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Screening Proficiency: Spaced Practice and TV Productions in Spanish

This project seeks to strengthen students' higher-level listening proficiency through the screenings of "authentic" materials—namely, selected TV productions in Spanish.[1] These productions, the final selection of which I shall complete during the initial stages of the project, are not considered to be classically academic programs. Nor are they treated in a way that is typical to my handling of the supplemental teaching aids that I currently use in my courses (i.e., documentary clips, short historical videos, short- and feature-length films, and textbook-bound audiovisual programs).[2] Traditional kinds of teaching materials will still be at the heart of my course every week in order to frame our assigned homework, discussions, and in-class participation in SPAN 299. The TV productions will function, however, as an additional cultural and linguistic platform for students' *personalized language acquisition beyond the classroom*. This approach relies on the notion of "spaced practice," just as it encourages students' learning autonomy meaningfully.[3] The same approach is designed to boost the quality of students' in-class performance and proficiency in accordance with the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Performance Guidelines and Descriptors for Language Learners*.[4]

The notion of *personalized language acquisition beyond the classroom* is three-fold. The word "personalized" is essential because it refers to each student's choice regarding pacing her own screening so long as she completes the assigned number of hours per week. While research suggests that teachers should avoid "choice overload,"[5] numerous studies have underscored the importance of fostering choice in order to enhance students' learning in "meaningful"[6] ways and promote overall "motivation."[7] Students can screen several episodes at once or distribute them differently in accordance with their learning preferences. Pedagogical guidance will be offered in order to "scaffold"[8] students' choices and learning preferences. The length of episodes ranges from thirty to fifty minutes, and these productions will principally promote students' honing of their listening skills. Students screen each episode, moreover, in order to acquire and retain

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[1] Pedagogical advocacy for the usage of "authentic" materials as teaching tools has gained more traction during the last twenty years. For more information about past and relatively recent debates about pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials, see J. R. Weyers, "The Effect of Authentic Video on Communicative Competence." *The Modern Language Journal* 83. 3 (1999): 339-349 and R. H. Al Azri and M. H. Al Rashdi, "The Effect of Using Authentic Materials in Teaching." *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research* 3. 10 (2014): 249-254. I broadly rely on Al Azri's and Al Rashdi's discussions of "authentic" materials (251).

[2] See R. Vanderplank, "Déjà vu? A Decade of Research on Language Laboratories, Television, and Video in Language Learning." *Language Learning* 43. 1 (2010): 27.

[3] See H. L. Roediger III and M. A. Pyc, "Inexpensive Techniques to Improve Education: Applying Cognitive Psychology to Enhance Educational Practice." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 1. 4 (2012): 243. According to these scholars, "how information is repeated determines the amount of improvement. If information is repeated back to back (massed or blocked presentation), it is often learned quickly but not very securely (i.e., the knowledge fades fast). If information is repeated in a distributed fashion or spaced over time, it is learned more slowly but it is retained for much longer" (243).

[4] See https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-performance-descriptors-language-learners.

[5] See Flowerday et al., 2004, and Iyengar & Lepper, 2000.

[6] See Deci, et al., 1996; Evans, 2015; Boucher 2015; Flowerday, 2000; and Schraw, 2000.

[7] See Deci et al., 1996 and Grolnick et al., 1991.

[8] See Alex Gilmore, "Authentic Materials and Authenticity in Foreign Language Learning." *Language Learning* 40. 2 (2007): 112.

correct pronunciation, new vocabulary, and cultural awareness.[9] Finally, "beyond the classroom" encourages a continuous listening practice that does not cease whenever our individual class sessions end. This element is particularly important, given the design of my new course in which the class meets twice per week. In an ideal learning environment, my students would be exposed daily to rigorous encounters with the Spanish language beyond the classroom. The inclusion of TV productions in Spanish establishes the potential for such a sustained learning environment.

Pedagogical Choice, Rewards, and Inclusion

TV productions in Spanish, which in general entail several episodes or seasons, are narratively concentrated around a few main characters. The main characters' personal and professional lives, along with other related developments, unfold in multifaceted directions. These TV productions' central narratives operate on the principle of suspense, thus engaging the viewer in intriguing ways. They are pedagogically appealing principally because they target native speakers.[10] Such a linguistic experience can be rewardingly challenging for our students, for it supersedes curated, clinical, and textbook-related audio-visual programs.[11]

Arguably addictive in nature, some TV productions in Spanish demand that the viewer *develop* or *have* a native or near-native aural ability; a layered linguistic palate; and a sophisticated diction. In addition, each series brims with regional expressions, idiomatic phrases, wide-ranging vocabulary, and historical contexts—the combination of which enhances our students' proficiency and further awakens their cultural literacy. If used regularly and with appropriate assignment guidance, TV productions in Spanish can become steady and readily available platforms for the enhancement of students' listening skills beyond their participation in formal academic settings.[12] Such productions, moreover, offer *bursts* of new vocabulary and idioms that exceed those of the assigned texts and discussions throughout the course. Our assessment tools, therefore, will be crucial in determining if—or to what degree—the assigned TV productions succeed in bettering our students' overall language proficiency.

Most foreign language-focused textbooks incorporate video programs that compliment certain cultural segments of the textbook. Aiming at Spanish elementary-level learners at Wellesley College, for instance, *Caminos* has been a multifaceted resource, a well-regarded textbook accompanied by its video program ("Caminos del jaguar"). The program corresponds to the proficiency level its students are encouraged to reach, typically, during two semesters of Elementary Spanish. Intermediate-level Spanish textbooks (i.e., *En contacto*, *Pasajes*, and *Interacciones*) and upper-level conversation-focused courses (i.e., *Español con amigos, Cinema for Spanish Conversation*, and *¡De Película!*) likewise abound with video programs the durations of sometimes range from two minutes to a half-an-hour, thus covering a wide-range of academically curated topics, exercises, and cultural readings. Traditional academic audiovisual programs supplement what students read, write about, and seek to reproduce

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[9] See Weyers, "The Effect of Authentic Video on Communicative Competence," 342-43.
[10] See R. Vanderplank, "Déjà vu?," 30.
[11] Alex Gilmore, "Authentic Materials and Authenticity in Foreign Language Learning," 98.
[12] See Bruner, 1983; Gilmore, 2007; Roediger and Pyc, 2012; and Al Azri, et al., 2014.

linguistically within the boundaries of their language course. Such segments are also created with deeply specific pedagogical objectives in mind. They influence students' language acquisition in subtle and gradual ways.

The present project is not envisioned to replace such video materials. Instead, my project proposes to broaden our students' exposure to linguistically advanced programs in Spanish in flexible yet consistent ways. The TV productions in Spanish under consideration in this proposal hold certain attributes that most textbooks' supplemental materials fail to reach for obvious reasons; textbooks target heritage or non-native speakers/learners of the Spanish language, not native speakers. Although TV productions in Spanish seek to reach global audiences and offer multilingual subtitles, they can be rewarding for boosting our students' language acquisition for several reasons: the pace of their conversations is kept at a natural and native speaker-based level; they do not use only chapter-specific vocabulary to reinforce certain skills; and they are thematically expansive, even unpredictable. Their very nature demands that linguistically curious students keep their listening skills exceptionally alert in order to achieve several learning goals.

The project also reinforces pedagogical inclusion. This term fundamentally refers to incorporating diversely challenging assignments, in-class activities, and exercises—or what scholars of foreign language learning call "language variety"—in order to engage the different degrees of proficiency my students simultaneously exhibit.[13] This approach also calls for creating lesson plans that work with and test different levels of language control, vocabulary, communication strategies, and cultural awareness. With the inclusion of TV productions in Spanish beyond the class period, I seek to carve out additional space for diverse approaches to our learners' modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational), language performance, and proficiency.[14] Students' *autonomy, self-discipline, and personal drive* to enhance their listening skills rest at the heart of this experiment. Each student is encouraged to map out her own screening pace per week and engage with the three modes of communication. This approach welcomes an *inclusive learning platform*, for it encourages students to determine their own trajectory toward the level they seek to achieve beyond our class sessions.

Assessment, Budget, and Learning Goals

There is a multifaceted set of goals to be met prior to and throughout the Spring semester of 2020. These goals are meaningfully interconnected (Figure 1), just as they are appropriately reflected in the final grade (Figure 2). In order to pursue these goals, students will be expected ideally to log 130 hours of Spanish engagement throughout the semester, in addition to our in-class time. This figure includes approximately 10 additional hours per week of active listening to Spanish. Students will engage meaningfully with one or two of the suggested TV series. I will encourage students to

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[13] See Gilmore, "Authentic Materials and Authenticity in Foreign Language Learning," 98. In my teaching experience, most courses beyond SPAN 201-202 draw students with widely varing language range and proficiency at Wellesley College. Such groups' performance and output naturally vary, which can pose certain challenges for instructors. Some of the challenges stem from the instructor's need to reach out simultaneously to students who are under-prepared, over-prepared, and those in-between students, while keeping all learners meaningfully engaged.
[14] https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/ACTFLPerformance-Descriptors.pdf.

suspend subtitles gradually—or use captions as needed—so that students come to rely on their own listening/comprehension skills. The number of assigned hours aims to engender a concrete platform for language acquisition that operates in accordance with the *ACTFL Performance Descriptors*.[15] The concretely assigned percentage for TVPs ought to validate and encourage students to engage autonomously yet in meaningful ways.

> **G 1:** Increase vocabulary in multidimensional contexts (i.e., cultural, historical, and sociopolitical)
> **G 2:** Acquire new idiomatic expressions from regionally complex backgrounds
> **G 3:** Differentiate accurately and rapidly one verbal tense from another (i.e., multiple subjunctive moods, present, preterit, future, conditional, imperfect, pluperfect, etc.)
> **G 4:** Retain verbal tenses' irregularities

Figure 1. Learning Goals: TV Productions in Spanish and Learners' Listening Proficiency

> Exams **30%**
> Homework/Blogs **20%**
> Participation **30%**
> TV Productions (TVPs) **20%**

Figure 2. SPAN 299 Grade Breakdown

My ultimate objective is to assemble a map of assessment tools in order to test this hypothesis in practice and in accordance with the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. Such tests will seek to determine if relatively significant and regular exposure to the spoken Spanish at a native level beyond our class periods substantially enhances students' proficiency. All assessment tools should be in place before the course is taught (Spring 2020) so that different modes of testing (performance vs. proficiency) can be incorporated in the course throughout the semester or upon the student's completion of the course. Two basic questions should initiate this project: (1) How can the *ACTFL* strategies guide our assessment processes? (2) How can we test students' before/after vocabulary/idiomatic expressions scope for both performance and proficiency? I propose to tackle these questions during the preparatory stages of the project, just as I imagine that additional questions might emerge.

In order to assess and analyze the proposed goals, I envision several concrete steps. The goals are clustered around the notion of meaningful retention of screened information, especially vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and certain grammatical elements. As already noted, my pedagogical approach stems from the notion of "spaced practice." In screening the assigned TV productions in Spanish throughout the semester, students will be exposed to language elements over a longer period of time, which might enhance their retention.

Progress towards the **first two goals** can be measured in conjunction by providing students with a short vocabulary test, to be administrated at both the outset and upon completion of the course. The test should be pedagogically relevant to an overall level typically associated with a 200-level language course beyond our SPAN 202 (Intermediate Spanish). Students will listen to three conversations (3-5 minutes each) and complete their test in approximately 20 minutes in class. I plan on preparing the listening part and all tests during the summer of 2019.

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[15] See https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/ACTFLPerformance-Descriptors.pdf.

For **Goal 3**, I will create a test to analyze "input for form" at the outset of the course. Another assessment will follow for "meaning" in May of 2020 (Gilmore, 2007). During my preparatory stages, I will consult relevant research on "authentic" materials and foreign language acquisition. According to Gilmore, teachers must "ensure that we do not overload learners' language processing systems by asking them to analyze input for meaning and form simultaneously" (111). This means that students' varied language preparedness must be taken into consideration as they set their learning goals. It also requires that such goals be as tangible and precise as possible. According to Gilmore, moreover, "we might speculate that authentic materials are often superior because they provide rich input that is more likely to cater to the different stages of development and individual differences that exist within any classroom population" (112). After students complete 130 hours of Spanish outside our regular class sessions, we might be able to determine to what degree such a learning platform of "authentic" materials will have succeeded in enhancing their listening proficiency.

In order to measure the outcomes for **Goal 4**, I will prepare students' pre/post self-assessment materials. During the first week of class, students will be given a set of worksheets on verbal tenses' irregularities to complete. Students will receive an answer key and will self-correct subsequently. It is the students' responsibility to keep their initial results and compare them to their self-assessment results during the last week of the semester. The second self-assessment should ideally reflect the contexts of the TV productions. Students will also receive their answer key. All results will be submitted to the instructor before the course ends. These self-assessment efforts are not to be perceived as punitive or discouraging. They are intended to serve as motivational bookends in the course, for students' personal choice, focus, and self-motivation are expected to be at work as they meet these academic responsibilities. Students' self-assessment results are not shared with the rest of the class. The successful completion of all assigned steps regarding the TV productions, however, will be reflected in the overall grade (TVPs 20%).

I would like to meet with Sarah Pociask and/or Akila Weerapana during the first week of June to discuss some of these assessment ideas in person. I plan on doing significant amount of preparatory work during the summer of 2019. The prepared assessment tools will be used throughout the Spring semester of 2020. I would like to complete my data analysis by June of 2020. Budget: TBD by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Office at Wellesley College.

Consulted Research:

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