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### ¿Y Tú Quién Eres? Interviews As Project-Based Learning At A Multicultural College Community

A. Gras-Velázquez

Julia Chindemi Vila

*Swarthmore College*, [jvila1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:jvila1@swarthmore.edu)

A.-Y. Song

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## 12 *¿Y tú quién eres?* Interviews as Project-Based Learning at a Multicultural College Community

*Adrián Gras-Velázquez, Julia Chindemi-Vila, and Ah-Young Song*

Project-based learning (PBL) is a student-driven approach to learning organized around complex tasks, in which the teacher acts as a facilitator, and students are given “ownership of the project” (Mikulec and Chamness Miller 81).<sup>1</sup> In this approach, there are explicit educational goals and learning outcomes, and the projects engage students in cooperative learning, problem-solving, decision making, and investigative activities. Additional defining features of project-based learning are how these learning activities offer students the “opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time” (Thomas 1) over the course of days, weeks, or months. Activities typically culminate in the creation of a project that is shared with an authentic audience. Importantly, project-based learning within the realm of second language acquisition also promotes “communication and the functionality of language, both of which are key elements in contemporary language instruction” (Mikulec and Chamness Miller 81). Therefore, project-based learning helps integrate language learning within particular contexts and fosters the “gathering, processing, and reporting of information from target language resources” (81).

This descriptive case study traces a project-based learning assignment in a Beginning Spanish language classroom. Data collection involved examinations of student work, such as transcripts of interviews with community partners as well as student surveys completed following the class. This methodological approach allowed researchers to examine the significance of a “phenomenon . . . as it is socially enacted within a particular case” (Dyson and Genishi 10). Through an exploration of interactions between individuals situated in a foreign-language learning context, this study explores how one classroom case serves as a useful example of how project-based learning can engender and extend communities of practice for novice language learners. The *¿Y tú quién eres?* project<sup>2</sup> was based on a communicative approach to second language acquisition and highlighted the use of language in contextual situations, positioning the learner in a meaningful task for live purposes after three months of Spanish-language instruction. This project integrated major

language learning skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) that students developed interdependently as they developed “communicative competence” (Mikulec and Chamness Miller 82). In this PBL unit, communicative competence was defined by the following:

- 1) the ability to use basic grammar structures in present and past tenses
- 2) the ability to comprehend general ideas in a basic interaction
- 3) the ability to have a simple conversation with a native speaker without reliance on English

The project also encouraged students to expand their linguistic repertoire beyond foundational literacy skills and consider how “culture plays a central role in establishing communicative competence” (82). This project encouraged language learners to engage with Spanish speakers on campus and illustrated the importance of intercultural dialogue in facilitating language acquisition.

*¿Y tú quién eres?* was designed for Beginner Spanish students. In this course, students completed two consecutive semesters of language instruction and met five days a week with two instructors. By the end of the second semester, learners were expected to communicate at a level of low-intermediate proficiency. The objective of this learning project was to start building a community of practice<sup>3</sup> in the classroom and then engage with members of the wider college community. By week nine, when the project started, the students had reached a low level of proficiency in Spanish, and engaging with a wider community of practice helped the students build their understanding of sociocultural dimensions of literacy. The aim was to encourage them to converse with diverse speakers of Hispanic<sup>4</sup> descent in the target language through an interview directed by the students’ own questions. Centered on the goal of building cultural and global competencies, this project allowed students to appreciate the campus’s cultural diversity. For students of Hispanic descent, the project also encouraged deeper engagement with fluency in their heritage language through in-person exchanges.<sup>5</sup>

College communities in the United States are often considered to be a microcosm of a globalized network because of the high rates of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity. The term *globalization*, however, can also be considered reductive. As Waters and Brooks assert, “by capturing ‘everything’, globalization actually succeeds in explaining very little” (26).<sup>6</sup> Although the term itself is a fashionable concept that captures “the vast, complex and seemingly unstoppable changes occurring in economies and societies around the world” (26), it also potentially reduces the understanding of international environments into that of an “undifferentiated sameness” (Ley 4). This type of project-based learning therefore helps students understand their local college community

from a transnational perspective and develop an appreciation of multidimensional racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. As Pauwels argues, many universities have significant international student populations, and the college campus has therefore become “a multilingual and multicultural hub” (46). In addition, international faculty and staff have multicultural backgrounds that contribute to campus diversity. By interviewing Spanish-speaking students, faculty, and staff in the college community, language learners in this PBL unit could interact with a range of speakers and gain some insight into transnational experiences, while also making progress in their target language.

This project also shares some of the tenets of a *multiliteracies framework*, which positions learners to leverage a wide range of semiotic tools to connect with diverse communities, societies, and cultures (The New London Group). A pedagogy of multiliteracies assumes that “learning is not simply a series of rules to be obeyed, facts to be learned, and knowledge authorities to be followed” (Fenice and Tochelli 91). This approach strives to prepare learners for “multilingual, multicultural and, in a Bakhtinian sense, multivocal communication, digital communication, global and local participation and a complex knowledge society” (Breidbach and Küster 136). In this sense, second-language acquisition should enable students to foster social awareness and critical literacy instead of “mere instrumental skills” (136). This framework helps position both learners’ identities and their social participation at the center of the learning process, inspiring them to “negotiate and generate (new) meaning in linguistically and culturally heterogeneous life worlds,” while at the same time “adopting responsibility for themselves as well as for the community” (136).

A multiliteracies pedagogy involves more than just integrating “digital tools and technology, multiple modalities, or popular culture into an existing curriculum” (Boyd and Brock 2); it encourages students to engage with multiple media, such as visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic affordances, to learn and communicate across cultures. Drawing from a pedagogy of multiliteracies requires instructors to reshape curricula that expand beyond traditional literacy skills (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and instead include interdependent social practices “that honor the vast array of linguistic, racial, cultural, sexual, and gendered identities” (2). A multiliteracies approach attends to social diversity and the “variability of conventions of meaning in different cultural, social, or domain-specific situations” (Kalantzis and Cope, as cited in Boyd and Brock 6).

In the following sections, we present the motivations for this project, desired learning outcomes, students’ engagement with components of the project, and reflective comments about pedagogy. The chapter then concludes with results from the case study, followed by a discussion about project modifications recommended for future iterations.

## The Project

The idea of the project was to build a classroom community that acknowledged sociocultural dimensions of literacy and the diversity of Hispanic cultures on campus. The concept of “communities of practice” in education, as introduced by Lave and Wenger, is built around the principle that “learning is to be understood within the context of interpersonal experiences” (Breibach and Küster 132). Second language learning is therefore a “process of individual experience, in which the learner is gradually involved and integrated in the speech community” (132). By increasing their active participation in language exchanges, students can expand their linguistic competencies. This communicative approach to language learning follows Kramsch’s definition of learning activities that expose “learners as much as possible to spoken or written texts that have not been fabricated for pedagogic purposes” (185). Instead, language learners can engage in more authentic communication experiences that help them “better *understand* the speaking customs and ways of life of the target country” (185).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the project was a means to develop not only language skills but also intercultural understanding, which is “valued as an equal complement to language learning and as an activity valid in its own right” (Byram et al. 10).<sup>8</sup> While this learning project may not be reflective of a completely impromptu or natural interaction embedded in what Collentine and Freed would term “authentic target culture situations” (156), it involved sociocultural learning through interactions with native speakers in communicative situations outside of the course.

In small groups, students researched the interviewees’ national or regional backgrounds, created a list of possible interview questions, contacted the interviewee to arrange a meeting time, recorded the interview, and edited the recording for a two-to-three-minute final product to present to the class. Each student also separately composed a personal 500-word essay about what they learned from the interview, the process of working with others, and their experience with the target language. All of these activities, of course, had to be in Spanish.

The students started working on the project around week nine of the Beginning Spanish class. By then, they were familiar with the present tense form and could understand and use everyday expressions, such as basic phrases to introduce themselves and others. In speaking to their interviewees, students could use any of the Spanish-language forms of address (tú/usted/vosotros/ustedes) as long as they were consistent. They could also ask and answer questions about personal details, such as likes, dislikes, locations of residence, and basic information about a person. Students were proficient enough to complete project tasks without major difficulties, including the creation of meaningful questions to communicate in the target language at a basic level during the interview.

Part of the reasoning for the timing of this project was to test the probabilistic model of language processing and acquisition at a novice level. Language is often represented in Chomskian terms as a natural and inherent system of grammar, or a “system of rules that specifies all and only allowable sentences” (Chater and Manning 336). However, language rules are also somewhat ambiguous,<sup>9</sup> as grammar is often shaped by particular contexts and situations. As Chater and Manning express, language use, “with probabilities of use, [is] capturing what is linguistically likely, not just what is linguistically possible” (335). Students can generalize concepts from sparse linguistic data, an ability that is crucial for learning not only the meaning of words but also “the properties of objects, cause-effect relations, social rules, and many other domains of knowledge” (Tenenbaum et al. 309). Similarly, Seidenberg notes that language learning varies because it consists of both standardized and nonstandardized grammar patterns that are at times indiscernible to the learner. By engaging with the community outside of the classroom, students are able to use grammar at a dialogical or sociocultural level. Working with linguistically and culturally diverse people allows them to develop linguistic strategies to sustain interpersonal communication, exposes them to grammatical exceptions to conventional rules, and enhances understandings of regional and cultural differences.

## The Process

Before the project-based learning unit, the course professors undertook several tasks to set the project in motion, including finding interviewees, arranging for media equipment, and structuring the project into a feasible timeframe with specific deadlines and guidance points for students. For students, important project tasks involved conducting background research, preparing questions for the interview, recording the exchange with a device, editing the interview, and presenting the product to their classmates. The following sections elaborate further on the professors’ and students’ roles for this PBL unit.

### *Professor-Led Tasks*

#### *Finding Community Members to Participate as Interviewees*

The class of 20 students was divided into five groups of four to five students, with each group interviewing one community member from the college campus. Therefore, professors strove to find a minimum of five people to interview, with the aim of having as much national diversity within the interviewees as possible. They chose not to include interviewees who shared the instructors’ countries of origin so that students could

engage with community members with different cultural backgrounds and regionalisms. The professors wanted students to have access to a variety of people across the college community, so they looked for not only faculty members but also students and staff who would be willing to participate in the project. The professors of the course endeavored to connect student groups with a Spanish-speaking member of the college community at large, rather than just a professor in the modern languages department.

The professors reached out to potential interviewees through personal connections, such as volunteers across Hispanic social organizations at the college. Five candidates were selected (See Table 12.1), with demographic information outlined in the following table:

*Table 12.1* Interviewees general demographic information

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Job</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Nationality</i> <sup>10</sup>	<i>Age Group</i>
1	Faculty	Female	Cuban	31–40
2	Staff	Male	Puerto Rican	31–40
3	Staff	Female	Mexican	31–40
4	Student	Male	Mexican	21–30
5	Staff	Female	Mexican	21–30

Once the interviewees were confirmed, the professors paired each group of students with one interviewee. They introduced the students to the candidate over email, offered some basic information about the interviewee (name and position within the college community), and provided students deadlines for the interviews and final project.

### *The Media/Technology Component*

The professors worked with the college’s IT and media department to simplify the technological component of the project for students. Students needed unobtrusive recording equipment that would not detract from the interview exchange since, as Blake summarizes, “a second language is best learned and taught through interaction” (3). They used the Zoom H1 Handy Recorder, a portable audio recorder whose auto-level function prevented sound distortion and supported WAV and MP3 files for easy editing. The primary audio editing program was Audacity, which professors recommended to students because it was a free, open-source, cross-platform software that was easily accessible online.

### *Setting the Time Frame and Facilitating the Opening Conversation*

The professors set the following time frame (See Table 12.2), with particular professor- and student-directed tasks:

Table 12.2 Professor- and student-directed tasks

Week	Activity	Student (S)/ Professor (P) led
9	—Create groups	P
	—Recruit volunteer interviewees	P
	—Pair groups with interviewees	P
	—Facilitate an initial class discussion	P
10	—Conduct cultural and background research	S
	—Prepare questions	S
	—Give feedback on questions	P
11	—Begin recording interviews	S
12	—Continue recording interviews	S
	—Edit interviews	S
13	—Complete final edits and prepare for presentation	S
	—Optional: Submit first draft of essay	S
	—Provide feedback on first draft	P
14	—Present projects	P
	—Grade projects	S

At the beginning of the unit, the professors organized an initial discussion to elicit students' thoughts on the project and to frame tasks. The discussion had two goals: to make the students more aware of campus diversity and to discuss the linguistic and social differences across cultures. The class started with an open discussion of general topics about the college community, such as meals in the cafeterias, schedules, academics, sports, family, and jobs.

Afterward, the professors focused the conversation around the following topics:

- how international students talk about their personal experiences and cultural differences
- how Hispanic members of the community talk about their background and family traditions in the US
- how different community members talk about regionalisms and cultural differences
- how students connect immigration to the cultural diversity of the United States
- who speaks Spanish in the United States and why
- what kind of jobs students associate with Hispanic immigrants and why
- what stereotypes students associate with Hispanic communities in the US
- who speaks Spanish in the college community and from which countries they originate.



*Student-Led Tasks**Research and Preparation*

After the initial discussion in class, students had two main tasks before the interviews. First, once they learned about their interviewee's country of origin, they conducted research using various online resources on relevant customs and cultural practices. This background research supplemented intercultural exchanges and the development of linguistic competence while engaging "with complexity and multiple identities" rather than stereotyping during the interview (Byram et al. 9).

However, acquiring intercultural competence is an ongoing and unfinished process (7). Thus, the aim of conducting research was not the "transmission of information about a foreign country" (14) in a decontextualized manner. Gaining an understanding of the interviewee's general cultural, social, and national background allows students to prepare themselves to understand

- how intercultural interaction takes place,
- how social identities are part of all interaction[s],
- how their perceptions of other people and other people's perceptions of them influence the success of communication,
- how they can find out for themselves more about the people with whom they are communicating.

(Byram et al. 14)

This pre-interview research also built on previous in-class discussions about diverse Hispanic communities on campus. As Byram and colleagues state, "[U]nderstanding the target culture" is sometimes seen as "a support to linguistic proficiency" (7), but this project encouraged that cultural learning was "valued as an equal complement to language learning and as an activity valid in its own right" (10). This kind of exercise could also help dispel the danger of culture "being limited to the all-too-familiar stereotypical icons of the target culture" and the belief "that there is one authoritative account of another country and its cultures, that there is a 'real' account which only the native speaker can know" (11).

The second activity was for groups to create a series of questions to ask their interviewees. To promote creativity and spontaneity, the professors did not place restrictions on the types of questions, and students were free to explore any subjects that seemed interesting or pertinent during the interview. Professors also encouraged the students to depart from the script and delve into unplanned topics if they wished, but not many ended up asking questions that had not been previously written down, except for some clarifying questions. Once they formed their list of questions, professors checked them for grammar and spelling. The groups had different approaches but similar levels of proficiency. The following

are examples<sup>11</sup> of questions that students decided to use or discard for the final interviews, based on time constraints or relevance of the topics:

### Questions Used During the Interviews

- 1) ¿Como se llama usted?  
*What is your name?*
- 2) ¿De dónde es tu familia?  
*Where is your family from?*
- 3) ¿Tienes hermanos o eres un hijo único?  
*Do you have siblings, or are you an only child?*
- 4) ¿Que lugares viviste antes llegando a Swarthmore?  
*What places did you live before coming to Swarthmore?*
- 5) ¿Como sabes español?  
*How do you know Spanish?*
- 6) Cual es tu trabajo en Swarthmore? ¿Cuáles son sus principales responsabilidades?  
*What is your job at Swarthmore? What are your primary responsibilities?*
- 7) ¿Qué haces en tu tiempo libre?  
*What do you do in your free time?*
- 8) ¿Cuál es el mejor parte de estar trabajando en Swarthmore? ¿Cual es el peor parte?  
*What is the best part about working at Swarthmore? And, what is the worst part?*
- 9) ¿Cual es tu comida favorita?  
*What is your favorite food?*
- 10) Cual es uno consejo que usted tiene por los estudiantes en el clase de espanol?  
*What is one piece of advice you have for the students in Spanish class?*

Students were reminded to be mindful of certain syntactical, grammatical, and linguistic norms, but professors did not make explicit corrections on their papers. As agents of their own learning, students drew from their class notes and books to make their own corrections. After receiving feedback on spelling and grammar, students had two weeks to finalize questions, get in touch with their interviewees, schedule a time and place to meet, and send questions ahead of the interview. All communication had to be in Spanish, and at the end of the project, all emails and recordings had to be submitted to the professors for the purpose of grading either as a Zip file or shared through Google Drive.

### Interview Recording and Editing

In project-based learning, students gain knowledge and skills through problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and self-management. Finding resources and applying information are key elements of this

approach. Students can also make their own decisions and take charge of their project after considering certain constraints, such as time and resources. Although professors were available if there were any questions, students had total freedom on how to conduct and edit the interviews. Students edited their recordings on Audacity and downloaded five- to ten-minute recordings into a cohesive, two-minute piece that they then emailed to the professors, in addition to the raw recordings.

### *Final Product, Presentations, and Product Display*

Due to unforeseen technical and timing circumstances,<sup>12</sup> students were unable to share the audio interviews in a manner that did justice to the time and effort that they had taken to complete the project. Therefore, the class did not have the opportunity to experience one of the most essential parts of project-based learning: exhibiting the final product to a larger community.<sup>13</sup> As Larmer and Mergendoller assert, “[S]choolwork is more meaningful when it’s not done only for the teacher or the test” (37). As the following section will demonstrate, displaying the final product for a wider audience is an integral part of project-based learning and must be considered in order for students to benefit fully from the PBL activity.

## **Results**

An effective way to assess skills at low proficiency levels is to apply a holistic criteria<sup>14</sup> and make a general assessment of a student’s level of performance as a speaker, writer, and learner. However, it is also possible to take into account analytical criteria that, although often used at higher levels, can serve as guidance for the instructor in any evaluation task.

### *Group Interviews*

The evaluation of students groups’ written and oral work were considered using a very simplified rubric (see Table 12.3). Overall, students engaged in different kinds of negotiation strategies and responded to implicit feedback from fellow group members or from interviewees to keep the conversation moving forward and resolve minor misunderstandings. Students engaged in simple but effective interactional modifications like comprehension checks and error reformations. For example, during their conversation with one of the members of staff (an Environmental Building Services employee), students had the following exchange:

STUDENT: *¿Nosotros tenemos . . . tienes las cucarachas . . . nosotros tenemos en los dormitorios?*/Do we have . . . you have cockroaches . . . we have in the bedrooms?

Table 12.3 Evaluation rubric

	5	4-3	2-1	0
Interview Preparation Score: _____	The group prepared many questions to ask.	The group prepared between four and five questions to ask.	The group prepared less than three questions to ask.	The group did not prepare any questions.
Communication Skills Score: _____	The students listened carefully to the person being interviewed and asked several relevant follow-up questions and/or made clarifications.	The students listened carefully to the person being interviewed and asked at least a relevant follow-up question and/or made clarifications.	The students listened to the interviewee but did not ask any relevant questions or make clarifications. Students did not engage with interviewee.	Incomprehensible (due to language misuse or technical issues) communication or lack of audio sample.
Mechanics (Writing) Score: _____	No grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	A few grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	Many grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	Too many mistakes OR no writing sample.
Final Product Score: _____	The students edited and organized the audio interview in a way that made the information clear and interesting.	The students edited and organized the audio interview in a way that made the information clear or interesting.	The students edited and organized the audio interview, but the information was not as clear or as interesting as it could have been.	The students did a poor job editing and organizing the audio interview, or the students did not edit it.
Final Score				

INTERVIEWEE: *Una vez más . . . Repítame la pregunta . . . /Again . . . Ask me the question again . . .*

STUDENT: *Oh, si . . . ¿Tenemos las cucarachas? Porque nosotros tenemos en nuestros dormitorios . . . /Oh, yeah . . . Do we have cockroaches? Because we have [cockroaches] in our bedrooms.*

INTERVIEWEE: *¿Ustedes tienen cucarachas en sus dormitorios? Lo único que te puedo decir es no comas en tu cuarto . . . /Do you have cockroaches in your bedroom? All I can say is do not eat in your room.*

This excerpted conversation illustrates how students were able to engage actively in the conversation using beginning Spanish language skills and respond instantly to the interviewee with incremental adjustments based on perceived misunderstandings, especially as interviewees asked for repeated questions and modeled more conventional structures and phrasings.

The interviewees also responded to students' clarification requests, as exemplified by this interaction<sup>15</sup> between a group of interviewers and another college employee:

STUDENT 2: *¿A ti te gusta la comida de Swarthmore? /Do you like the food at Swarthmore?*

INTERVIEWEE: *¿La comida de Swarthmore? Pues bueno, esta tarde, en la tarde comí en Sharples,<sup>16</sup> no está tan mal, está bastante bien . . . /Food at Swarthmore? Well, this afternoon, this afternoon I ate at Sharples, it is not that bad, it is quite good . . .*

STUDENT 2: *¿Cual es tu comida favorita? /What is your favorite food?*

INTERVIEWEE: *¿En el mundo? /In the world?*

STUDENT 2: *Si. /Yes.*

INTERVIEWEE: *Pues, como comida individual ¡jitomate, en México, o tomate en general, misma cosa, tiene diferente nombre y cheesecake. /Well, as a single food ¡jitomate, in Mexico, or tomato in general, same thing, it has a different name in México and cheesecake.*

Interviewees' follow-up questions often helped lead students to advance conversations, as this example evolved from a discussion about local to worldwide contexts.

Most students demonstrated mastery of basic grammatical structures that enabled them to complete the interview. They were able to ask and answer questions about personal details, even while using only the present tense, as exemplified by this conversation between one of the groups and a faculty member:

STUDENT 3: *¿Cuándo empiezas enseñar en Swarthmore? /When do you start teaching at Swarthmore?*

INTERVIEWEE: *Empecé en septiembre de este año, así que sólo hace 3 o 4 meses /I started in September this year, so only 3 or 4 months ago.*

Although students were at a more novice level of Spanish, these fluid exchanges with interviewees helped them understand the distinctions between past and present tenses. Some students even asked for explicit explanations about interviewees' biographical details, such as where they had been born. These options for differentiation gave students the freedom to direct and demonstrate their own learning within a community of practice in ways that traditional multiple choice exams might not have allowed.

### *Students' Survey Responses<sup>17</sup>*

At the beginning, some students seemed indifferent to the project, as exemplified by Student 2's feelings about the assignment at the start of the PBL unit: *"I was pretty neutral about the idea, but it was fine doing it."* At the conclusion, however, many of the students expressed enjoying the project, as they noted in their post-project questionnaire responses. Student 1 stated,

*At first I was really reluctant to do this project but it turned out I actually really liked it. I liked getting to hear the perspective of the person I interviewed on his culture and how he felt that fit into going to a liberal arts college in America.*

This sense of enjoyment and learning from the interactions with members of the college community was echoed in many of the responses.

The students' most significant concern about the project had been their relatively low level of Spanish proficiency. At the beginning, they were concerned that their Spanish was not *"good enough"* to communicate with someone outside of the classroom setting. Student 3 stated, *"I didn't feel really comfortable having a conversation with a native speaker that early in my Spanish-learning experience."* Student 4 feared not only the language barrier but also a cultural one, explaining, *"I just needed to be reassured that I wasn't going to embarrass myself or offend the person I was talking to."* Students felt unsure whether the wording in the questions could be misinterpreted or lost in translation, resulting in intercultural miscommunication.

After completing the project, however, students stated that they felt *"more comfortable with the language"* (Student 5), especially across multiple dialects (Student 3). Students had the benefit of being able to talk to a native speaker who understood the nature of the project. The interviewees were aware of the students' limited exposure to the language and were *"not judgmental"* (Student 6). Therefore, they *"at no point made us feel stupid or attempted to use language he knew we wouldn't understand"* (Student 2). Student 2 also enjoyed being able to create questions that *"you could ask anyone in any language from any place, but then*

hearing how his cultural experience led him to have a very different response than I would have had" (Student 2). Students learned about cultural differences, noting that native Spanish speakers *"had to adjust to other Spanish-speaking folks who didn't have the same heritage as her. At the college they were kind of all lumped into the same group"* (Student 4). In addition, as Student 5 noted, listening to the whole audio conversation multiple times in order to create the two- to three-minute piece helped them *"really understand"* the language *"in order to edit it."*

At the same time, Student 2 added that the project highlighted how much they still needed to learn in order to master a second language: *"I think it put in perspective how much we needed a native speaker to slow down in order for us to understand, which is kind of a bummer to realize."* While the PBL unit facilitated students' understanding and use of more complex Spanish dialogue, they also recognized the relative levels of experience that distinguished them from native speakers.

## Conclusions

The project helped expose lower-proficiency students to authentic conversations that placed them in interactive settings that exceeded basic linguistic skills. Through the use of a communicative approach to language learning, the project offered a balance between comprehension and production skills at the beginner's level. As Han and D'Angelo assert, learners may rely on non-linguistic information, such as "contextual clues and world knowledge" to infer meaning (178–179). Furthermore, the project drew from the language socialization framework that emphasizes the "development of linguistic, cultural, and communicative competence through interaction with others who are more knowledgeable or proficient" (Duff and Talmy 95). By understanding language through contextual semantics, students could then practice the target language at the beginning level, while also practicing grammar, syntax, and vocabulary that might not have been covered in a traditional classroom unit. The students became familiar with more advanced grammar structures through conversations with native speakers that would be solidified later on in the course curriculum and beyond.

Students developed linguistic and sociocultural understandings, and they felt more "comfortable" with the language, in part due to the native speaker's linguistic accommodations for the learners. More fluent speakers were clearly attentive to the varying needs of a novice speaker's vocabulary, language structure, and pace, which helped learners of Spanish not only improve their language skills but feel equipped to communicate without fear of judgment. In this way, students developed their language skills in part because of the native speakers' social allowances, which helped them feel a sense of acceptance and a capacity to take risks as less-experienced speakers.

Lecture-based classes with strict formal instruction driven by the instructors could offer similar learning outcomes in regards to grammar and vocabulary, but this project supported students' capacity to engage in a wider community of practice with native speakers. As Duff and Talmy contend, language socialization exercises promote a sense of "agency, contingency, unpredictability, and multidirectionality" in learners (97). Interview-based projects promote active learning, as students navigate and transform conventional language practices.

This PBL assignment also encouraged lifelong skills such as critical thinking, decision making, cross-cultural understanding, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and technological fluency. Projects like this provide opportunities for greater engagement with the broader community outside of a single classroom. Learning is then situated across social contexts through the exchange of emails, the formation of interview questions, relevant research of cultural backgrounds, and interviewing and editing processes.

To further improve and expand the activity, instructors might consider having more in-class practice, which students suggested as a modification for future classes. Professors could assign a class activity in which students could interview and record each other to develop greater confidence and fluency. In addition, per the students' recommendation, instructors might invite students to create a shared set of questions to ask their interviewees and make cross-cultural comparisons during a later class. This activity could serve as an in-class exercise in which questions are modeled, brainstormed independently, and then discussed in small groups. However, students should not be limited to only these questions, since part of the exercise is to encourage learners to develop their own creative ideas and respond with extemporaneous follow-up questions.

A second-semester activity could also involve more intensive work with native speakers on a series of mini-projects that could provide more comprehensive insights into the diversity of the campus community. These smaller exercises could be linked to different grammatical points. For instance, a series of photographs of interviewees' daily lives could be used to practice the present or present perfect tense. Or a short narrative of interviewee's childhoods could help students learn the two basic past tenses in Spanish, the preterit and the imperfect. Interviewees could also share a list of their short- and long-term plans to help students practice the future and the conditional tenses. In addition, students could collaborate with community members to co-construct a rubric that could be used in their final assessment. This process could help engage students in building their own accountability standards rather than having an instructor independently define the scoring criteria.

As previously mentioned, the audio interviews could not be displayed because of technical issues, but with sufficient planning and coordination, this project could be part of an exhibition. During the last weeks of



the semester, students could share their work, answering questions and offering reflections on the project to friends, interviewees, and interested community members. They could also contribute to a larger campus-wide activity, such as Hispanic Appreciation Week.

While most literature on project-based learning underscores frameworks that facilitate the process of language acquisition at higher levels, this case study serves as an example of what is possible when novice Spanish speakers participate in an interview project. Overall, the *¿Y tú quién eres?* project demonstrates that many of the benefits of project-based learning can be successfully implemented and adapted for beginning learners.

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## Notes

1. See Stoller “Project Work” or “Establishing a Theoretical Foundation” or Haines for further definitions and discussions of the main features in PBL.
2. This project took place during the fall 2015 academic year while the two Spanish professors were teaching at Swarthmore College.
3. A community of practice provides a learning context in which students can simultaneously build knowledge of language and communicate in a foreign language across a range of contexts and activities (Hall).
4. The term “Hispanic,” rather than “Latinx,” was preferred by the interviewees.
5. As Kern states, “It is important not to lose sight of the fact that what one sees on one’s computer screen is a highly mediated, filtered, and designed version of the world” (341). Online venues for second language acquisition can be beneficial and enhance the class environment (see, for example, Clark and Feldon, Butcher, or Erneling), but this particular project stressed the interactivity of face-to-face encounters.
6. See also Block and Cameron, Blommaert, or Gorter for a discussion about the homogenizing effect of the term *globalization* and its contradictions.
7. Emphasis in original.
8. See Byram et al. for a discussion on language and culture learning theory (4–40). See also Kramsch (“The Cultural Component”) for an interesting discussion on the cultural component of language pedagogy.
9. Instructors can, for example, make students aware that standardized grammar rules presented in class are not infallible and that at times there are exceptions to the rule.
10. The nationalities of the interviewees varied in official citizenship and heritage. The only requirement for volunteers was that Spanish had to be a primary language in the home, either as the dominant language or in conjunction with English.
11. Questions are transcribed without corrections as to best exemplify the students’ levels of Spanish at the time of the project.

12. Several groups needed extra time because of their interviewees' schedules, while one group had to re-do their interview several days later, after realizing that they had not in fact recorded it properly.
13. See Larmer and Mergendoller, Boss and Krauss, or Cooper and Murphy for more on culminating activities and the need to showcase students' work.
14. For a discussion on the benefits and pitfalls of a holistic approach to grading, see Charney or Sadler ("Indeterminacy," "Transforming Holistic Assessment").
15. The transcriptions are directly taken from students' own work, so any non-standard spelling and punctuation choices are inherent to the original texts.
16. Sharples is Swarthmore College's dining hall.
17. Of the 20-plus students in the class, only eight agreed to answer a questionnaire regarding the project. The low number of responses was due in part to the fact that questionnaires were sent during the summer, when students do not always check their emails with great frequency, rather than during the semester in which this course was offered.

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