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Learning Online: A Safe and Engaging Place

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LEARNING **O**NLINE: **A** **S**AFE AND **E**NGAGING **P**LACE

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Introduction

The field of Spanish as a second language is wide and has grown in New Zealand in the sixteen years I (Raquel) have been a tutor here. What is the role of an effective pedagogy? How are learners' behaviour and their ability to learn online related in the process of learning? How important is a positive emotional involvement to the building up of a learning community? In this essay, I want to share my experience as a teacher of Spanish as a second language who interacts with her students mostly online in the context of New Zealand. I would like to present a case for the effectiveness of online instruction, particularly in that it allows, and in some cases even fosters, emotional engagement and connections. In addressing these questions, this essay focuses on my own experience about the way teaching Spanish language can be delivered effectively remotely, without scarifying emotional connections in the class.

I consider students' feedback critical to understanding and improving methodologies, and so throughout this essay, Hayley (my student this semester) and I will work together to examine our Spanish 101 online tutorials. In order to explore whether teaching Spanish as a second language can be delivered effectively online, we can investigate the pedagogical strategies applied, students' ability to learn the language online, and their emotional involvement in the class. I will reflect on my teaching of Spanish as a second language and the particular methodology that I use, while Hayley will describe how she perceives herself as a student of Spanish over the course, acknowledging/evaluating the most influential factors in her learning experience and so linking achievement goals with her accomplishments.

Seeking perfection: A grammar consideration

Hayley was an active and outstanding student of Span 101 during this semester (Feb-June 2018), and she wrote the following reflections about the course:

> As my 12 week Spanish paper draws to an end, it is timely to reflect on the course. Firstly, I think it is important to point out that as a distance student learning a language, I went into the course thinking I had a huge challenge ahead of me. I was particularly worried about how I would get to improve my speaking and reading skills. Fortunately, the weekly online tutorials led by the tutor, Raquel Direnzo, were a great help in this area. I received individual feedback on my pronunciation, efforts to decode and read a range of texts. I have managed to resolve one or two ongoing pronunciation errors because of the explicit nature of the feedback. I particularly appreciate that it took several examples, comparisons, and repetition in order for me to master the "que" / "qui" sounds. Overall, I am now reading with more fluency and confidence. A bonus is that I feel more knowledgeable about aspects of the Spanish culture due to the reading content.

> Another aspect of the course that I found supportive was the forum for asking questions. I personally used it probably more than any other student and found the tutors explanations clear and helpful. At times extra examples and tasks were given here and this really helped me to reinforce some of the more challenging grammar

1

concepts. I believe I have a very good grasp of a range of beginner grammar concepts, particularly around use of the present tense, present progressive tense, conjugation of verbs, and reflexive verbs.

This methodology considers grammar and pronunciation as two important parts of the content of the subject. Much emphasis is put in the explanation and practise of grammar. Rules are explained in such a way that students not only follow the instructions, but also understand the concepts. I try to put together listening, phonetics, and spelling in the same scenario for the students.

A zero tolerance approach to mistakes during class must be exercised. This means reacting to every mistake that any student makes in class, by reviewing the appropriate rules that would apply in that case, and then making all the students understand the mistake. Efficient formative feedback is provided in order to achieve students' retention and engagement.

Feedback can be more or less explicit, a reproduction of the mistake or to ask for a clarification from the student; it can also be an *uptake*. Correction is not only valuable to the student who it is directed to, but also to the whole class, as a critical learning opportunity.

The effect of technology in students' ability

> If I were to offer suggestions for improvement, I would ask that the tutorials were all posted up at the start of course in order to better facilitate working at my own pace. Another small area for improvement would be linked to Wi-Fi connections; at times valuable online time was interrupted by a poor connection. I am, however, unsure how to solve this issue. Overall, I learnt a great deal and especially appreciate that the course material was presented in a sensible sequence and that there was a great deal of vocabulary repetition.

Technology plays a vital role in this interface, and Hayley points out that bad Wi-Fi connection can result in the disruption of the class. In fact, the students' quality of internet connection, headphones, and speakers is very different and sometimes they have to disconnect and connect again to the tutorial to improve the internet connection quality. Anyway, as Hayley suggests, technology does not seem to be an impediment for her to learn.

> Although, I still have a long road ahead of me as far as speaking goes, I have also improved my confidence here. During the tutorials, the tutor tried to engage us in conversation as much as our beginner level would warrant. Every week, there was generally a section where we were asked questions on an individual level and prompted to reply as best we could. I would now consider myself fairly competent at recognising key questions and can answer them with some accuracy. I liked the prompts, and verbal and written scaffolds available if I was having trouble producing spoken answers. Again, explicit feedback was given and appreciated. I believe the oral assessment interviews were an essential part of the course as they provided summative evidence of my progress. The interviews, conducted by the tutor, were non-threatening, encouraging, and well scaffolded.

Regarding students' ability to learn the language online, in my experience, it is not impaired by the fact that the lecture or the tutorial is delivered remotely rather than in-person. On the contrary, it is possible for students and teachers to connect emotionally and forget about the

special constraints imposed by the technology being used. Stepp-Greany (2002) considers a Local Area Network (LAN) writing project where students felt positive because the LAN represented a low-anxiety situation, a technology-enhanced setting with three common factors of student motivation: communication, empowerment, and learning. This author also considers another study where networked sections showed that the use of technology redistributes teacher and classmates attentions so that less able students can become more active participants in the class, fostering more learner-teacher communication and interaction between learners than in traditional classes. He shows that students in a network writing project demonstrated more fluidity of conversation; use of complex sentences; and self-disclosure, since "the elimination of strong teacher dominance freed students to express themselves, resulting in a larger quantity and better quality of communication." Stepp-Greany (2002) also reports an increased improvement in speaking in online courses and he suggests that an explicit focus on one area can have an effect on the other skills as well.

Building an affective domain

The achievement of positive emotional involvement and expression in the class is a substantial part of my methodology and how I perceive myself as a teacher. I believe that to learn a second language, students need strong motivation, since it is a difficult and demanding process for them, therefore the depth of the students' affective engagement will contribute to the learning process. Gardner (2000) makes a distinction between "orientations," which are related to the goals of the learners, and "motivation," connected to students' effort to learn a language and their persistence on that. Trying to make students feel emotionally involved in every class becomes a challenge and an unavoidable goal for me. This means getting them interested, motivated, and involved, for instance by clearly using gestures, intonation, jokes, acting of situations, mental images, and so on. The teacher's enthusiasm is contagious. Therefore, a common task for second language teachers is to investigate how to deal effectively with attitude, motivation, and integration, to make improvements in class involvement. Berscheid (1987, cited in Imai, 2010, p. 282) argues that "verbal communication with immediate others is probably the principal source of one's emotional experience." Hayley highlights conversation, answering questions, and even the oral assessments, as "engaging, non-threatening, and encouraging," as a way to work out her capability and potential as a student in a collaborative and interactive setting.

Conclusion

Teaching is a rewarding activity for me and redefining goals, aims, and intentions is my challenge at the start of each semester so as to get students' in tune with each cohort and their specific qualities. As a whole, the main goals that define my teaching are: a clear focus on how learners approach and experience Spanish grammar, presenting the online setting as a safe place, and planning and delivering dynamic and engaging tutorials where both teacher and students can interact in a comfortable atmosphere. I hope this essay invites further discussions on this area of teaching and its key elements; a successful class is made up of substantial components working in consort to convey an effective methodology.

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