

Service-Learning: Overcoming Fears, Connecting with the Hispanic/Latino Community

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Abstract

This chapter explores the reasons why adult Spanish language students claimed to be hesitant to participate in the local Hispanic/Latino community in a recent study on 25 students enrolled in a 400/500-level Spanish class with a service-learning component at a Southeastern university. Data come from student reflection papers, written four times over the course of the semester, analyzed through thematic content analysis. Findings indicate that students held specific fears about participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community, including fear of interacting with the community and insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers. The analysis of the reflection papers revealed that service-learning helped many students to overcome these fears. Pedagogical implications that consider ways in which service-learning can help learners overcome their hesitance to participate in the local Hispanic/Latino community are discussed.

Keywords: *service-learning, Spanish, foreign language teaching, fears, Hispanic community*

Background

In my 17-year career as a Spanish teacher, I have often been disappointed by students' hesitancy to spend time in the local Hispanic/Latino community. Of the hundreds of students I have taught, very few have made an effort to interact with local Hispanics/Latinos. Even Spanish majors, who commonly have a passion for the language and culture, tend to simply ignore their greatest resource—native speakers in the local community with whom they can practice speaking and from whom they can learn about target cultures firsthand. For this reason, I investigated the underlying reasons for the apparent hesitancy of Spanish students to participate in the Hispanic/Latino community and explored how service-learning might help address the problem.

In this chapter, I first present findings on the fears the student participants reported about spending time with Hispanics/Latinos, primarily the participants' fear of interacting with the community and their insecurities about their ability to communicate with native speakers. Understanding the reasons for student reluctance to participate in the Hispanic/Latino community is essential to effectively targeting and addressing the problem. I then discuss the potential for service-learning to help students overcome their fears by providing a gentle push into the Hispanic/Latino community, while at the same time offering support and guidance to make the experience a successful one that students likely will endeavor to seek out again in the future.

Overview of Literature

In recent years a growing number of Spanish language educators have begun to incorporate service-learning experiences into their curriculum (Nelson & Scott, 2008). These experiences are invaluable because they provide students the opportunity to interact with local Hispanics/Latinos, an experience they may not otherwise seek out on their own. In fact, research suggests that, for many students, a service-learning placement represents their first time interacting with the local Hispanic/Latino community (Pellettieri, 2011; Plann, 2002; Varas, 1999; Weldon & Trautmann, 2003). According to Bringle, Clayton and Hatcher (2013, p.6)

...service learning involves the integration of academic material, relevant service activities, and critical reflection and is built on reciprocal partnerships that engage students, faculty/staff, and community members to achieve academic, civic, and personal learning objectives as well as to advance public purposes.

It is clear from this definition that service-learning goes beyond traditional community service in that it weaves classroom content into the experience and requires substantial reflection. Thus, service-learning offers several advantages in foreign language learning. Service-learning provides an authentic, real-world setting in which students can practice their language skills and learn academic content-related concepts. At the same time, it offers students a space to reflect upon the experience and themselves on an intellectual, interpersonal and personal level.

Service-learning is also an effective means of achieving global competence, as articulated by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Global Competence Position Statement* (2014), offering the student an opportunity to communicate with others in their native language, while acquiring knowledge of different cultures. It follows the Position Statement's recommended practice of "Reflect(ing) on one's personal experiences across cultures to evaluate personal feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions" (p.2).

In recent years a growing body of research has emerged addressing service-learning in the postsecondary Spanish as a foreign language context (Barreneche, 2011; Beebe & DeCosta, 1993; Caldwell, 2007; Carracelas-Juncal, 2013; Hale, 1999; Hellebrandt & Varona, 1999; Kaplan & Pérez Gamboa, 2004; Lear & Abbott, 2009; Long, 2003; Morris, 2001; Nelson & Scott, 2008; Pellettieri, 2011; Plann, 2002; Tancelosky, 2008; Tilley-Lubbs, 2004; Vázquez, 2014; Weldon & Trautmann, 2003; Zapata, 2011). These investigations have shed light on many of the potential benefits of service-learning, including positive language acquisition outcomes, especially increased proficiency and improved language learning attitudes, meeting the ACTFL *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015), and cultivating deeper cultural understanding, positive attitudes toward Hispanics/Latinos, an appreciation for diversity, and a sense of civic responsibility.

However, none of these investigations focused specifically on the topic of student fears and the role of service-learning in helping students overcome them. A handful of these studies mentioned student fears in passing, mostly in the context of student reflections and comments. In research focusing on advanced Spanish language learners, the fears mentioned include fear of making errors and fear of not

knowing what to expect (Barreneche, 2011), fear that the students will not be accepted by the Hispanics/Latinos with whom they work, and fear of not being linguistically well prepared (Plann, 2002). In research on intermediate Spanish language learners, the fears identified were fear of not speaking Spanish “properly” and fear that the student’s lack of fluency will “impos[e] on [the] time and patience” of native speakers (Pellettieri, 2011, p.295) and fear that the student’s proficiency is inadequate to help Spanish speakers (Tacelosky, 2008). Note that the majority of these fears (five out of seven) were language-related.

One study (Pellettieri, 2011) also considered language-related fears as part of a broader investigation of Spanish students’ willingness to communicate and service-learning. This study looked at linguistic self-confidence, “a construct that combines a learner’s perceived L2 competence and speaking apprehension” (p. 291). Results indicated that students’ linguistic self-confidence was increased in both areas through their participation in service-learning. That is, students reported higher perceived L2 competence in Spanish and lower speaking apprehension.

The topic of language anxiety has also been well investigated (Aida, 1994; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Krashen, 1987; MacIntyre, 1995a, 1995b; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Phillips, 1992; Rodriguez, 1995; Young, 1986), though not in the specific context of service-learning. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), “Language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p.284). The majority of research on this topic has focused on the negative effects of language anxiety, concluding it is detrimental to language acquisition or learning. Native speaker anxiety, anxiety related to interacting and speaking the foreign language with native speakers, is one common type of anxiety experienced by foreign language learners (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

Anxiety has been studied in research on intercultural competence, as well. Gudykunst (1993, 1998) asserted that high levels of anxiety are detrimental to communication and intercultural adjustment. His *Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Model* is based on the premise that, in order for effective communication and cultural adjustment to take place, the non-native speaker must learn to manage anxiety and uncertainty. Gudykunst discussed the important role that mindfulness plays in this process, helping the foreigner to shift out of “automatic pilot” (his/her instinctual, natural response) in order to develop a way of thinking characterized by heightened awareness and openness to considering different perspectives.

The present study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature by contributing data on student fears related to participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community and considering the beneficial role service-learning might play in helping students overcome these fears. This issue is of particular importance to language educators and policy makers. If we hope to engage students in the local Hispanic/Latino community, it is critical that we are first able to identify the obstacles that interfere with this engagement—specific fears students hold that keep them from participating in the community. With this information in mind, we can design service-learning curricula that help students work through these particular fears effectively. In this way, the service-learning experience becomes more productive by addressing student apprehension from the start.

Methodology

The Setting/Context

The data presented here come from students enrolled in a combined upper-division undergraduate and graduate level course entitled *Spanish in the United States*, taught at a public research university in the Southeast with a student body of approximately 15,000. The course explores the varieties of Spanish spoken in the U.S. and the various communities of Hispanics/Latinos who speak these varieties from a sociolinguistic perspective. Students learn about the (im)migration experiences and reception of different Hispanic/Latino nationality groups (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Salvadorans, etc.), as well as the unique features of the dialects spoken by each group. They also learn about typical bilingual language behaviors, including code switching, code mixing and borrowing, and about language maintenance. As part of the course, students are required to participate in a service-learning experience in which they observe and reflect on the aforementioned phenomena, while volunteering in a local Hispanic/Latino organization. The goal is for students to experience firsthand the topics from their course readings, notes and class discussion in an authentic setting, while at the same time getting to know and serving Hispanics/Latinos in their local community. Student reflections and observations constitute an important part of class discussion and are also the basis for four reflection papers.

Students spent a minimum of 10 hours total taking part in service-learning. They were instructed to evenly distribute their service-learning hours over the course of the semester so that they were able to gather the necessary information to write each reflection paper. Students were responsible for keeping track of their own hours—they were not officially verified.

The Hispanic/Latino community near the university is small, but growing. Hispanics make up 4.3% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The largest group is Mexicans (73%), followed at a distant second by Puerto Ricans (4%) and Hondurans (3%). While there are several Mexican restaurants and Hispanic/Latino-owned businesses in the area, there are few places where one could go to be immersed in a Hispanic/Latino, Spanish-speaking environment. The notable exception to this is a handful of Hispanic/Latino churches that offer Spanish-language services: one Catholic church, one Seventh-Day Adventist church, one Baptist church and one evangelical Christian church. These churches are unique in that they provide an authentic Spanish-speaking community environment—a family-like setting, in which the Spanish language and Hispanic/Latino culture are maintained and highly valued. They were therefore selected as ideal service-learning sites.

Beginning in 2013 I established a relationship with two of these churches, both of which have served as our community partners since then. When I initially contacted the pastors of each church and invited them to serve as community partners, both were excited about the opportunity. Since then the relationship has been fruitful and mutually beneficial. Both church communities have welcomed our students and provided a supportive and encouraging environment in which students can practice their Spanish language skills and engage in academic learning. The church community members, in turn, have commented that they enjoy our students' presence in their church. They have expressed appreciation for the students' service, as

well as for the students' enthusiasm for the Spanish language and Hispanic/Latino culture. The pastors are pleased with the arrangement and have extended an open invitation for new service-learning students to be placed in their churches at any time.

The majority of students carried out their service-learning experiences in one of these two community partner churches. However, the option was also given to select an alternate service-learning site, so long as it met the basic requirement of providing a Spanish-speaking community environment that was open to receiving service-learning students. A few students chose the latter option; two selected other churches and one chose a Hispanic/Latino community organization near her home far from campus.

Students served in a variety of roles, including as ushers, childcare or nursery workers, teacher assistants, office assistants, translators, and healthcare outreach representatives. Some were simply asked to serve informally as conversation partners for members of the congregation who were working to improve their English.

The Participants

The participants were 25 students enrolled in either the Summer 2013 or Spring 2015 session of the course. The majority of participants (22) were undergraduate students taking the course as part of their Spanish major. All were juniors or seniors and most were 20-24 years old. The remaining three participants were graduate students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Teaching Languages (MATL) program who were specializing in the Spanish-emphasis track of the degree. While most participants (21) were non-native speakers of Spanish, three were heritage speakers and one was a native speaker who was born and raised in Mexico. Three students were male and 22 were female. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Research Questions

Based on previous research and my experience as a foreign language educator, preliminary research questions were developed. These questions were refined over the course of the semester, resulting in the following:

1. Why are students hesitant to participate in the local Hispanic/Latino community?
2. Which particular fears keep students from participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community?
3. Does service-learning help students to overcome these fears?
4. (How) does service-learning change students' perceptions of local Hispanics/Latinos and themselves?

In this investigation the term 'fear,' referenced above, will be used broadly to refer to feelings of fear, anxiety, insecurity, nervousness, worry, etc., expressed by students. This term was selected because it is comprehensive, encompassing a variety of fear-related phenomena.

The answers to these questions provide valuable data regarding the specific fears Spanish students hold about participating in the Hispanic/Latino community. Recognizing and identifying these fears is important because, until they are addressed, students are likely to continue to avoid interacting with Hispanics/Latinos, missing out on an invaluable opportunity. Yet, if these fears can be confronted

and overcome through service-learning, students will gain access to an incredible resource—a community of native speakers with whom they can practice speaking, while at the same time learning relevant academic content knowledge. Furthermore, the experience has the potential to be truly transformative, offering students the opportunity to reflect upon their perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos and themselves.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data come from 100 student reflection papers. Each student submitted four three-page reflection papers written in Spanish. Student reflection papers were based on assigned writing prompts (see Appendix). The due dates for the papers were evenly distributed over the course of the semester. Students were instructed to complete at least 2.5 service-learning hours prior to writing each reflection paper. Reflection papers were evaluated based on academic content, depth of reflection, grammar and mechanics. For undergraduate students the papers counted for 25% of the overall grade, while for graduate students they counted for 20% of the overall grade. The writing prompts asked students to discuss their expectations and perceptions, but did not specifically ask students to discuss their fears.

The data analysis procedure took a mixed-methods approach. Student reflection papers were analyzed as follows. First, the reflection papers were coded and analyzed through thematic content analysis. Holsti (1969) explains that content analysis involves the coding of data according to categories for the purposes of hypothesis testing. In this investigation the categories were the themes indicated in the research questions. Themes included ‘reasons for not participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community,’ ‘fears about participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community,’ ‘how service-learning helped the student overcome his/her fears,’ and ‘how service-learning changed the student’s perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos and/or him/herself.’ Any passage of data pertaining to a particular theme was coded accordingly. Then, the themes were broken down further into subthemes. Subthemes included:

Fears about participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community:

1. Fear of interacting with the community
 - a. fear Hispanic/Latino community members would be unwelcoming
 - b. fear Hispanic/Latino community members would see the students as invaders and not want them there
 - c. fear of the church/religious environment
 - d. fear Hispanic/Latino community members would be shy or afraid of outsiders
 - e. fear of not knowing what to expect when entering the community
2. Insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers
 - a. fear of speaking
 - b. shyness or lack of self-confidence
 - c. fear of not comprehending
 - d. fear of making errors

The coding procedure was based on the occurrence of key words. For instance, within item number two, ‘insecurity about their ability to communicate with native

speakers,' the subtheme a) 'fear of speaking' was coded when, in discussing fears in his/her reflection paper, the student wrote the word 'speaking' (or some closely related term), while b) shyness or lack of self-confidence was coded when the student wrote the word 'shyness' or 'lack of confidence' (or some closely related term). Differentiating between these types of communicative insecurities is important, as each represents a particular type of challenge the student must work to overcome and not all communicative insecurities are present in all students. For example, a student may be apprehensive of speaking Spanish, although her personality is neither shy nor lacking in self-confidence. In cases in which more than one subtheme was present in a student comment, the comment was coded for all applicable subthemes.

The coding process, in turn, informed the generation of hypotheses. Each hypothesis was numerically coded, recorded on a spreadsheet and tested by calculating the number of students for whom it held true. For example, the following hypothesis was generated: 'many students fear that Hispanic/Latino community members will be unwelcoming.' For this hypothesis, the variable 'fear that Hispanic/Latino community members will be unwelcoming' was coded for each participant on a 0-1 scale, where 0 indicates 'participant does *not* hold a fear that Hispanic/Latino community members will be unwelcoming' and 1 indicates 'participant holds a fear that Hispanic/Latino community members will be unwelcoming.' The number of students coded as 1 was then calculated, revealing that slightly over half of the participants (10/19) who held a fear of interacting with the community feared Hispanic/Latino community members would be unwelcoming, thus supporting the validity of the hypothesis.

Findings

Overview

Results supported previous research findings that many students were, in fact, reluctant to participate in the local Hispanic/Latino community. In their reflection papers students discussed several fears that kept them from spending time with Hispanics/Latinos. The two most common fears discussed were fear of interacting with the community and insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers. Student comments also demonstrated that service-learning helped them to overcome, or at least confront, these fears and to transform their perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos and themselves.

Hesitancy to Participate in the Hispanic/Latino Community

Comments from student reflection papers revealed that, for the majority of participants (20/25), this service-learning experience was their first time spending time in the local Hispanic/Latino community. Although the students were all Spanish majors with an assumed passion for the language and culture, many confided that they had been afraid to seek out this type of experience on their own. Students offered a number of reasons for not participating in the local Hispanic/Latino community, including never having thought of it and ignorance of the fact that a substantial Hispanic/Latino community existed near campus. However, the most common reasons given were fear of interacting with the community and insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers.

Fear of Interacting with the Community

The most common fear students expressed in their reflection papers was fear of interacting with the community (19/25). Undergraduate students (17/22) held this fear more often than graduate students (2/3). Two of three heritage speakers held this fear, as did the one native speaker.

Of these fears, the most frequently mentioned (10/19) was fear Hispanic/Latino community members would be unwelcoming. For example, Liliana, a heritage speaker, commented, "I imagined that in the church they would be serious and bitter if they did not like you."¹ Jamesha, a non-native speaker, said, "...my first visit I was shy and nervous because I did not know if they would welcome me and accept me within their church." Surprisingly, the native speaker also held the same fear. María explained that she felt very uncomfortable attending a pan-Latino evangelical church. She worried that, as a Mexican Catholic, she would have little in common with the church members and that they, therefore, would not help her to feel welcomed. She commented, "I had the impression that Latinos do not help each other...I thought that there were very few things that were shared between Central Americans and Mexicans."

The second most common fear (6/19) in this category was fear Hispanic/Latino community members would see the students as invaders and not want them there. For example, Margaret commented, "At first it was pretty uncomfortable for me to go to a church and observe the community. It seemed rude and invasive of their community and culture." Eva recounted, "I thought that they were going to think that I was a strange outsider who had come to judge them. I thought that they would not like that I was in their church."

The remaining fears were mentioned by a smaller number of students. Fear of the church/religious environment was discussed by 3/19 participants. These fears were primarily motivated by students' own previous experiences with churches. For instance, Owen, a homosexual young man who had faced terrible discrimination in the church in which he was raised because of his sexual orientation, said:

I learned that I have too much fear of the Christian church and I used to judge all of the Christians of the world by the actions and beliefs of the worst Christians from the most rural place in [this Southeastern state].

Although this fear is not specifically related to the Hispanic/Latino community, it is valuable for instructors considering service-learning placements in a church to bear in mind that it may be a significant fear for some students.

Of those who held a fear of interacting with the community, 2/19 students feared that Hispanic/Latino community members would be shy or afraid of outsiders, and therefore not like them. Andrea said, "[I thought that] the people were shy and they didn't like foreigners [non-Hispanics/Latinos]." Of those who held a fear of interacting with the community, 2/19 expressed fear of not knowing what to expect when entering the community. Emma shared the following:

I was so very nervous the first time I visited [the church], because I did not know what to expect...I learned a lot about how I feel and other Americans feel about the Hispanic population. It is interesting for me that prejudice is still here...

Heritage speakers, native speakers and graduate students. A commonality existed amongst heritage and native speakers concerning their fears of interacting with the community. Of the three heritage/native speakers who held a fear of interacting with the community, all shared the fear that Hispanic/Latino community members would be unwelcoming. Although they themselves were Hispanic/Latina, it is clear from their comments that these students felt like outsiders entering an unknown culture. In their reflection papers, each student focused on the differences between herself and the church members, discussing religious differences—Catholic versus Protestant—and cultural differences—pan-Latino culture versus her own native culture. Amongst graduate students there were no such commonalities.

Insecurity about the Ability to Communicate with Native Speakers

The second most common fear students cited was fear surrounding their ability to communicate with native speakers. Over half of participants (14/25) reported having this fear. While none of the graduate students held this fear, nearly two-thirds (14/22) of undergraduates did. Two of three heritage speakers held a fear related to their ability to communicate with native speakers.

Within this category there were four primary subcategories which students reflected on in their papers: fear of speaking, shyness or lack of self-confidence, fear of not comprehending, and fear of making errors. Students most frequently (10/14) mentioned having a fear of speaking. For example, Heidi said, “Sometimes I felt ashamed to speak with the people.” The second most common fear (7/14) expressed was related to students’ shyness or lack of self-confidence. For example, Sarah commented, “I learned about myself that the shyness with which I speak Spanish is paralyzing my learning experience.”

The third most frequently cited fear (6/14) was fear of not comprehending. Victoria, a heritage speaker, remarked, “When I went the first time, I was nervous because I did not know if I would understand the people, if it would be something difficult for me.” Fear of making errors was discussed by 5/14 of the participants. For example, Sandra reflected, “...my greatest obstacle to acquiring fluency in this language never really was the lack of people available to practice with me, but my fear of making errors when speaking aloud.”

A number of student reflections (8/14) incorporated more than one of the abovementioned subcategories. For example, the following excerpt from Margaret’s paper weaves together several fears related to ability to communicate with native speakers: “I am still afraid of initiating conversations with people in Spanish. I am afraid of making errors or failing to understand what the other person says. I don’t want to be rude or an ignorant American.”

Heritage speakers, native speakers and graduate students. While the native speaker student did not hold a fear related to their ability to communicate with native speakers, two of the heritage speaker students did. Both shared a common fear of not comprehending. While Liliana and Victoria spoke fluent Spanish and had no problems comprehending in the classroom setting, in their papers each reflected self-consciously about her lack of complete mastery of the Spanish language. Rather than focusing on the language skills they possessed, both students discussed the skills they were lacking and expressed concern that they might not understand dialectal differences or religious terminology.

Common among the graduate students was the fact that none held a fear of ability to communicate with native speakers. This result is not surprising, given that one of the students had been raised in Mexico, the second had lived abroad for a significant period of time, and the third had been married to a Spanish-dominant Colombian.

Overcoming Fears through Service-learning

Because of the abovementioned fears, most students (20/25) were wary of service-learning at the outset of the experience. However, as they spent more time in the community, students became increasingly comfortable and conveyed that they were appreciative of the opportunity. Some remarked that they were grateful for the “push” that service-learning provided, making it possible for them to get to know the local Hispanic/Latino community, an experience they never would have sought out on their own.

In their reflection papers many students (16/25) emphasized the role that service-learning had played in helping them overcome their initial fears of both the community and of communicating with native speakers. In each of the comments that follow, the student reflected on his/her initial fears and concerns and explained how he/she was able to overcome them through the service-learning experience. The following are two representative comments with respect to overcoming a fear of interacting with the community. Sandra recounted:

I was very nervous about entering the church the first time. All of my fears were alleviated quickly once I entered and everyone was very nice and helpful...now I see various members of the congregation as friends that I enjoy visiting regularly.

Vera said:

I thought that they did not want us there taking notes and observing. I was wrong...they seemed enthusiastic about our presence in their service. Also, they were willing to communicate, interact and share their community with us...If I would not have been able to overcome my fears and anxiety about religion, I would have missed a great opportunity to be part of the [local] Latino community.

With regard to overcoming insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers, many students offered reflections similar to this one from Margaret:

I am still afraid of initiating conversations with people in Spanish... But this project obligated me to work against these fears. I like that I had to initiate conversations and ask people personal things that I usually would not have the confidence to ask. I learned a lot that will help me with understanding different accents and dialects.

Overcoming fears through service-learning. Another means by which students were able to overcome their fears was through acquiring academic content knowledge and skills. As students gained linguistic knowledge and honed their observational skills, they began to feel more competent. This, in turn, increased their self-confidence and helped them to feel more at ease in the service-learning setting.

In their weekly assignments students were tasked with identifying different di-

lects of Spanish they heard in the community and noting corresponding linguistic features, including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features. They were also asked to observe and record instances of code switching, code mixing and borrowing and trends of language use amongst speakers of different generations. Student comments on their progress in these areas clearly illustrate a self-perceived growth in their linguistic knowledge and observational skills. For instance, Margaret said, “My abilities to recognize different dialects and listen for characteristics of each dialect when they are being spoken have improved...After a lot of practice in the church I can understand more easily.” Liliana remarked, “The pastor used a lot of code switching when he was speaking with us. This surprised me because I had never noticed it before [we studied it in class].”

In their reflections students often expressed feelings of confidence and pride in their accomplishments. Jamesha said, “During my recent visits to the church and in reviewing the previous chapters about the differences in the ways Hispanics speak Spanish, I have developed an ear for many linguistic characteristics...I am very proud to have this ability.” Mateo similarly remarked:

It is becoming easier and easier to hear specific linguistic characteristics that differentiate one cultural group from another. I am a little surprised about how well I am progressing in this aspect. It seems evident that the combination of the service-learning practice and our textbook are responsible for this progress.

Transforming Perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos and Themselves

Not only were students able to overcome their fears through participating in service-learning, but it is clear that the experience has also transformed their perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos, the local Hispanic/Latino community and themselves. A shift in perspective is evident in students’ final reflections, especially.

The following comments participants offered on transforming their perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos and the local Hispanic/Latino community are particularly inspiring. In each, the student reflects on his/her initial expectations and explains how these have changed after taking part in service-learning. Each of these reflections reveals substantial growth in the student’s level of cultural awareness and understanding.

For Emma, the service-learning experience helped her to uncover and address her own prejudices, as well as those of her community:

I learned a lot about how I feel and other Americans feel about the Hispanic population. It is interesting for me that prejudice is still here and this experience has helped to demonstrate that it is unnecessary in any case. The Hispanic population [here] is incredible and very diverse.

Kate and Andrea were able to progress to a new level of cultural understanding and empathy. Both initially perceived Hispanics/Latinos in their community as outsiders who were different from them and wary of strangers. However, through their service-learning experience, these two students came to view Hispanics/Latinos as more like themselves. Kate said:

Something I learned about this community is that it is an open and caring community. This community is not afraid of strangers or those who speak English...This experience taught me that...Hispanics are like us, they just speak a different language.

Andrea commented:

[I thought that] the people were shy and they didn't like foreigners [non-Hispanics/Latinos]...Now I know that the people are very nice and love when [other non-Hispanic/Latino] people visit the church. I know that the community is like a big family, like many of the churches I know.

María, the native Spanish speaker from Mexico, was surprised by the bonds that existed between Hispanics/Latinos of different nationality groups. She came to appreciate the sense of helpfulness and harmony amongst Hispanics/Latinos, which she encountered during her service-learning experience. She remarked:

Before I had the impression that Latinos do not help each other, but I think that I was a little bit wrong. I thought that there were very few things that were shared between Central Americans and Mexicans...I was very wrong—to maintain strong ties, it is not necessary to have the same traditions...to share and respect those traditions can also create unifying ties which are necessary for a harmonious life in your environment and with yourself.

Other comments illustrate a change in students' perceptions of themselves. Participants reflected especially on their personality traits and themselves as language learners. Deborah and Sandra discussed the ways in which their shyness, hesitancy and fear of making errors have impeded their Spanish language fluency in the past. With increased awareness and confidence gained from their service-learning experience, both feel equipped to take the necessary steps to progress and become more fluent in Spanish. Deborah reflected:

I also learned that I am shyer than I thought. I learned that I must make an effort if I want to speak Spanish fluently. It is going to require more from me, like talking to strangers, not thinking too much and not trying to speak perfectly every time that I open my mouth. I need to be patient with myself and understand that learning another language is a marathon, not a sprint.

Sandra said:

The most important thing that I have learned about myself from this experience is that my greatest obstacle to acquiring fluency in this language [was]...my fear of making errors when speaking aloud. I think that now that I have given this experience more thought, I hope that I will be capable of overcoming this fear and begin to speak more in a way that tries to send a content message instead of being grammatically correct all the time.

Heidi learned that, although her Spanish was not perfect, she was able to effectively communicate with native speakers and that, to her surprise, she could actually be understood. She commented:

Before visiting the church in [the local community], I felt very nervous because I did not know what I would find, how I should behave,

what would happen when the people asked me things and I could not respond...But they were impressed when a person could speak and no one placed a great importance on if the Spanish was correct or not. Communication and the feeling of being able to be understood is of great value.

Discussion

The findings of this investigation reveal that, on the whole, students were hesitant to participate in the local Hispanic/Latino community and that they held specific fears about spending time with local Hispanics/Latinos. The most common fears expressed were fear of interacting with the community and insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers. Fears of interacting with the community included fear Hispanic/Latino community members would be unwelcoming, fear Hispanic/Latino community members would see the students as invaders and not want them there, fear of the church/religious environment, fear Hispanic/Latino community members would be shy or afraid of outsiders, and fear of not knowing what to expect when entering the community. Insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers encompassed fear of speaking, shyness or lack of self-confidence, fear of not comprehending, and fear of making errors. Service-learning was beneficial in helping students overcome both their fear of interacting with the community and insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers. The experience also helped students to transform their perceptions of Hispanics/Latinos and themselves.

These findings are consistent with previous research. Several of the fears uncovered in the present study are also corroborated by Plann's (2002) investigation. Within the fear of interacting with the community category, fear Hispanic/Latino community members would be unwelcoming is similar to a fear expressed by one of Plann's participants: "I was worried that the students wouldn't welcome me or like me" (p.334). Fear Hispanic/Latino community members would see the students as invaders and not want them there was reported by another participant who said, "*Me sentí como una intrusa* [I felt like an intruder]" (p.334). In the insecurity about their ability to communicate with native speakers category, a third participant commented, "I was quite nervous about entering into an entirely different culture with my stumbling Spanish, ill-equipped to maneuver well in this environment" (p.334). Fear of making errors was also cited by Barreneche (2011) and Pellettieri (2011) as a fear held by their participants. Consistent with Pellettieri's (2011) findings regarding linguistic self-confidence, participating in the service-learning experience did increase my students' overall linguistic self-confidence and helped them to overcome their language-related fears.

While the findings of the present study clearly demonstrate that implementing service-learning helped students to overcome their fears and transform their perspectives, which particular features of the experience are responsible for this result? It seems that the combination of authentic interactions with Hispanics/Latinos and the practice of ongoing reflection may have been the most influential features for this particular group of students. Further research in this area would be needed to establish a stronger link between specific service-learning pedagogies and student outcomes.

As Gudykunst's (1993, 1998) research suggests, effectively managing anxiety and uncertainty requires the cultivation of mindfulness, helping the foreigner to shift out of "automatic pilot," in order to develop awareness of his/her own perspectives and openness to other perspectives. The student reflection papers provided students a space to do exactly this. In writing their reflections students were compelled to name and describe their own perspectives, as well as to open themselves to reconsidering those perspectives in light of what they actually observed and experienced in the service-learning placement. Essentially, the written reflection practice encouraged students to slow down their thought process, to become more mindful of the types of fears they held, and to work through those fears through facing, acknowledging and problematizing them, resulting, in many cases, in a shift in perspective.

Recall that ACTFL, likewise, advocates the practice of reflection as an effective means of exploring cross-cultural perspectives in the Global Competence Position Statement: "Reflect(ing) on one's personal experiences across cultures to evaluate personal feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions" (ACTFL, 2014, p.2). Undoubtedly, understanding one's own perspectives is a precursor to developing empathy toward and appreciation of the perspectives of others.

Limitations

While the findings of this investigation provide rich qualitative data on the topic of student fears and service-learning, its small participant pool and lack of random sampling limit the generalizability of the results. Fruitful directions for future research include studying the topic of student fears through a quantitative approach with a larger participant pool and a random sampling procedure in different types of universities and programs across diverse geographical regions and communities.

The study could have also been enhanced by the collection of more specific data regarding students' intercultural communicative competence. Future research might consider student fears and service-learning within the framework of Gudykunst's (1993) *Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Model* and intercultural adjustment training (Gudykunst, 1998). One potential direction for this research would entail providing students intercultural adjustment training prior to their participation in the service-learning experience, in order to examine the impact of this training on student fears, anxiety management, and the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this investigation have important implications for language educators and policy makers who endeavor to engage students in the local Hispanic/Latino community. As educators, an awareness of student fears is beneficial in informing our service-learning curriculum design. Knowing that students will likely come to the service-learning experience with some fears, we can structure the curriculum to provide a time and space for students to voice these fears, incorporating activities such as targeted reflection prompts, class discussions, readings, and sharing comments from students who have previously held and overcome similar fears. Introducing a more formalized pre-service-learning training such as intercultural

adjustment training (Gudykunst, 1998) may also be helpful, depending on time constraints and learner needs.

It is important to take into consideration the learners' proficiency level and learning context in selecting which activities to include, as student fears will undoubtedly vary to some degree based on these factors. For instance, beginning or intermediate Spanish language learners educated in a traditional foreign language classroom may fear that they will be unable to help native Spanish speakers at all, because of their limited language proficiency. In this case, the teacher could address this particular fear by ensuring that he/she had arranged service-learning placements appropriate to the learners' proficiency level and by implementing class discussion and role play of practical strategies students could use to make sure they were understood.

For advanced learners studying a particular academic content area, on the other hand, their primary fear may be that their speaking skills are imperfect and that they therefore will be judged harshly by native speakers. In this circumstance, an exploration of what it means to achieve communication versus perfection would be appropriate. Students could be asked to reflect on their own reactions to non-native English speakers they have encountered who could communicate, yet made some errors. The teacher might also invite a contact person from the service-learning community to class to share his/her perspective on the topic. While it is unlikely that students will enter the service-learning experience with no fear at all, taking these important steps can help students work through and overcome their apprehension more quickly and effectively.

Educational policy makers can help better prepare students to become engaged, globally-minded citizens by integrating service-learning more fully into the university curriculum. While most foreign language programs strongly advocate or require study abroad, few have a service-learning requirement. Yet, the Hispanics/Latinos students will most often encounter in their future lives and careers are those living in their local community. As the findings of this investigation suggest, service-learning has the potential to play a powerful role in helping students to transform their perspectives and cultivate a desire to interact with and serve the local Hispanic/Latino community.

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Appendix

Reflection Paper Writing Prompts

Reflection 1:

- Describe the site. Imagine that you are describing it to a person who has never visited. What is the physical space like? What is the atmosphere like? What is the purpose of the site/organization?
- Describe the people in detail. Imagine that you are describing them to someone who has never met them. What is their age, gender, nationality, place of origin, socioeconomic status, educational level, occupation, general background, etc.? Do they have children?
- What is your role at the site? How do you feel about this role?
- What were your expectations before arriving at the site? Have they changed after your first visit? How or why?
- Was there something about the visit that surprised you? What? Why did it surprise you?
- What impressions would you like to convey to the other students at our university or the residents of our city about this community/site?

Reflection 2:

- Which dialect(s) of Spanish do the people speak? How do you know? Which specific linguistic features do you observe that are associated with this/these dialect(s) of Spanish, according to our textbook? Give specific examples of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical characteristics.
- Which language(s) do the people speak with you? Amongst each other? With the leader of the organization/site? Which language(s) does the leader speak with you? With the other people?
- What are the easiest and most difficult parts of working at this site for you?
- Other observations/impressions?

Reflection 3:

- Which dialect(s) of Spanish do the people speak? How do you know? Which specific linguistic features do you observe that are associated with this/these dialect(s) of Spanish, according to our textbook? Give specific examples of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical characteristics.
- Choose one person from the community who has made a positive or negative impression on you. Describe that person. How or why has he/she impressed you?
- (How) has your perspective of the local Hispanic community changed because of this experience?
- How has your perspective of yourself, our city or society in general changed because of this experience?
- Other observations/impressions?

Reflection 4:

- Do you observe language mixing or code switching? Give specific examples.
- If there are multiple generations of people (grandparents, parents, grandchildren), which language(s) do the people of different ages speak with one another?
- What were your initial expectations of the community? Have they changed since your first visit? How or why?
- What surprised you most about this experience? Why?
- Which parts of the experience did you like the most? The least? Why?
- What did you learn from this experience about this particular community or the local Hispanic community in general?
- What did you learn from this experience about yourself?
- Other observations/impressions?

Endnote:

¹ This and all other quotes have been translated from the original Spanish by the author. All student names are pseudonyms.