

Thinking outside the classroom for practicing Spanish *

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Abstract: This community outreach project brought together secondary and post-secondary students through a collaborative project focused on the learning/teaching of the Spanish language. A total of 19 volunteer undergraduates (the facilitators) offered language practice to 30 volunteer students from a local high school in Vancouver. The project addressed a need for additional Spanish practice at the school. Moreover, the project offered teaching experience to the undergraduates. The latter was relevant because when joining the project, the facilitators demonstrated interest in language teaching as a future prospect. Drawing on the curriculum provided by the Spanish schoolteacher, the facilitators prepared language practice rich in hands-on activities, visual cues, and movement. These moments of authentic communication in Spanish allowed the high school students to fully embody the instructional language (Holmes, 2009). Likewise, the activities engaged students in oral interaction that stressed the usage-based nature of language (Langacker, 1987; Tyler, 2012). The cultural component was integrated through the activities, songs, and traditional games that the students and facilitators played. The mentorship sessions were conducted in the newly created Spanish Club at the high school. In short, the high school students and facilitators collaboratively constructed learning opportunities (Lantolf, 2000) in Spanish and outside of the classroom. Results from a survey completed at the end of the mentorship showed an overall support for the project. The high school students appreciated the chance to practice and reinforce what they learned in class while the facilitators valued the teaching experience and the opportunity to strengthen their own use of Spanish. I discuss these results in terms of learner autonomy.

Keywords: Spanish, community project, mentorship, language teaching, embodied learning

1 Introduction

In Western Canada, a primarily Anglophone region, the teaching and learning of Spanish at the secondary and tertiary levels appears primarily contextualized as guided learning that takes place within a classroom environment. Although the number of native Spanish speakers is on the rise in this area of the country (Statistics Canada, 2007), access to members of the Hispanic community remains elusive for many students. This situation translates into few opportunities for Spanish learners to experience “spontaneous authentic speech” (i.e., exchange of non-modified, spontaneous input) produced with a communicative intention (Navarro, 2012, p. 1596). For the most part, a teacher and instructional materials (e.g., textbooks, electronic resources) mediate access to language and cultural input. And students learn to function in Spanish following the *initiation-response-feedback* interaction mode (Cook, 2002) prevalent in language classes. As a result, teachers tend to control the

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communicative situation while students adopt a rather passive role. In practical terms, students become skilful at responding or following directions more than taking control to initiate a dialogue, ask questions, or complete linguistic functions that reveal more autonomy as language users.

There is also the curricular requirements of each program that teachers need to consider when planning lessons and designing practice activities. Students need to achieve mastery over the language curriculum that determines their promotion from one level to the next. Students' academic standing relies on their success when completing formal assessment. The difficulty of determining levels of linguistic performance makes it practical for teachers to measure comprehension and production of morphosyntactic constructions (e.g., tense or mood verb paradigms) rather than fluency. The latter appears more abstract for operationalization and measurement especially in multi-participant classes. This explains in part the over emphasis in instruction of the teaching of formal aspects of the language that still prevails.

A quick observation of textbooks (or other materials) reveals that learners process language from highly artificial contexts. Students read and listen to dialogues rich in formulaic language and with participants intervening in sequential order. Of course the aim is to present samples of pre-modified input that students can comprehend and teachers can utilize to draw attention on the grammar embedded in those interventions. Needless to say, these samples of Spanish only remotely exemplify what students will hear and process in an authentic dialogue. For one, Spanish is a pro-drop language i.e., native speakers favour omitting subject pronouns in oral discourse (e.g., *Ø fue a la casa* 'went home' but not *él fue a la casa* 'he went home'). The tendency is also for limiting the use of nominal phrases in subject position in sentences with transitive verbs (e.g., *el hombre* 'the man' [subject] *compró un libro* 'bought a book' [direct object]). Thus, provided that the referents have been clearly established in the discourse context, native Spanish speakers rely on the verb morphology to keep track of the agents (e.g., *compró un libro* 'bought a book') and/or the patients (e.g., *lo compró ayer* 'bought it yesterday'). What this implies is that in naturalistic communicative contexts, students rarely hear sentences with both subjects and objects overtly realized (Azevedo, 2009; Hualde, Olarrea, Escobar, 2006; Wheatley, 2006). Yet, this is the kind of pedagogical input that is abundant in Spanish instructional materials. One can anticipate the many challenges learners likely face when participating in authentic conversations. Close attention to the discourse context may be their only cue to keep track of who did what and for what purpose.

As to the cultural component, textbook authors have made important contributions to inform learners about the customs, habits, and traditions of Iberian and Latin American communities. Textbooks contain colourful passages that inform about the traditional Hispanic family, habits for interacting in social contexts, and favourite food habits to name a few (Zayas-Bazán, Bacon, and García, 2014). What those passages scarcely reveal though are patterns of authentic language usage. Even teachers who adhere to a communicative approach to instruction know that underlying students' oral production, there are specific contents that require practice. Not in vain, Cook (2002) describes the interactions in the language classroom as a mock-up of true dialogues in real life.

Clearly, the nature of Spanish learning in a classroom context limits the activities available for practice. Moreover, there is pressure to prioritize activities that align with the programs of instruction so that students achieve the expected learning outcomes

successfully. And as already mentioned, teachers emphasize practice activities around formal aspects of the language that do not leave sufficient room to grasp the naturalness of spontaneous discourse in Spanish. It is important to note that it is by no means our intention to create a detrimental impression of classroom learning. There is already enough evidence that supports the benefits of studying a new language in a classroom setting vis-à-vis direct exposure to it in a naturalistic setting (Ellis, 2002; Lightbown and Spada, 2014). Our aim, instead, is to motivate teachers to explore ways to enrich instruction by increasing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful interactions in Spanish. How feasible is it to organize more interactional activities when lesson plans are already filled to the brim with content? When and how could teachers create spaces rich in communicative interactions?

The community outreach project reported here addressed these questions by offering volunteer undergraduate learners of Spanish and a group of high school students a unique opportunity to collaboratively construct learning (Lantolf, 2000). The project called FHIS-UHill was organized as a co-curricular activity and it enabled the undergraduates to facilitate oral Spanish practice at the high school. This community project was motivated by an emerging body of evidence that demonstrates positive effects of engaging language learners in activities beyond the classroom (Navarro, 2012, 2013; Navarro and Wang, 2015; Pelletieri, 2011). Overall, students decrease anxiety levels and increase their desire to speak the target language (willingness to communicate) as well as renew their appreciation for the culture and people of the target community as I review next.

2 Speaking the new language beyond the classroom: Current evidence

The literature on Spanish Community Service Learning (CSL) in the United States reports on the linguistic, personal, and social gains of students who interacted with native speakers outside the classroom (Boyle and Overfield, 1999; Caldwell, 2007; Hellebrandt and Varona, 1999). For example, Pelletieri (2011) observed that students who completed a series of tasks outside the classroom (e.g., speak with Spanish-speaking friends, acquaintances, and strangers from the community) increased their self-confidence in the use of Spanish, were more willing to speak the language, and increased spontaneous communication in Spanish. Pelletieri acknowledged that the evidence from her study would not be easily achievable through traditional methodology and urged instructors to engage learners outside of the classroom.

In Western Canada, there has been a series of studies that like the CSL experiences mentioned above have yielded positive results in terms of personal and linguistic gains. For example, 10 undergraduates from a Spanish conversation class learned about customs and traditions while conversing with seniors at a Hispanic center. The spontaneity with which the dyads unfolded could hardly compare with the conversations students were accustomed to having in class. By the end of the experience there was a general sense that “learners fully profited from the rare opportunity of authentic communication with Spanish native speakers beyond the confinement of the classroom” (Navarro, 2012, p. 1597). Likewise, 10 volunteer undergraduates who completed an online Spanish-English tandem with Chilean undergraduates also reported positive feedback from this co-curricular experience outside the classroom (Navarro, 2013). Students in Canada valued learning about Chilean university life and improving their oral discourse in Spanish.

Likewise, Navarro and Wang (2015) observed positive effects from an after class Mandarin-English tandem. Analyses of survey results showed that the tandem participants more than a control group increased in willingness to speak Mandarin inside (0.38 vs. 0.06) and outside (0.71 vs. 0.21) the classroom by the end of the tandem. This tendency likely resulted from the tandem participants feeling less anxious of speaking Mandarin beyond the classroom. In short, this evidence (albeit still preliminary) suggests that activities in which learners experience authentic communication beyond the classroom enrich traditional instruction. Most of all, learners appreciate the personal and linguistic gains from their participation in activities that despite their heterogeneity (in type and methods) have consistently yielded similar positive results. So if it is not the activity, is it the fact that the event happens outside the classroom? Is it the lack of supervision? Or is it the realization that there can be a meaningful use of a language one is studying? I address these questions in the conclusion.

3 The FHIS-UHill Spanish mentorship

This experiential learning project involved volunteer students attending Grades 10, 11, and 12 from University Hill Secondary (hereafter UHill) and volunteer undergraduates (the facilitators) from the Spanish program of the Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies (FHIS) at the University of British Columbia. Both cohorts were attending traditional Spanish instruction; hence, the project was conceived as an enrichment of the language and culture between two distinct groups of Spanish learners. For the UHill students, the focus of the practice was the lessons they had studied in the classroom. For the facilitators, the opportunity for enriched practice resulted from a review of aspects of language and culture that they had already studied and had used for preparing the oral activities, and (whenever necessary) explanations of those same language and cultural lessons. After receiving approval from the school administration, the project was scheduled to run during the 2013–2014 academic year.

3.1 The participants

A total of 19 facilitators participated in the mentorship. The number of students varied along the academic year with fewer participants during critical moments in a term (e.g., exam periods). On average, there were about 10 facilitators available per month. The students responded to an invitation sent electronically by the author. The message promoted the project as an opportunity for language instruction that was of interest for students who envisioned teaching as a future professional endeavour. To comply with regulations from the local school board, all facilitators obtained a Police Records Check that allowed them direct access to the school students. At UHill there were a total of 13 students from the senior levels. All students joined the project voluntarily and only received 1% of their total grade for participating. The teacher applied the percentage to any classroom-based task or test.

As to roles and responsibilities in the project, the author was responsible for the design of the project, the training of the facilitators, and the overall support for the implementation of the mentorship. The high school Spanish teacher was responsible for distributing the curricular content taught in her classes, supervising the sessions, and organizing a series of cultural events. Crucial for the coordination between the

school, the facilitators, and the author was the active participation of the Student Leader. This is a position fulfilled by selected undergraduate students who are prepared to assume major coordination and leadership roles in experiential learning projects that involve the university and community partners. In this capacity, the Student Leader maintained all participants informed and coordinated via email. For example, the facilitators received from the Student Leader the language curriculum to be practiced, the schedule of sessions, and also the schedule of cultural events. In turn, the Student Leader attended and delivered practice sessions and co-organized the cultural events. It is important to mention that a deliverable of the mentorship was the creation of the Spanish Club at UHill. This became the context where students and facilitators met twice per week for a total of 20 weeks. As explained below, the project was contextualized within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics and language learning and teaching (Holmes, 2009; Langacker, 1987; Littlemore, 2007; Tyler, 2012). In short, this community outreach project was an unconventional attempt to enrich Spanish instruction outside the classroom.

3.2 Embodied Spanish learning at UHill

The practice sessions were prepared with the idea that the UHill students would make active use of Spanish, but not in a formal classroom environment. The Spanish Club functioned in a lounge whose dimension and implementation were conducive to have the students work in small groups, sit on the floor, move around, stand in circles, dance, etc. They could also write information on portable boards, use audiovisual technology, and handle art supplies (e.g., color paper, scissors, crayons) to prepare simple flash cards or drawings. The facilitators planned activities with a strong hands-on component (e.g., spelling words on paper with cut out letters; grabbing objects identified by their colors, etc.), visual cues (e.g., pictures and flash cards for oral descriptions, movie clips), and movement (e.g., switching positions while standing, dancing, forming circles). The idea was to involve students cognitively and physically so that they could think, feel, and become physically in contact with the world around them. The underlying notion is that the imagery of bodily movements has a bearing on how we perceive and categorize the world around us. More specifically, the information learners process visually (e.g., watch a person run) or process physically (e.g., enact instructions to sit or stand up) has a facilitative effect in our comprehension of word meanings and their use (Ellis and Cadierno, 2009; Holmes, 2009; Tyler, 2012). As such, the students executed actions that involved taking objects in and out of a container to practice *poner* ‘put in’, *sacar* ‘take out’; or placed objects in opposite locations to practice *arriba* ‘above’, *abajo* ‘below’, etc. During the 50 minutes that the sessions lasted, the UHill students embodied the Spanish language in ways the classroom rarely affords.

Although the idea was to integrate all language skills, there was an emphasis on listening comprehension and speaking through controlled responses (i.e., call and response activities), creative speech (i.e., open ended questions, unplanned discourse), singing songs, repeating tongue twisters, and playing games. As a result, the students became exposed to usage events that varied in frequency with which they heard and produced the vocabulary and grammatical forms. The underlying notion was that as humans, we are sensitive to input frequency i.e., the number of times we encounter and

register a language unit that may shape our learning process (Bybee, 2006; Ellis, 2008; Tyler, 2012).

As to the cultural component, this was integrated through many of the activities, songs, and games that the facilitators organized. For example, the facilitators had the students play traditional games (e.g., *El bachillerato*, *Romper la piñata*) that showed ludic aspects of the Hispanic community. The use of games was a recurrent activity to keep students engaged and enjoying a moment of camaraderie. Most of all, students perceived that the practice sessions were clearly not a formal time for instruction, but a way to have fun through the use and learning of the Spanish language. Worth mentioning are the three cultural events that enriched exposure to the customs and traditions of the Hispanic world. The first event involved the screening of a short Spanish-speaking movie subtitled in Spanish. The facilitators had the UHill students complete a series of follow up activities that included comprehension questions and acting out skits. In the second event, the students led by two graduate students from the same university learned to dance salsa steps. The third cultural event came to a closure of the project by the end of the academic year. The students and facilitators gathered in the schoolyard and played the traditional game *Romper la Piñata* 'Breaking of La Piñata'. Previously, the facilitators helped the students make the piñatas and stuff them with an assortment of candies and sweets (see pictures below).



Figure 1 Spanish movie night



Figure 2 Breaking of La Piñata

Holmes (2009) maintains that by incorporating cultural elements (e.g., food, music, literary work) of the target community to the language-learning context, there is a restructuring of stereotypes and beliefs about that particular community (i.e., students become acculturated). I in principle concurred with this position. However, overriding entrenched stereotypes might require some strategic treatment by the teacher. Drawing on the experience at the UHill Spanish Club, I argue that presenting cultural contents associated with moments of amusement in the target language predisposed young learners positively.

As reported further below, students by and large were enthusiastic of having learned cultural traits about the Hispanic community and they pointed out those that had likely been the most fun (e.g., typical foods, salsa dancing). What is important to stress is that learners begin to appreciate that their way of thinking about certain notions (e.g., personal space, demonstrations of affection) may differ from those of the target community. Yet, such a gap does not need to represent a threat. By contrast, students become sensitive and value these cultural differences. As mentioned earlier, the sessions at the UHill Spanish Club became moments where the facilitators and the

students learned and had fun together and beyond the classroom. In the next section I report evidence of the reception that the larger educational community expressed for this idea.

4 The FHIS-UHill and its impact in the educational community

There is an inherent degree of uncertainty associated to the idea of trying new materials, new activities, new methods for teaching and learning. We become accustomed to the safety of our instructional practices to the point that we might feel reluctant to explore something unknown. The FHIS-UHill project was clearly an atypical experience that in its first version it kept all those involved juggling unpredictable events. Could Spanish be a sufficient reason to attract students from highly distinct communities to collaborate? How reliable could the facilitators appear to their high school counterparts? Would there be enough participants to justify the investment of time and resources? What sort of impact could the project have in the rest of the educational community?

In retrospect, it seems limiting to attribute the positive outcome of the project to a single factor (e.g., the Spanish language). A more realistic explanation suggests the cumulative effect of a series of factors (e.g., common interest for the language and culture, embodied language practice, opportunity to connect with senior students, experiencing language instruction) as an explanation for the satisfaction with which the project was received. For example, leading authorities from the local School Board publicly manifested an enthusiastic support for this initiative and the school administration envisions extending the mentorship to students in lower Grades. Coverage of one of the cultural events appeared on the electronic version of the Vancouver School Board newsletter informing the educational community at large of the partnership that university and secondary school learners established to practice the language and culture. But what do we know about the opinions and reactions of the participants?

In what follows I present results of a survey administered to both cohorts after the project finished. The aim was to motivate students to reflect about their participation in the mentorship and its impact as a learning experience. The survey inquired about what the participants learned, how much they liked Spanish after the event, how much their knowledge of the Hispanic culture increased, and whether they would recommend the mentorship to their peers. Typically reflection surveys aim to collect information on what the students who reached out to a community partner learned and their overall satisfaction with the experience. Voices from the community partners are less systematically collected. On this opportunity we determined that it was crucial to gather reflections from both groups, hence the UHill students were also included. The nature of the mentorship as an educational experience requires the full understanding of not just how the high school students reacted to an external intervention (i.e., the undergraduate students in their educational milieu), but of equal importance, the understanding of whether the UHill students perceived this intervention as valuable to the point that they would want to invite their peers to participate in the project. The reflection survey was circulated among all participants anonymously and completion was voluntary. In total, six facilitators and 15 UHill students returned their surveys completed as I explain next.

5 The FHIS-UHill and its impact on the student participants

The data from the post-mentorship survey are presented as follows. For each question, I report numerically the overall tendencies from both groups. In addition, I illustrate the tendencies with examples from the protocols collected. Comments on the main trends follow each table.

Table 1 Summary of what participants learned from the mentorship

Spanish facilitators	High school students
<p>•(N = 3/6) <i>I learned that the students need an informal yet safe environment in which they can practice their Spanish freely and without the fear of making mistakes. (#2, F, 19)</i></p>	<p>73% (N = 11/15) •<i>Helped me remember stuff learnt in class better. (Grade 10, F, 15)</i></p>
<p>•(N = 2/6) <i>I learned some effective teaching strategies, such as using visual aids like flashcards or games on the whiteboard to keep the attention students. (#5, F, 22)</i></p>	<p>20% (N = 3/15) •<i>How you sometimes just need to relax and let the Spanish flow. (Grade 11, F, 16)</i></p>
<p>•(N = 1/6) <i>Learned how to think on my feet. Feelings went from nervous to more comfortable as I learned how to navigate the environment. (#4, M, 21)</i></p>	<p>7% (N = 1/15) •<i>I learnt to cooperate with others and have fun with Spanish.</i></p>

To the question of what participants learned from the mentorship, both groups identified different yet interrelated aspects. In the case of the facilitators, Table 1 shows protocols that ranged from a view of the experience as a positive learning space to professional and personal gains. For example, three facilitators stressed the need to build non-threatening learning spaces where freedom to speak Spanish replaces an error-sanction format. The latter is unfortunately the kind of learning context often associated to Spanish learning (or any other language) in a classroom. Students are well aware that an instructor is constantly weighing their comprehension or production of Spanish. In other words, the opportunities for students to freely talk in Spanish are few considering that we have specific curricular objectives to achieve and time is a constant limitation. The fact that half of the participants mentioned the non-threatening environment at the UHill Spanish Club is reassuring (also see the reflection of a Grade 11 student). It is important to keep in mind that these facilitators are students who envision pursuing language teaching as a future prospect. Therefore, one might conjecture that having seen students behave linguistically in “an informal yet safe environment” might motivate them to reproduce a similar positive environment with their own future students.

Reflections from the UHill students revealed that to them the mentorship was a reinforcement of classroom learning. Considering the reflection of the tenth grade student that summarizes what 73% of her peers also shared that it was an effective

reminder of the Spanish learned in class. From the perspective of the project, this result is highly promising because it reveals that students perceived a direct benefit from their participation. As mentioned earlier, the FHIS-UHill project intended to augment the instruction students were receiving in the classroom and the overwhelming response from students appeared to confirm that it did. Whatever possibility there might be for a replication of the project (at UHill or any other institution) will need to consider this notably positive response. In what follows, I discuss the effect of participation in the project on the on the participants' increased liking of Spanish.

Table 2 Summary of the participants' reflections about their liking the Spanish language after the mentorship

Spanish facilitators	High school students
100% (N = 6/6) Yes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Because I realize how many words and grammar concepts I actually know pretty well and how diverse the language is. Some of the students were even able to teach me some new things, which was exciting. (#6, M, 22) 	73% (N = 11/15) Yes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I even use some Spanish with my friends or while playing video games! •I got to know so much more through the Spanish Club. I love it. •Yes because it is easier and more fun to understand. (Grade 11, M, 15)
	13% (N = 2/15) No opinion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I can't say I like it more. I never really "liked" Spanish language to begin with. I see languages as something essential to one's life so I don't have much opinion about.
	13% (N = 2/15) About the same <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •About the same. I like it still.

Worth repeating is that the FHIS-UHill project included students whose needs for additional Spanish practice overlapped in important ways. Thus, the question about a possible increase in liking the language post-mentorship was pertinent to both groups. Any linguistic gains as a result of the mentorship would have an impact on both cohorts. Table 2 shows that all six undergraduates confirmed an increase in their liking of Spanish and a similar tendency was observed among 73% of the UHill respondents. Unfortunately, we lack data on the topic of liking Spanish prior to the experience, but we can assume that both groups were composed of motivated students who were already appreciative of the language.

It is perhaps more interesting to consider that although both groups ended up liking the language more, this reaction was motivated by different reasons. Take the case of the facilitators, for example, who performed a dual role as mentors and learners. At UHill, they were the more competent learners who supported their junior peers with practice and language explanations. Yet, they remained learners in their own university programs. The protocol #6, M, 22 in Table 2 suggests a possible effect of wearing two hats. On the one hand, the student realized how much Spanish he already knew, something that was certainly useful at UHill (*I realize how many words and grammar concepts I actually know pretty well*). On the other hand, there was an explicit

acknowledgement that there was still more to learn (*and how diverse the language is*). And interestingly enough, the facilitator acknowledged that some of this new knowledge came from the target population of the mentorship: the UHill students! The latter is a clear example of the sort of collaborative learning that defined the FHIS-UHill project. The facilitators helped their junior cohorts to improve their use of Spanish and, in turn, this group also helped the senior counterparts to advance their own use of Spanish.

For the UHill students an increased liking of Spanish after the experience was triggered by different reasons. Notice the student (Grade 11, M, 15) who mentioned using Spanish with friends and when playing video games. Clearly, these were activities in which the student engaged in using Spanish beyond the classroom much like what the facilitators were doing in the mentorship and the evidence discussed in Section 2. In other words, the general tendency observed among the UHill students aligned with the evidence that is beginning to emerge in Western Canada. Students who engage in activities using the target language beyond the classroom tend to increase their willingness to communicate in it as a result of experiencing moments of authentic target language usage (Navarro, 2012, 2013; Navarro and Wang, 2015). In the next section I report and discuss on the tendencies observed concerning the question about knowledge of the Hispanic culture after the experience.

Table 3 Summary of Participants’ Reflections About Their Liking the Customs, Habits, and Values of the Hispanic Culture After the Mentorship

Spanish facilitators	High school students
100% (N = 6/6) No	80% (N = 12/15) Yes
<i>Because I am Hispanic, my cultural knowledge remains the same after the experience. Nonetheless, I do believe the student’s [sic] did learn a little bit more, especially through the films we watched.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>I have learnt a lot about the Hispanic culture like the traditional Hispanic festivals.</i> •<i>One of my “facilitators” went to Spain “like” Spanish and we talked about her experience there.</i>
	Activities enjoyed most: Spanish movie night, the salsa dancing, La Piñata

The tendencies with respect to a possible increase in cultural knowledge differed between the two groups. While the facilitators acknowledged no change, the UHill students reported the opposite. For example, 83% of the students confirmed to have learned more about the class content that related to the culture of the Hispanic world. For example, one student mentioned learning about traditional Hispanic festivals while another stated that he/she learned about Spain from the personal experience narrated by one of the facilitators.

The UHill students also talked about the Spanish movie night as one of the most popular cultural activities organized. It is important to reiterate that in order to enrich the presence of cultural elements a movie screening and two additional activities (salsa dancing and Breaking La Piñata) were organized on different dates during the academic year. It is possible that the design of the movie screening in that it actively engaged students is what contributed most to the positive impact of the event. For

example, before the screening, the students reviewed key words and expressions so that they would be better prepared to comprehend the four and a half minute movie. There was also important discussion about the accent variety the students were going to listen to. Ideally the actors would need to speak a standard Spanish with sounds clearly articulated and spoken at a moderate speed. The use of subtitles in Spanish was also intended to reinforce comprehension. Finally, the simplicity of the story line that involved a woman and a man conversing in a supermarket and the unexpected turn of events at the end also contributed to the student's amusement. After the screening, the students worked with the facilitators in small groups and answered a series of comprehension questions. The goal was to make sure that all students comprehended the story and could use the thematic elements of the movie to prepare their own skits. At the end, the students performed their skits and received prizes for their participation.

As observed, the movie screening was a comprehensive instructional activity through which the students embodied the Spanish language cognitively, physically and even emotionally. The section that follows contains the participants' responses to the question of whether they would suggest the experience to their mates. Ideally, we would like to see more students joining the mentorship and there is no better endorsement than one coming from a student who has already gone through the experience.

Table 4 Summary of the participants' reflections of whether they would recommend the mentorship to their peers

Spanish facilitators	High school students
100% (N = 6/6) Yes <i>Absolutely. Anyone with the slightest interesting [sic] in teaching or youth or even just Spanish can get something out of this experience. (#2, F, 19)</i>	93% (N = 14/15) Yes <i>•If they want to learn in a more interactive way with people of a higher level. (G11, M, 15)</i>
<i>Yes, because it is a great way to help others in the community and to review your own Spanish vocabulary and grammar. Also, the students and volunteers were awesome and it was really fun! (#5, F, 22)</i>	<i>•Language learning cannot progress just by following class material or doing homework. You definitely need extra help. Because they taught me a lot of Spanish and they are nice and patient. (G10, F, 14)</i>
	1/15 Maybe (G12, M, 17)

Table 4 shows that both groups overwhelmingly agreed to the idea of recommending the mentorship to their peers. All six facilitators and 93% of the UHill students responded affirmatively. No student responded negatively. There was a single UHill respondent who manifested uncertainty and unfortunately the student did not elaborate on his feelings about the project. The protocols from the facilitators stressed some of the building blocks of the mentorship as arguments to engage their own peers in this experiential learning opportunity. For example, they mentioned the teaching experience, the help to the community, and the possibility to work on their own Spanish by reviewing vocabulary and grammar. The UHill students also pointed out some crucial arguments of the project by first stressing the instructional nature of the

experience, the opportunity for interacting with more advanced learners, and the benefits of additional practice for enriching instruction. Clearly these were among the fundamental reasons that triggered the project and students captured them all accurately.

One last point has to do with the impression that both groups produced on each other and that certainly had a strong effect on the outcome of the experience. Consider the protocol from the facilitator #5 who described her fellow facilitators and the UHill students as “awesome”. We can see an equally positive reflection in student (G10, F, 14) who identified the facilitators as “nice and patient”. For a project that so heavily depended on collaborative learning, the opinion that the participants had of their teammates appeared to be a crucial aspect in the building of trust and positive interdependence (Stahl, 1994) that are necessary to make all participants welcome and appreciated.

6 Conclusion

The FHIS-UHill, an exploratory co-curricular activity that connected students from secondary and tertiary levels in the practice of Spanish, yielded positive results. Reflections from both cohorts were indicative of an overall consensus on the benefits of this experience. Learners at University Hill Secondary valued the mentorship, because it enhanced classroom instruction. The newly created Spanish Club was a nonjudgmental forum where the students and facilitators met to speak Spanish in a comfortable and relaxed manner. The undergraduates appreciated the opportunity to experience teaching and work on their own mastery of the Spanish language. Both cohorts overwhelmingly agreed to the idea of recommending the mentorship to their peers. This positive impression may help to incorporate even more participants the next time there is a replication of the mentorship. Summarizing, the evidence collected on this pilot version of the mentorship aligned with the studies reviewed in Section 2.

By retaking our initial idea to motivate Spanish teachers to enrich instruction by increasing opportunities for authentic interactions, we can see that a pattern is beginning to emerge in Western Canada. Most importantly, there is a growing tendency for students to report positive linguistic and personal gains from their intervention. Drawing on the variety of the projects and the consistency of the results, I claim that students’ satisfaction has not been tied to one experiential learning activity in particular since similar observations have been collected across all of them. I acknowledge that like the activities, the students’ reflections have not been collected using the same instrument. Thus, variability in data collection method is considered a drawback. In any case, our point here is to identify as a unifying element the degree of autonomy that learners achieve and that I argue underlies the linguistic and personal gains reported across projects.

Our initial observation suggests that student autonomy in projects beyond the classroom emerges from the combination of several factors. For example, during the FHIS-UHill mentorship, the facilitators functioned independently to a great degree. The high school Spanish teacher supervised the sessions, but she did not control or determine what the facilitators implemented for practice. Likewise, the nature of the UHill Spanish Club allowed the high school students to feel less constrained than they would normally feel in the classroom. What this means is that all participants likely

felt more in control (i.e., more autonomous) as well as more responsible for their participation that in turn boosted their self-esteem as Spanish users.

In other words, participation in the Spanish Club implied that the students took control of their linguistic participation. That is, both the facilitators and the high school students could ask questions, initiate the dialogues or stop interventions according to what was necessary at the time of communication. There was no instructor who led the interactions, but the students themselves organized their participation. I argue that this autonomy is in itself a reason for feeling that the use of the target language is meaningful and realistic.

Clearly, none of the complementary activities to the language classroom reviewed earlier happened in a native Spanish-speaking environment. So we feel hard-pressed to claim “true” authenticity for the linguistic interventions. However, the fact that the students have more independence to determine when and what they say in the target language adds an element of genuineness to the communicative situations. At UHill, the activities in which the facilitators and the high school students interacted were intended to embody the language more holistically; hence students could have a sense of living moments of authentic communication. Simply put, the activities students performed in the mentorship went beyond the mere repetition of coursework and the mechanical drilling type of exercise that often lacks any communicative purpose. The interventions students produced in the mentorship had a communicative and ludic motivation.

I close by citing a reflection written by a Grade 11 student. His words are revealing of the general sentiment of appreciation conveyed by the school students: *Thank you for your efforts. I really appreciate that students from UBC actually came and sat down to help us learn Spanish when they are so clearly busy enough.*

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