
- in my job
- in short-term travel to a Spanish-speaking country (such as a vacation or mission trip)
- on a summer study abroad program
- on a semester-long study abroad program
- on a year-long study abroad program
- Other:

Question 9: Did your experiences in Advanced Spanish Conversation (SPAN 420) have an important effect on your ability and/or motivation to take part in the above activities? Please explain.

Closing Message

Thank you very much for completing the survey. We hope you found it useful in gaining awareness of your own path as a language learner. The anonymous data collected will be used to help identify effects of participation in service-learning on students' subsequent engagement of Spanish-speaking communities, particularly involvement in study abroad and community service. Future presentation/publication of this study will be an original contribution to knowledge of the effects of service-learning pedagogy on language learners. Please direct any questions to Dr. Kanost.

Appendix B: Demographic Data

	Group A (service-learning)	Group B (conventional)
Number of respondents	59 out of 109	72 out of 178 (3 dropped out after starting)
Sex	14 males (23.73%), 45 females (76.27%)	12 males (16%), 62 females (82.67%), 1 N/R
Year of birth	1986: 4 1987: 13 1988: 13 1989: 16 1990: 9 1991: 4	1982: 2 1985: 2 1986: 8 1987: 10 1988: 19 1989: 20 1990: 10 1991: 3
Years of high school Spanish	0: 2 (3.39%) 1: 0 (0%) 2: 8 (13.56%) 3: 8 (13.56%) 4: 41 (69.49%)	0: 2 (2.67%) 1: 1 (1.33%) 2: 6 (8%) 3: 14 (18.67%) 4: 49 (65.33%) N/R: 3 (4%)
Major(s)	Spanish (including dual majors and Spanish Education): 15 (25%) Other: 44 (75%)	Spanish (including dual majors and Spanish Education): 17 (23%) Other: 57 (77%)

Appendix C: Summary of Responses

Thinking back on my experience as a student in SPAN 420, the three most important things I got out of this class were (select three)

	Group A (service-learning)	Group B (conventional)
became a more proficient or fluent Spanish-speaker	46 (77.97%)	49 (65.33%)
became more familiar with reading and film analysis techniques	10 (16.95%)	17 (22.67%)
became involved in volunteer work or service-learning (aprendizaje-servicio) for the first time	19 (32.2%)	1 (1.33%)
continued my previous involvement in volunteer work or service-learning (aprendizaje-servicio)	9 (15.25%)	0 (0%)
expanded my vocabulary	39 (66.1%)	63 (84%)
gained self-confidence in speaking	41 (69.49%)	39 (52%)
got to know my classmates	21 (35.59%)	19 (25.33%)
improved my pronunciation	29 (49.15%)	34 (45.33%)

learned about Spanish-speaking cultures	11 (18.64%)	23 (30.67%)
Other: _____	2 (3.39%)	6 (8%)
N/R	0	2 (2.67%)

Appendix D: Summary of Responses

Before (After) I took Advanced Spanish Conversation (SPAN 420), I used my Spanish in the following settings (check ALL that apply)

	Group A before	Group A after	Group B before	Group B after
in other Spanish classes	57 (96.61%)	53 (89.83%)	74 (98.67%)	57 (76%)
with my family	10 (16.95%)	13 (22.03%)	10 (13.33%)	11 (14.67%)
with friends or conversation partners	37 (62.71%)	50 (84.75%)	40 (53.33%)	49 (65.33%)
as a community volunteer	4 (6.78%)	10 (16.95%)	8 (10.67%)	12 (16%)
in my job	9 (15.25%)	22 (37.29%)	11 (14.67%)	29 (38.67%)
in short-term travel to a Spanish-speaking country (such as a vacation or mission trip)	23 (38.98%)	18 (30.51%)	29 (38.67%)	28 (37.33%)
on a summer study abroad program	4 (6.78%)	10 (16.95%)	5 (6.67%)	17 (22.67%)
on a semester-long study abroad program	2 (3.39%)	4 (6.78%)	1 (1.33%)	10 (13.33%)

on a year-long study abroad program	1 (1.69%)	1 (1.69%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other:_____	1 (1.69%)	6 (10.17%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.67%)
N/R	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (4%)

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