Teaching about Diversity Fund

Final Report

Project Name: Teaching diversity through foreign language service-learning

Date: May 2014 Submitted by: Mignette M. Garvida and Myriam Martel

Year of Funding: 2013-2014

Project Abstract (max 200 words)
Your abstract of your findings should include enough detail so that rationale, methodology and outcomes are clear. Use plain language as this abstract will be posted on the LTO website.

The purpose for this case-study project is to know to what extent service-learning in a community centre that provide services to Hispanic community in Toronto can provide an immersion context for students of Spanish as foreign/second language. We intended to find out how much service-learning will affect students’ foreign language acquisition and how this activity can contribute to their social awareness, particularly the existence of diversity in the community they live. Volunteers were asked to write in Spanish about their knowledge of Hispanic cultures, a reflection paper (Advanced level) or a diary (for Intermediate language courses), and record a 10-minute conversation with a native Spanish speaker. They also completed a questionnaire to evaluate the service-learning experience. The results show that service-learning benefits our students, both academically and socially. Service-learning has changed their common perception of Hispanic/Latino stereotypes and has raised more awareness of the diverse Hispanic cultures in Toronto. It also has improved their confidence in their ability to communicate in Spanish, written and oral. In conclusion, by creating a partnership between our Spanish language program, our students and the community centre, we have provided our students not only a venue where they can practice the language they are learning but also made them aware of the diversity that exists in our community.

Summary of Work Accomplished (max 1500 words)
Describe the study rationale (including supportive literature), project methodology, outcomes and potential application of outcomes.

Students learn a foreign language for diverse reasons, and their approach to learning and their abilities vary. Foreign language researchers have taken into account the students’ needs giving rise to different methodologies and approaches - communicative approach, task-based methodology, needs-based approach, computer-assisted language learning - all professing to be ‘learner-centred’. Indeed, while all these methodologies and approaches focus on the basic components of foreign language acquisition: listening, reading, writing and speaking, many learners still lack the confidence to speak and/or negotiate meaning due to lack exposure or immersion in the target language. This case study is informed by ideas on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) in which they stressed that every person is a social being and that this condition itself is a crucial characteristic of learning, which in turn is “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (Wenger, 1998: 31 cited in Fraga-Cañadas, 2006: 297). In the context of foreign language acquisition, Thorne (2011) found evidence that “the yoking together of community and communication resonates well within foreign language and L2 education”
(304) given that everyone belongs to a community (schools, neighborhood, clubs, etc.) and communicate with each other to organize themselves, express their aspirations, etc. Consequently, both foreign language students and the community involved will achieve certain level of enculturation (becoming accustomed to the community and its cultures), and acculturation (acquisition of new socio-linguistic practices). We believe that service-learning in a community where the target language is spoken can be effective in the acquisition of Spanish as foreign language.

To assess the effectiveness of service-learning among true foreign language students, we have listed the following questions:

1. Through repeated contacts with native Spanish speakers at the community centre, will participants learn new language features: vocabulary and grammar, and be able to use them correctly?
2. Do they have better understanding of the language they are learning: its similarities and differences with English?
3. Do participants have more confidence in expressing themselves orally or in written form when communicating with native Spanish speakers?
4. How do they negotiate meanings? What strategies do they use to understand native Spanish speakers? Do they resort to translation to English, or do they find words or phrases in the target language that may be synonymous to what is said?
5. Do they have better understanding of Hispanics and their cultures?

**Methodology**

At the beginning of this case-study, five students volunteered to participate. However, since this is on voluntary basis and their participation is not a requirement to pass the course, two decided to withdraw from the study due to the demands of the requirements of their program course works, and one did not complete it due to health issues. One student, from the Advanced Spanish language class, volunteered as tutor for elementary and secondary schoolchildren under the supervision of On Your Mark! Tutoring Program at the Working Women Community Centre. The other volunteer, from Intermediate Spanish language class, attended a full-day workshop organized by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) during the celebration of the Hispanic Canadian Heritage Month Family Celebration at James Cardinal McGuigan Catholic High School.

**Data collection**

Assessment data in this study were gathered through the use of both qualitative and quantitative approach.

1. Pre-test: language proficiency, cultural proficiency This was written in Spanish to assess students' level of language proficiency based on the vocabulary and grammatical structures previously learned in class as well as the use of idiomatic expressions and other vocabulary or grammatical structures not previously learned. We also looked at their general knowledge about Hispanic cultures and communities in Canada.

2. During the volunteer/service-learning: Since the Intermediate and Advanced level students are not learning the same topics in terms of vocabulary, cultural topics and grammatical structures, we have decided to ask the Intermediate level students to write a diary, recounting the events that had transpired during their service-learning. While for the Advanced courses, we asked them to write a reflection paper as at this point they have more vocabulary and wider knowledge of grammatical structures.
As well, they had gained in class more knowledge about Hispanic society such as immigration, democracy, etc. Much of the field embraces the notion that reflection is the key process that holds the service and learning together (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1996; Hatcher et al., 2004; Kiely, 2005 as cited in Swords and Kiely 2010: 151).

In both activities, we again analysed at the use of vocabulary and grammatical structures learned, the idiomatic expressions, and if they have learned any new ones (based on pre-test). As well, we looked for a new and reaffirmed socio-cultural knowledge (based on pre-test).

3. After a minimum of five (5) hours of volunteer work, volunteers were asked to record a 10-minute conversation with a native Spanish speaker. In this activity, we again looked at vocabulary and grammatical structures as well as idiomatic expressions used in the conversation. And most importantly, at how students negotiated meanings with the native speakers: the phrases they used to clarify the meaning of a word or phrase, the ability to find and use synonyms in the target language, etc. And lastly, volunteers were asked to fill out the student exit survey to assess the effectiveness of service-learning among foreign/second language students.

References:


Evaluation of Project’s Success (max 600 words)
Explain how you know that the project was successful (Include evidence of rigorous evaluation.)

We believe that this project has been successful despite the withdrawal of some of our volunteers as we have collected enough data that support our hypotheses: through repeated contacts with native Spanish speakers at the community centre, participants learned new language features, have better understanding of the language, have gained more confidence in expressing themselves, used diverse strategies to negotiate meanings while conversing with native Spanish speakers, and most importantly, have a better understanding of Hispanics and their cultures.

With regards to cultural proficiency at the beginning of this study, students had a general knowledge about Hispanic cultures and communities in Canada: the reasons for migrating to Canada, where they came from and in which major cities in Canada they have settled in. Some mentioned the common perceptions of a Hispanic stereotype: unskilled/trade workers, Casanovas, party animals and frequent recipients of social assistance. One, however, who is a second generation Hispanic but never learned Spanish, and have seen how his parents struggled to adapt and fit in the Canadian society, has a different opinion.

Los hispanos son luchadores y trabajadores en este país… si no fuera por el sueño norte americano que mi familia y muchos latinos han perseguido, yo no tendría las oportunidades que tengo hoy en día como la oportunidad de buena educación y la oportunidad de tener un buen trabajo. (Hispanics are fighters and hard-workers in this country… if it were not for the North American dream which my family and many Latinos have pursued, I would not have the opportunity today to have a good education and the opportunity to obtain a good job.)

At the end of this study, we have noted that there is a better understanding. One student noted in his reflection paper that children, regardless of where they come from, are the same, and one has to be quite perceptive, inventive and judicious when it comes to the completion of task at hand, in this case, review and complete the exercises the child is having trouble with.

With regards to the language proficiency, while everyone still made some grammatical and syntactical errors, everyone consciously corrected themselves, used some fillers such as, ah, ok or um to gain time, or paused a few seconds to reflect on what they wanted to say. In the end, everyone feels more confident when they speak and understand that making mistakes is part of their learning process.

As to their opinion on their experience on service-learning, everyone agrees that it is a good experience, from the opportunity to practice Spanish to learning new aspects of the language, to better understanding of Hispanic culture as well as new life experiences.

Transferables (max 500 words)
List and describe knowledge gained in this project and how that knowledge could benefit faculty members in the Ryerson community.
1. Including service-learning as part of the foreign language curriculum can positively help students to put into practice, oral and in written, what they have learned in class.
   Both volunteers think that the time spent volunteering was worth it because they were able to practice the language, and are made aware of how much they have learned but needed real life situations (not textbook based) to fully appreciate it.

2. They are able to relate the topics (specific thematic vocabulary and grammar) learned in class to realities of the Hispanic community in Toronto, such as immigration and settlement, work and employment, family and their values.
   In their conversations with native Spanish speakers they talked (in Spanish) about their travels to different Spanish-speaking countries, including the United States (At present, United States is the second largest Spanish-speaking country, after Mexico), and discussed what interested them most: where to get the best deals when traveling, their plans after graduation, and the uncertainties in the labor market, especially for them who have limited work experience.

3. Volunteering in a community centre and becoming involved in the activities organized by different Hispanic organizations provide an opportunity for the students to network with professionals that are related to their program of study, such as Social Work and Hospitality and Tourism Management.

4. Students are confident that knowledge Spanish language and Hispanic cultures, and being able to communicate with confidence in this language give them an advantage when applying for a job after obtaining their undergraduate degree.

5. This experience has proven that foreign language students do not necessarily have to attend a study abroad program. Students have been immersed in the Spanish language and Hispanic cultures and at the same time, be of assistance in alleviating some of the concerns of Hispanics, especially in education, in our community.

6. In general, it is beneficial for students to include service-learning in second/foreign language curriculum to not only ameliorate their communicative skills but also to familiarize themselves with the challenges Hispanics face within the Canadian society.

**Media or Publication (max 500 words)**

List any media attention your project has received internally from Ryerson or externally. List any publications or conferences you have attended where data from this project was presented. Confirm that you acknowledged or will acknowledge the grant’s contribution to your work in media, publication or conference presentations.

*Global Education Review* (Longsbridge Publishing) is interested in publishing the study. I am a member of this journal’s editorial and review board. We also plan to publish this study in Spanish in a Spanish journal.

As well, we plan to present this study during the 2015 Annual Conference of North East Modern Languages Association which will take place at Ryerson University, and of Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera (ASELE) or Congreso Internacional Nebrija en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza de Lenguas, Madrid, Spain.
In all publications and conference presentations we are acknowledging the grant’s contribution.

**Financial Summary**

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Total balance remaining (if any): 1126.27