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LINGUA FRANCA: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 5 C'S OUTSIDE OF THE SPANISH CLASSROOM.

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Lingua Franca: An Innovative Approach to the Implementation of the 5 C's outside of the Spanish Classroom.

Synopsis:

Prompted by the implementation of a new curriculum compliant with the ACTFL standards, the Spanish and Portuguese Department of the University of Southern California has embraced the 5 Cs of ACTFL to provide students with a conceptually new learning experience: Lingua Franca, an innovative way to extend exposure to Spanish language and Hispanic culture outside of the classroom walls. This article examines this service-learning program, its challenges and outcomes.

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What is *Lingua Franca*?

In the light of the increasing interest in service learning among educators and students, *Lingua Franca* emerges as an innovative way to extend exposure to Spanish language and Hispanic culture outside of the classroom walls.

Prompted by the implementation of a new curriculum compliant with the ACTFL standards, the Spanish and Portuguese Department of the University of Southern California has embraced the 5 Cs of ACTFL to provide students with a conceptually new learning experience. In the past two years, the new basic language curriculum in Spanish and Portuguese has included cultural portfolios that proved to be an excellent way for students to use the target language while interacting with native speakers in Los Angeles in different contexts and social settings (see Zapata, Cabrera, Siguenza-Ortiz, & Vierma, 2014). With the same objectives in mind, in the fall of 2013 we created and launched *Lingua Franca* as an alternative to these cultural portfolios. *Lingua Franca* allows students enrolled in third-semester Spanish (SPAN 220) to collaborate with USC's Child Development Center located a few blocks outside of USC's main campus, a neighborhood where 53% of the population comes from a Spanish-speaking country (Census 2000, SCAG, Los Angeles Department of City Planning). This Child Development Center provides care and education for the children of USC's faculty, staff and students, and it also serves as a lab site for university's research studies related to young children, their families, and surroundings.

Since inception, *Lingua Franca* has provided students with the opportunity to share their skills and talents with the children of USC's Child Development Center, and has allowed them to enhance their Spanish and to increase their awareness of USC's culturally and socially diverse surroundings. The mission of *Lingua Franca* is not only to expose students to a set of tasks focused on various modes of communication (interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive) but also to contribute to USC's diversity requirement: "to prepare students through the study of human differences for responsible citizenship in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse society" (<https://dornsife.usc.edu/diversity-requirement/>)

How does *Lingua Franca* work?

Students who chose to participate in *Lingua Franca* prepare and conduct a mini-course consisting of 4 classes that they teach in Spanish at the USC's Child Development Center to children whose ages range from 3 to 5 years old. Classes are approximately 30-minute long and they are related to art, literacy, music, dance, sports and/or games. Spread over the 10-week duration of the program, these 4 on-site classes constitute 70% of students' grade in the project, while the remaining 30% is evaluated through 3 written assignments in Spanish aimed to reflect on the experience. Students' overall participation in *Lingua Franca* constitutes 15% of their final grade in SPAN 220. While the 4 classes at the Child Center present the students with the opportunity to interact and negotiate meaning in spoken Spanish beyond the classroom and in their community, the written assignments compel them to reflect on the relationship between the practices and the perspectives of the language.

As part of their first assignment, students are asked to write about their expectations on teaching in Spanish and to draw upon the lessons they are learning in their Spanish class to teach children. The assignment also allows students to anticipate the challenges that they might face and to strategize the pedagogical approach that they intend to follow. In the next assignment, students compare their first and second class, and reflect on the adjustments they had to implement after their first class to allow better interactions. In their third assignment, students analyze the academic and personal impacts of *Lingua Franca* in the context of USC's master plan (<http://www.usc.edu/community/upcmasterplan>) and USC's diversity requirement (<https://dornsife.usc.edu/diversity-requirement/>). The last task requires that both the students participating in *Lingua Franca* and those opting for cultural portfolios make a class presentation where they describe the project and share their experience with their classmates. Throughout the duration of the program, students' performance is evaluated based on carefully designed rubrics aimed to both explain the goals of each task and encourage students to approach the assignments thoroughly and rigorously.

How do we prepare students for *Lingua Franca*?

One of the first challenges we encountered after the pilot program was launched was that students who did not have previous experience teaching children were surprised and intimidated by the children's age: "These kids are so small! They are like 6 or 7 years old or something", announced

Ilya Dubinski, a student who taught the 3-year old class. To mend that misconception, we replaced our online training by two orientation sessions conducted in person. The first one takes place at USC and its purpose is to inform students of the goals, the requirements, and the assessment of the program. More importantly, during this session we give students specific instructions on how to prepare age-appropriate activities, strategies to recover from class disruptions and resources that help them keep the children engaged and maintain the dynamic of the class. Students are then invited to tour the Child Center where they meet the director and the staff, and are given an opportunity to observe classes and learn about the tasks that children are interested in and are able to perform.

After these preliminary steps, students are expected to prepare a lesson plan that also indicates what materials they need for their class (e.g., crayons, dance floor, ball). Once their lesson plan is approved, students proceed to schedule the 4 classes at the Child Center. At this stage students collaborate closely with the Director of USC's Child Development Center. Furthermore, the teachers of the Child Center—most of whom are bilingual—are instrumental for the success of *Lingua Franca* as they guide students through their tasks and offer valuable feedback after each of their teaching performances. They also facilitate the assessment process providing professors with a written evaluation that measures different aspects such as the depth of content of the student's class, research and preparedness, and use of the target language.

What are the outcomes of *Lingua Franca*?

In order to measure the outcomes of the program and make improvements, at the end of the semester we distribute a survey among USC's students who participate in *Lingua Franca*. We have received extensive feedback and have discovered that nearly every student expresses great satisfaction with the program's outcomes. We are very pleased to report that the vast majority of our students feel privileged to have been exposed to the multi-ethnic composition of USC academia whose children attend the Child Development Center. "La clase era muy diversa y había una mezcla de personas. Había niños americanos, europeos, asiáticos [sic] y también afroamericanos" says Mindy Lyn. Others are amazed at the effort the teachers of the Child Center make to celebrate children's culturally diverse backgrounds: "Cuando enseñaba mi primera clase, los niños celebraban costume day [sic] y

tenían diferentes costumbres [sic] de diferentes países: Rusia, Francia, China, India. Las maestras también tenían costumbres [sic], muchas hispanas ¡Era increíble! Yo soy de Kansas y en mi escuela no había muchas personas diferentes, solo unos hispanos”, recalls Alyssa Gong. Nearly all students participating in *Lingua Franca* were extremely surprised at the impact they had on the children: “Estaba impresionado porque los niños querían aprender mucho. Siempre hablaban conmigo, siempre miraban, siempre preguntaban preguntas [sic]. Eran adorables. Fue la experiencia más grande que he tenido nunca. No pensé que voy [sic] a disfrutar mucho, pero yo no podía dejar de sonreír cuando terminaba mi clase”, says Carole Kennedy.

Both the surveys and the reflections show that students are able to draw parallels between what they learn in their Spanish class and their experience at the Child Center. For example, after learning in class about the changing role of women in Latin America, those students who met bilingual Hispanic teachers at the Child Center produced profound reflections on the role of Hispanic women in the modern American society and workplace. Others offered an emotional reflection on how they evolved personally and acquired a broader perspective on the topic of immigration after having come into close contact with USC’s racially diverse community.

The surveys have also revealed that it is only after they teach their first class that students acknowledge that teaching a class requires extensive preparation, as we repeatedly emphasize in our orientation sessions. Typically, they discover that a successful class requires conducting thorough research (e.g. a children song in Spanish, and what the lyrics mean), learning vocabulary and grammar (e.g. explain how to play a game using commands), exploring alternative ways to communicate (e.g. rephrase, use gestures, give examples, make it simple), etc. Duga Gosh reflects: “Es muy difícil usar los comandos [sic], estudié mucho para mi clase. También quiero usar futuro en mi segunda clase. Tengo que aprender vocabulario para duck-duck-goose [sic]. Necesito estudiar mucho.” Students also come to realize that teaching requires empathy, patience and at least basic understanding of teaching methodology. They report observing their Spanish teachers as they prepare for their own class. Julia Du shares: “Cuando enseño mi clase, puedo tomar inspiración de las lecciones que estoy aprendiendo en la clase de español. Mi profesora es muy buena para comunicarse con la clase sólo en español. Planeo usar muchos gestos [como ella] para ayudar a mi clase a entender mis lecciones.”

As we interviewed the professors whose students were enrolled in *Lingua Franca*, we came across a common denominator: most professors point out that those students tend to be extremely enthusiastic about their participation and very proud of their role in this community-outreach program: “Her presentation was spectacular. She could not wait to share her stories and the pictures she took of the class she taught. I also remember seeing the faces of my other students after Laura [a participant of *Lingua Franca*] shared her experience with them. They were surprised to hear that something so meaningful, fun and rewarding was offered for credit in their Spanish class”, says Prof. Lorena Gallego.

To measure the impact of *Lingua Franca* at the Child Center, we conduct surveys and interview the teachers and the parents whose children participate in *Lingua Franca*. We are happy to report that this year, parents’ level of satisfaction with the program increased to 100% as a result of the improvements we have been making. The parents are particularly pleased with the rising interest that their children show in learning and speaking Spanish outside of the classroom since *Lingua Franca* was implemented. Most parents share specific examples of their children’s use of the Spanish language outside of the classroom. For example, one parent reveals that his son “likes watching Spanish cartoons, and responds to kids that speak Spanish in their language”, while another is amused that that her daughter “would ask how to say that in Spanish” after every Spanish class.

It is also worth mentioning that *Lingua Franca* has encouraged the Hispanic teachers of the center to incorporate Spanish in their daily tasks more actively, such as by giving instructions in Spanish and reading stories in Spanish on a daily basis. The children seem to embrace the new language and happily engage in the tasks that require them to speak Spanish beyond their “Spanish class”. The teachers say that *Lingua Franca* has brought a sense of pride and appreciation for the Spanish language to the Child Center.

Conclusions

Lingua Franca is in constant evolution. We visualize this program as an extension of the classroom and as an opportunity to expose our students to an authentic situation that allows them to draw parallels between their Spanish class and the new experience. We tell our students time and again that the success of *Lingua Franca* heavily relies on their willingness to engage and explore, but we also acknowledge that it is the close collaboration between USC's faculty, students and the staff of the Child Center that results in life-long interest in learning about the Hispanic cultures and the Spanish language. We encourage our students to overcome the temptation to simplify cultural stereotypes and go beyond superficial reflections and commonplace remarks, as we remind them that they are the ones who will have an immense impact on the children's perception of the world, as these children embrace a new language and gain new role models.

Overall, our experience shows that *Lingua Franca* has been an important and extremely rewarding tool in the task of incorporating culture- and community-based standards in the classroom and creating a bridge between the university and its culturally and socially diverse environment. We invite other instructors to seek similar opportunities in locations surrounded by thriving and diverse communities.