

# An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study of Spanish Literature with Theater

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*I hear and I forget*  
*I see and I remember*  
*I do and I understand.*  
(Old Chinese Proverb)

The current trend in foreign language programs in Georgia, and in fact, most of the country, is for students to study Spanish rather than French or German. American students are quite practical in selecting this language, as it is the most needed in the fields of business, education, and the health professions. The traditional approach to offering a liberal arts degree in Spanish is to begin with 2 years of language courses focusing on the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, a definite shift occurs when students declare a major in Spanish and begin upper-level courses. The communicative approach for the language courses becomes a lecture course for literature classes, much like the correspondent classes in first language (L1) literature courses. Students spend the bulk of their time reading and writing outside of class and listening in class. The methodology of second language (L2) teachers calls for a re-orientation of our approach to integrate the teaching of literary texts into the general approach of teaching the target language with attention to all four skills.

Studying the golden-age literature of Spain presents unusual challenges for the typical Spanish major. To begin with, the language of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain is akin to

Shakespearean English; that is to say, comprehension is difficult at best because it is laden with archaic terminology and verb conjugations. To add to the mix, Spanish dramaturgy of the period was rhymed and incorporated several types of poetic meter. Cultural/historical context, character analysis, thematic development and authorial intent are other aspects included in examination of the three genres of that period's literature. Current research on learning and reading comprehension indicates that students will not necessarily be able to transfer reading or even study skills from their native language to a foreign language course (Chamot & Kupper, 1989, p. 13) which makes the prospect of teaching literature in L2 classes even more challenging. Abilities to communicate in both speaking and writing are necessary to successfully participate in the learning process without mere rote memorization of facts. Research has long demonstrated that language competence is, in fact, the best predictor of reading success in L2 classes (Alderson, Bastein, & Madrazo, 1977), clearly suggesting that the L2 student must consistently and continually follow the learning curve begun in the introductory and intermediate language classes. If language competence correlates to reading success, the same must hold true for competency in oral proficiency for class discussions and oral presentations. It must continually be developed and practiced then, even in literature courses.

In my experience, Spanish majors often note that it is embarrassing for them to announce to their family and friends that they are specializing in Spanish since the

immediate response is to request that they say something in Spanish. More often than not, they are stymied by a lack of experience in extemporaneous speech and suffer from a severe lack of confidence. Granted, the most difficult of the four skills in a foreign language is that of speaking because it requires the most practice; however, the reality of most foreign language programs is that most classes have 25 to 30 students per class which does not allow for much speaking by the individual student in a 50- or 75-min time period. Given this quandary, it is not surprising that students lament their lack of oral proficiency; what *is* surprising is that despite these constraints, the great majority continue to plod through upper-level literature classes in hopes of learning to speak Spanish well.

The teacher of L2 literature also faces challenges, but of a different sort: we must contextualize the history, culture, and literature of Spain so that students gain an appreciation and understanding of it. However, teachers are reluctant to spend an inordinate amount of time on syntax, phonetics, and vocabulary because literature is necessarily the primary focus of literature courses. The dichotomy between L1 and L2 literature classes begins here because the professor must necessarily pose comprehension questions in depth and address vocabulary enrichment before being able to ask a few—if any—analytical questions. Also, most students are trained to depend entirely upon a professor to explain the meaning and importance of literary canon. Generally the majority of student papers are “reseñas,” little more than plot summaries with some of the professor’s points regurgitated. Especially for the L2 student whose individual abilities and background may lack the linguistic

competence and personal confidence to negotiate meaning on his/her own terms—especially in class discussions, the teacher is expected to interpret and present pre-digested canonical analysis of Spanish literature. As Mueller and Rehorick (1984) ask, “Is it any wonder that colleagues in charge of such courses often express their frustrations at finding their students alienated, resentful, and bored?” (p. 475). The challenge then appears to be how to teach a literature course and, at the same time, advance the speaking skills of L2 students.

Using drama and theater arts to enhance an L2 classroom is not new, but rather common practice in communicative classrooms (e.g., Haggstrom, 1992). The mere role-play of question-and-answer exercises between classmates wherein students practice meeting, greeting, and introducing themselves is standard practice in most beginning-level courses. Games, interviews and oral reports also give the fledgling L2 learner opportunity to speak without textual support. Although these are excellent exercises, it is quite rare for students to hold conversations of any length that are contextualized beyond the classroom. Once in a literature course, developing oral proficiency is virtually abandoned. Of course, the primordial goal of the Golden-Age course is for students to learn to analyze and appreciate literature; but it is not impossible to do so while also improving their ability for spoken discourse.

Using theater, especially comedy, is ultimately the most effective methodology in engaging students in analysis of literary texts. Encouraging them to address a text as a performance medium requires them to become much more critical in approaching the text. According to Frye (1984), “Every effort of criticism is a re-creation” (p. 992). Ideally, as educators we want to develop the creative as well as the cognitive abilities of our L2 students using inductive questions. As both

reader and actor, they must negotiate meaning in written discourse as independent thinkers. They must understand the motivation of their characters as well as the contribution that those characters make to the plot. They learn to appreciate the development of character types, to recognize the appropriate style of expression for different character types. They examine the necessity of scene changes, costume effects, and the symbolism in stage properties of the period. Theatrical roles require the student to participate actively with the literary text, re-creating the text on stage, becoming part of it, just as it becomes part of them.

More importantly from the student's perspective, participating in an L2 theatrical production produces immediate and extremely powerful motivation to study and practice amelioration of pronunciation. Students faced with acting in a play spend an enormous amount of time studying and analyzing the language of the characters in order to render the appropriate reaction on stage and to understand the syntax and vocabulary well enough to deliver the line with the right inflection and intonation. Basic pronunciation and the attendant liaisons or native contractions of words come clearly into focus as students invariably wish to pronounce the words as well as possible. Native speakers can be sought to aid in addressing pronunciation difficulties by tutoring students individually or simply by recording the text for students to study and to practice in the language laboratory.

Krashin (1992) proposed the "Affective Filter Hypothesis" as a means of facilitating student learning. Creating a safe environment means, simply put, an environment where it is not only natural to

make mistakes, but normal and even expected as part of the learning process. Most foreign language students hate to be "put on the spot" when the teacher asks a question. They would rather remain passive in class, preferring to be silent rather than be wrong. Within the active context of a play rehearsal, students learn that making mistakes in speaking is not only natural but also an expected part of the learning process.

Another important point to note is that of the role of memory within the theatrical construct. According to McDonough (1981), there are two types of memory abilities: short-term and long-term. He explains that lists of indiscriminate vocabulary words and other concepts are more difficult to retain in long-term memory, especially if there is no context (hence contextualized vocabulary in L2 textbooks), but also if the context is different from that of the original learning. In the classroom L2 students need to be introduced and reminded of new concepts many times before they fully understand and retain them. For the L2 teacher, it is almost impossible to create and to sustain a context for different types of vocabulary while maintaining the same classroom venue and seating arrangements. The freedom that a theatrical stage offers, along with the attendant costumes and props, very quickly allows for contexts to be adapted, rehearsed many times, and committed to memory *physically* as well as mentally. As McDonough explains:

Any foreign language learner dealing with a new word (which is at first little more than a nonsense syllable to him, after all) needs to encounter that word frequently, perhaps in different contexts as long as the sense is identical, either by voluntary search or by involuntary discovery in texts and exercises. At each encounter the saving of time in recognition or

relearning (which can be equated here) will increase... (p. 65).

The L2 learner is able to revive and to reconstruct language verbally using new syntax and facilitate their vocabulary by the experiential learning completed in scene after scene and rehearsal after rehearsal, thus enabling retention by exposure to language in a variety of situations.

The other important point emphasized by psychologists when examining the challenges of L2 learning is that of motivation. Not to be confused with enthusiasm, student interest arouses energy, enjoyment, and perseverance, but the quality of success depends on the student's own scale of *values* (McDonough, 1981). Within the context of a theatrical presentation, peer pressure of the troupe also contributes as incentive and motivation.

### **Case Study: Application to a Literature Course**

As an experienced actor and director involved in many prior foreign language theatrical productions outside of the classroom setting, I have witnessed the dramatic increase in confidence, self-esteem, interest in, and passion for language learning by L2 students as well as their subsequent facility in oral proficiency. In order to facilitate my students' learning using some of these techniques, I recently prepared a golden-age literature course for a group of 25 Spanish majors who had never acted before and decided to add another discipline as a tactic to re-orienting my approach to literature. I incorporated theatrical presentations in an effort to address three different issues: (a) the lack of development in my students' oral

proficiency skills, (b) their confidence in speaking, and (c) their collective dread of studying literature.

With a series of carefully planned theatrical projects, students would be empowered eventually to appropriate a literary text, to negotiate meaning, and to regenerate the message and flavor of the culture encoded within, on their own linguistic terms. Students would read and then assume interpretive authority by rewriting the text in their own words, thus demonstrating cognitive understanding and exercising syntactical development. After memorizing and rehearsing, they would perform the text as a theatrical presentation, thus ameliorating their facility for speech and gaining confidence.

I had experimented with this approach before with short one-act scenes, but never with literary canon such as the *Trickster of Seville* and *Don Quixote*. This strategy was inspired by Les Essif's (1998) article "Teaching Literary-Dramatic Texts as Culture-in-Process in the Foreign Language Theater Practicum: The Strategy of Combining Texts." As Essif states, "[m]uch of the problem stems not from our recognizing the text as a canonical vehicle of authorial intention, but simply from its status as a text, a finished cultural product" (pp. 24-25). I incorporated other components as well, including class discussions, many guided and open-ended written assignments, debates, and lectures to thoroughly analyze the texts and to address the development of all four linguistic skills.

The first genre, typically the most difficult and agonizing for L2 students is that of poetry. In order to inspire student confidence and to begin training them to speak Spanish in public, I began with the passive exercise of memorizing a sonnet to declaim in class. As the class progressed, we discussed the meter, the rhetoric, the vocabulary, and the musicality of the language. Native speakers in

the language laboratory tended to prefer helping with pronunciation. Students were left to interpret meaning and to relate to the sonnet on their own terms. They rehearsed over and over, feeling out the inflection and the intonation. They studied the meanings of the words, argued the interpretation amongst themselves and spent much more time one on one with the text than if I had assigned it as a reading. Professors from other departments commented that they heard Spanish everywhere on campus: “What is going on?!” Learning that poetry was written, not to be read, but to be declaimed out loud to an audience, the students began to appreciate the beauty of the language and to ameliorate their pronunciation. Grades were based on pronunciation, elocution, inflection, and precise memory; all verbal and mental skills only. I allowed students whose minds went blank to sit down and try again. The particularly sensitive renditions surprised and impressed spectators and they applauded spontaneously for those with creative interpretations. In this atmosphere, students began to encourage each other and applaud as one by one they successfully recited their sonnets.

The next class was a creative attempt to utilize the resources on our campus to build student confidence. The class was held at the Pine Valley Leadership Course. This class period had been carefully scheduled to build verbal confidence and to advance the sense of collaborative learning. Pine Valley was established as part of North Georgia College & State University’s leadership training, modeled after the US Army Ranger training ropes course. It offers courses in low ropes and high ropes, as well as several teambuilding exercises to enhance group cohesion, team

communication, and leadership skills. Similar to the Outward Bound experience, this training course removes students from the academic setting and places them in a situation where each person is equally vital to success of the group, much as a theater troupe is dependent upon peer collaboration. It is also particularly designed to push people outside of their comfort zone to develop confidence and their potential to meet new challenges. Special Forces LTC William Shaw, Professor of Military Science at Auburn University, frequently states in speeches and presentations that asking people to achieve something very difficult re-orientes their perception of reality and expands their scope as to what is possible to achieve. Setting the environment in a completely different arena wherein they confront the unknown gives them a sense of growth that stimulates individual self-understanding and develops their personal capabilities. Facilitated by two Airborne Rangers, the class spent an hour working together on a few team-building exercises that exploited oral communication skills, particularly that of listening—a skill that is of utmost importance in theater as well as the classroom. They were debriefed after the exercise and discussion focused on problem-solving. This class was conducted entirely in Spanish. Next, students were offered personal challenges: one of which was to climb a 40-foot telephone pole, stand on top, and jump for a trapeze swing about 10 feet away. Of course, safety was primary with expert Rangers facilitating the exercise; but the crucial element was that the exercise is carefully designed to optimize human fear of death. Despite misgivings, students bonded in groups to encourage each other through the challenge. Jumping the “pamper pole”—as it is affectionately called on campus—spoke volumes about their untapped personal resources. To face a very real fear of heights,

in front of spectators, to risk embarrassment and failure, and to be successful, replicated on some level the very real fear of speaking Spanish in public.

The next genre was that of the golden-age novel, *Don Quixote de la Mancha* and some examples of picaresque literature, both wonderfully contrasting texts that incorporate distinct characteristics. As with the group work on poetry, I offered a list of questions about the novels that students discussed in small groups in class and summed up as oral reports at the end of class. My role was to proffer inductive questions to explore, guiding their discoveries, facilitating the discussion—but never controlling the outcome. It was gratifying to see them self-correct, both with grammar and understanding of the texts. After analysis of the texts, I implemented Vygotsky's theory (Prawat, 1993) for peer-teaching/learning in small groups and had students self-select groups of 4 to 5 for the novel project. I assigned students to write a 5 min monologue for one of the characters in the novels. They were to consider the language and the spirit of the character as well as the author's intent. This project required--but inspired--all to read the text with great care. This exercise was not designed to challenge the objective authority of the text; rather, it was to advocate expressing creative communication between L2 student learners and literary canon as both a cultural and communal process (Essif, 1998). Each group monitored all grammar, practiced pronunciation, and even came up with costumes for the class presentation. The students' language learning process continued within the context of mutually supportive peer groups, distinctly different from the teacher-centered lecture class.

I was very pleased with their individual presentations but, frankly, shocked at how well they encapsulated the crux of each character. For Quixote, his age, his insanity, and his powerful sense of honor all came across unmistakably; but the humor, the wit, and the "feel" of the text they wrote was surprisingly spot on. Their knowledge and understanding of the characters profoundly affected their appreciation of the literature; they had critically analyzed the text for character development using all four skills in small groups to produce their own creative text, but they had each individually stepped into the role of verbalizing this subjunctive interpretation as an actor. Studies have demonstrated that simulation and language learning may be seen as mutually supporting since simulation encourages language learning (Crookall & Oxford, 1990). Although a simulation of extemporaneous speech, this activity culminated in developing oral communication skills and bolstering student confidence.

After the success of the second project, the enthusiasm for the class and confidence in their abilities had mushroomed such that the final project was accepted with cheers. We began the final phase of study: the theater of Tirso de Molina, Lope de Vega, and Calderon de la Barca. The first two projects had been carefully structured to build up their pronunciation, memory skills and confidence, to empower them to analyze a text and to communicate it creatively with their own level of verbal expression. The final project was for the class to choose a three-act play among those we read, to rewrite it in modern Spanish and to perform it for a *public* audience. Instead of groans or panic attacks, students met the project with cheers!

I divided the class into three small groups and each chose an act to write. I limited each act to 10, double-spaced pages, telling them to reduce and to regenerate the

text into the critical information, important character development, and any creative flavor they perceived as necessary for maintaining the spirit of the text. The textual reduction was not as dramatically minimalist as that of Essif's (1998) production of *Le Roi Ubu*, but it allowed students to negotiate meaning of the script as an author as well as a performer. I made all students responsible for equal amounts of text, and each exchanged scripts to monitor grammar and plot snafus, and to critique ideas of the others. In rehearsals, I taught them the basics of theatrical presentation for blocking, projecting their voices, stance and sightlines, gestures, and suggestions about how to deliver lines. We had discussed character delivery in the context of group discussions wherein a king spoke and acted like a king, a servant like a servant, etc., and the students reflected that in the scripts they wrote and in the choices they made as to whom roles were assigned.

There were two presentations of the play and it was successful for many reasons. The students churned out a 30-page authentic text in Spanish as a collaborative class project, with everyone having input on each aspect of it. Although none had theatrical experience, they embraced the challenge of walking out on stage to perform in Spanish with less hesitation than they had shown when asked to climb a 40-foot telephone pole. They received standing ovations at both performances. As with all good theater, it was magical to see an electric performance of students, transformed into playwrights, actors, and classic characters on stage—speaking clearly in beautiful Spanish.

## Conclusions

Specific benefits to using this approach to literature include the following:

- Students of literature discovered a passion for theater.
- This approach offered unparalleled motivation to study Spanish, increased a willingness to learn, and encouraged the enjoyment of literature.
- It focused student attention on linguistic expression, syntax, pronunciation, and inflection of both written and spoken Spanish.
- It engaged students in an intensely collaborative process of reading, writing, listening, and speaking and offered them the opportunity to learn to work together as a team.
- It taught students to negotiate meaning of a literary text on their own terms and to communicate that comprehension in authentic (if simplified) texts, thus experiencing the perspective of the authorial process.
- This approach led students to a much more profound understanding and appreciation of classical Spanish literature within the context of the Golden-Age period.
- It was very successful in bolstering individual self-confidence both in oral expression and public speaking that carried over into subsequent Spanish courses.
- Students developed the capacity for applying interpretive analysis of Spanish texts and practiced the skills for recognizing plot development, character analysis and the roles of scene/act divisions.
- Students participated actively in controlling their own educational experience in an entirely new context.

- Students further developed their capacity for coping with unfamiliar challenges and broadened their formal education in literature with the experience of having performed on stage in Spanish.

This interdisciplinary approach to the study of Spanish literature using theatrical presentations exploits and supports experiential education and contextual learning. Students are engaged in highly expressive active communication related directly to their comprehension of the literary texts studied. This approach enriched the course experience, but it also created multiple contexts for understanding both the written and the spoken word. The processes during preparation for the performance as well as the performance itself resulted in many benefits related to language learning, increased oral proficiency, as well as critical thinking.

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