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Connecting Communities and Building World Language Proficiency

Tyler Anthony

Bowling Green State University

Honors Project

May 2016

Advisors: Dr. Brigid Burke and Susana Juárez

Connecting Communities and Building World Language Proficiency

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) provides a variety of ways for students to learn other languages. For example, students are able to participate in the typical classroom setting, join Living Learning Communities (LLCs), or study abroad in a country where the target language is spoken. While the first option is the most common, the latter two provide students with the opportunity to develop language proficiency outside of the classroom. Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) found that students who participated in a study abroad program made gains in four out of six fluency variables; whereas, students who participated in a formal classroom setting showed no improvement in any of the fluency variables. This study concludes that students who have the opportunity to speak the target language outside of the classroom are more likely to improve their language proficiency abilities.

This project intended to increase the opportunities for students to utilize Spanish outside of the classroom by bringing together an LLC on BGSU's campus with its study abroad program in Spain. The LLC used for this project, La Comunidad, is a community of students that share an interest in the Spanish language and culture with the goal of bringing students together and allowing them opportunities to practice their language abilities outside of the classroom. Students in both groups were asked to collaborate using video and typed blogs, to learn about the study abroad experience and build a stronger global community. The community aspect is very important when learning a language and is a required national standard set of language instructors by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). This standard can be met if "learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world" (ACTFL, 2010). Students in both La Comunidad and in Spain utilized this program to help develop their fluency in Spanish and expand their knowledge on Spanish culture.

Project Goals

Ultimately, the main goal of this project was to research and answer the following questions:

- What effect does online discussion have on promoting the use of Spanish outside of the classroom for both La Comunidad and BGSU study abroad participants?
- What effect does online discussion have on promoting focused practice in written proficiency for students in La Comunidad and those studying abroad in Spain?

However, there were additional objectives that this project hoped to accomplish, such as:

1. Establish a permanent connection between students studying abroad in Spain and students participating in La Comunidad to promote language use outside of the classroom and improve language proficiency.
2. Help the directors in Spain learn how their students adapt to the culture and improve their language abilities, which they can then use to focus on certain aspects in the language in their classrooms or in the program in general.
3. Promote the BGSU study abroad program in Spain. This program, located in Alcalá de Henares, started out doing very well with many students taking advantage of it; however, within recent years the numbers have started falling and the program has suffered several budget cuts.

Through this project, I hoped for students in La Comunidad to be able to read and listen to authentic student study abroad experiences, which in return could increase their desire to study abroad in Spain. Lastly, I designed this to encourage student reflection by allowing students access to all of their blogs while they are participating and for the duration of their BGSU career therefore allowing them to look back on their previous posts at any time and reflect on how their language has changed, which is a necessary component to learning a language.

Literature Review

There are many different methods and strategies that can be used to teach in classrooms, all of which have their own benefits and faults. Ferris and Godar (2006) believe technology and online collaboration can be used to teach effectively; however, often times, the benefits of distance education and the roll technology plays in the classroom is overlooked. Beldarrain (2007) believes that with new technologies, “instructional designers and educators have unique opportunities to foster interaction and collaboration among learners, thus creating a true learning community” (p. 140). Teachers are now able to utilize technology to expand their classroom and therefore provide their students with more opportunities to learn. By utilizing distance learning, instructors are able to not only facilitate and observe student interactions, but also actively participate in the exchange of knowledge and reflection (Beldarrain, 2007).

Technology opens up a myriad of new opportunities for student learning which can be used to increase language development and proficiency while also building a community in the world language classroom (Lee, 2007, 2011). Having a sense of community plays an important role in learning a language but sadly it is often overlooked and therefore it can be described as “the lost C” (Troyan & Cammarata, 2014). Through technology, students are able to share personal observations and reflections with others in small groups, which allow learning to come alive and give learners opportunities to compare their views with those of others (Jaatinen, Kohonen, Kaikkonen, & Lehtovaara, 2001). In order to give life to learning, it is necessary for active student participation. Jaatinen, Kohonen, Kaikkonen, and Lehtovaara (2001) believe that active participation can be achieved through experiential learning because it “involves both observing the phenomenon and doing something meaningful with it (p. 23). Some examples listed for this type of learning include personal stories and case studies, portfolios, personal journals, and reflections. Overall, the goal is to

bring students together and allow them to reflect on their experiences and get the opportunity to apply the language to something meaningful so that they are more likely to learn (Jaatinen, Kohonen, Kaikkonen, & Lehtovaara, 2001).

By providing students with the opportunity to apply their language abilities to something meaningful will allow them to develop their communicative competence (Burke, 2007, 2010, 2014; Savignon, 2002). Savignon (2002) uses this term “to characterize the ability of classroom language learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to recite dialogues or perform on discrete point tests of grammatical knowledge” (p. 3). She believes that by interacting with other speakers, grammar and syntax are learned implicitly due to a heavier focus on interaction with the second language. Burke (2007, 2010, 2014), professor and Director of the World Language Education Program at BGSU, shares a similar attitude to Savignon. Burke believes that in order for students to develop communicative competence, world language instructors should utilize the communicative language teaching (CLT) method and suggests that teachers assign authentic assignments. According to Burke (2010, 2014), these assignments, such as online conversations or reading online articles in the target language, promote world language use outside of the classroom.

Studying abroad offers students the chance to associate meaning with their language by providing them with the opportunity to utilize their language outside of the classroom. As mentioned before Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004), observed that students who participated in a study abroad program improved their fluency in the language. Although studying abroad is an opportunity, many students decide not to participate for a variety of reasons. Some of them being that their general perceptions of the program are negative or they may have a low level of intercultural awareness (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). In order to change this, students must be able to see the enjoyment expected from the

trip and interact with culturally different individuals (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). By communicating with students who had previously studied abroad in the same program and listening to their experiences, other students may feel encouraged to take advantage of the program and study abroad themselves.

Methodology

Context

This project began in the spring semester of 2016 and included 23 students studying abroad in Alcalá de Henares, Spain and members of the La Comunidad LLC on BGSU's campus. Out of the 23 students, nineteen responded to the final survey. This group of students was very diverse because it was made up of many different majors, ages, and language levels. The most common major among participants was World Language Education but other majors also included International Studies, Political Science, and Biology. Students of all majors believe that learning Spanish will help them in their careers. The majority of participants were second year students (42.1%) but there were students of all standings. First year students made up 26.3% percent of participants while both third and fourth year students made up 15.8% each. Perhaps the most diverse characteristic of this group was the variety of Spanish levels and years spent studying Spanish. The majority of students stated that they had studied Spanish for longer than five years (36.8%) while 26.3% of students had studied Spanish for exactly five years. Students that have only studied for two or three years made up 10.5% and students that have studied for four years, one year, and less than one year each made up 5.3% of the group. Regardless of the level or standing of the student, the majority (73.6%) expressed that they had never participated in any online discussion in Spanish before. Overall students of all types were willing to participate in this project to improve their Spanish proficiency.

Surveys

Prior to beginning the blogs, students both in Spain and La Comunidad were required to respond to survey questions via Google Forms regarding their perceived proficiency level in reading and writing based on the ACTFL scale and/or their interest in studying abroad in a Spanish speaking country (Appendix A). All 23 students completed the initial survey. After several weeks into the semester, students in Spain initiated a Skype conversation with members of La Comunidad to begin forming a bond. During the exchanges, several technical difficulties occurred. After the first connection was established, students in Spain signed a contract stating they would participate for the duration of the project (Appendix B).

Within the following weeks students in Spain were enrolled into the La Comunidad communication class, Spanish 4510 at BGSU, and began writing their blogs while the La Comunidad members began their responses. There were five blogs overall, three written blogs and two video blogs, and they were monitored by Carmen Álvarez (Director of La Comunidad) and me. Carmen enforced the participation of her students by making it a requirement for her class while the Spain students were bound by the contract. The blogs' themes included students' experiences in Spain, differences in the cultures, traveling around Spain and Europe, how to make Spanish friends, and thoughts on the study abroad program. Overall, each blog included an average of thirty-two responses. The project concluded after the majority of students completed the blogs and responses.

At the completion of the project, students were required to complete a second survey via Google Forms asking the same questions as the first along with their thoughts on the project, how they believed it affected their Spanish ability, and whether or not they bonded with other students (Appendix C). Nineteen out of 23 project participants completed the final survey.

Results

This section will explore the outcomes of the project and some common themes within the data based off of survey responses. The majority of the survey questions asked applied to all students; however, there were some that were designated only towards either La Comunidad or study abroad students, and the following data includes both question types.

Weakest and Strongest Areas in the Language

When asked what they believed to be their weakest area in the language all students responded with either listening or speaking. Students provided reasons such as “I am not able to use [my speaking ability] every day and when the opportunity comes, I am embarrassed to use it because my accent is poor and I am not confident in my abilities” or “I don’t have many chances to listen to Spanish”. One student also expressed concern for his/her lack of interaction with native speakers due to the fact that he/she believes that all students in his/her class share the same proficiency level. Overall, the common theme among responses in this section is that students in La Comunidad did not feel they were getting the opportunities to speak in Spanish or listen to Spanish materials or that when they did, they were insufficient.

When asked what students felt to be their strongest level in the language, almost all students, both in Spain and in La Comunidad, replied with reading or writing. These aspects of the language allow students to have more time to reflect and this may make them feel more comfortable with the language. One student claimed “My strongest area is reading/writing because I have to relax about the content. I can also use context clues this way” and another stated, “Writing because I have time to think about my grammar and correct it if needed”. Students feel more comfortable with the language if they have more time to reflect on what is being said. Through this project, ten students in Spain and La Comunidad claimed they were able to have more practice with their listening and speaking abilities. Examples they noted

were: they were asked to listen to many different Spanish levels and were able to practice their speaking through the video blogs.

Interest in Studying Abroad

Members in La Comunidad were asked if they had ever studied abroad in a Spanish speaking country, and if they had interest in doing so. Sixty-six percent of the LLC members indicated that they had never studied abroad before but 100% of them stated that they were interested in doing so. La Comunidad members were then asked whether or not they believed living in the LLC prepared them for the study abroad experience to which 77.7% stated that it did. The La Comunidad members that stated “otherwise” expressed that they were not learning “real language” because they did not feel they were improving their language proficiency. While many La Comunidad members have never studied abroad before, they all have interest in doing so and the majority of them also believe that participating in La Comunidad is helping them prepare.

Use of Spanish Outside of the Classroom

When students were asked how they believed the project affected their use of Spanish outside of the classroom, students studying in Spain and members of La Comunidad stated that it helped them and/or improved their language abilities. Some comments included “I really enjoyed this project! It gave me the chance to practice my speaking with other students who are really strong within the language” and “I feel as though the videos were especially helpful in forcing me to develop better speaking skills”. Others mentioned they felt the project helped them with their confidence or made them feel more comfortable with the language. One student noted: “I am more comfortable making videos of myself speaking in Spanish, which is something I have done before but never fully been comfortable with. Now, I speak with a little more fluidity when doing such an activity” and, another wrote: “I think it helped me be more comfortable speaking and accepting criticism from classmates”. Overall,

students in Spain and in La Comunidad generally felt that they had more of an opportunity to produce Spanish outside of the classroom through this project and that it helped them in some way, either with confidence or with their language proficiency.

Students from both groups also mentioned how this project allowed them to practice their writing skills and how reading other students' responses helped them recognize proper grammar. Additionally, they enjoyed learning about other students' study abroad experiences and listening to their stories discussed in each of the blogs. One student specifically mentioned how he/she enjoyed having specific topics to write about because "the topics were realistic and I could see myself having to say those same things in everyday life. Now when I have similar conversations my grammar will be a whole lot better". By assigning specific topics for the blogs, students were forced to focus on specific vocabulary and grammar structures. This allowed some students to develop new vocabulary that they can apply to the real world but it also helped them with their writing proficiency. Participants in Spain and in La Comunidad expressed how the blogs allowed them to develop their writing skills and understand the grammar. Therefore, many believed that the online discussion allowed them to improve their written proficiency and develop realistic vocabulary while also learning about student experiences abroad.

Discussion

This project began with the main goal of answering two research questions:

- What effect does online discussion have on promoting the use of Spanish outside of the classroom for both La Comunidad and BGSU study abroad participants?
- What effect does online discussion have on promoting focused practice for written proficiency for students in La Comunidad and studying abroad in Spain?

Along with this, there were other objectives such as establishing a permanent connection between two different communities (students studying abroad in Alcalá de Henares, Spain

and members of the La Comunidad LLC) and promoting the BGSU Spain study abroad program. In order to do so, students in both communities answered survey questions and participated in both written and video blogs to share their experiences and help one another develop their language proficiency.

With the results gathered from this project, it can be said that students felt that their speaking and writing proficiency improved and that they enjoyed writing/hearing/reading the stories and experiences of the students in Spain. Students appreciated the opportunity to produce Spanish outside of the classroom and 84.2% of them stated that they would be willing to participate in the project again.

Despite the enjoyment and improvement, there were some difficulties along the way. Technical difficulties made it problematic to establish a prior connection between students so therefore they felt that they did not bond throughout the project. The lack of participation at the beginning also made it difficult for students in Spain to stay on schedule with the blogs due to not having comments. Students also suggested that they would like to have more real time discussion with each other to help improve their proficiency and form a stronger community. Other comments included starting the project sooner during the academic year, including more interesting topics and photos, incorporating more video blogs.

It cannot be claimed that this project alone has encouraged students to consider study abroad with BGSU's Spain program because many of them were already interested in studying abroad before participating in the project. However, it is possible for this project to continue. The director of La Comunidad can maintain it as a requirement for her class while the director in Spain, Susana Juárez, makes it a requirement for her grammar class. They will both be able to monitor student progress on Canvas and provide feedback to their students. Overall, this project helped improve student proficiency, and established a permanent long

distance connection between two communities all while allowing students to get to know one another.

Reflection and Suggestions for Future Implementation

Overall, I am content with the outcome of the project but there were many challenges that emerged along the way that included everything from technical difficulties to miscommunication between directors and students. This section will explore these challenges and what can be done to avoid them if this project is to be implemented again while also expressing items that were successful.

Generally, the surveys yielded usable results; however, there are some changes that I believe should be made. Firstly, students had a hard time understanding the ACTFL scale question despite a chart being provided, therefore more clarification is needed about what each ACTFL level actually entails. Also, a more explicit question is needed regarding student improvement such as “How much do you believe your proficiency has improved on a scale of zero to five?” This will allow for easier data collection. Perhaps the best feature of these surveys was that they allowed students to give qualitative feedback such as quotes, and rich, thick description about their experience.

Before beginning the project, students in Spain and La Comunidad were going to establish an informal connection to start building a bond. This step is essential according to Ferris and Godar (2006) because it makes it more likely that students are going to learn from each other. Due to technical difficulties, the conversation via Skype was short and overall unsuccessful. I believe that this lack of a prior interaction between the majority of students lead to 68.4% stating that they felt that they did not bond with other students. If this project is to be continued in the future, it is necessary that students establish a prior connection. So I propose that students in Spain initiate this connection via email or Skype in their home or at the university rather than in a public café to avoid interference.

The greatest challenge that this project faced was lack of participation from students in La Comunidad. I took charge of students in Spain and established fixed due dates for the blogs. These dates were respected and almost all students completed their blogs on time. The problem occurred when La Comunidad students did not respond to blogs in a timely manner. Often times, weeks would pass before Spain students had a comment to respond to despite multiple emails sent by both Mrs. Álvarez and me. I believe that this is due to lack of interest in the project on the La Comunidad side. Students did not see this project as necessary homework and something that they could just skip. In order to avoid this in the future, I suggest that this project have a greater weight on student grades and/or there be stricter consequences for lack of participation. I also suggest that the director and other Spanish instructors at BGSU emphasize the necessity of producing the language outside of the classroom as much as possible and the benefits it contains. Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) state that students who practice world languages outside of a formal classroom are more likely to develop better fluency and higher levels of proficiency in the language so if students have access to this type of information, I believe that they will be more motivated to participate in the blogs.

Lastly, many students provided comments stating that they would have liked to have more real time conversation instead of recorded blogs. This was not expected because I believed that the video blogs allowed for more reflection time whereas real time conversation did not. However, I believe that real time conversation is more likely to help students form a community and therefore more likely to allow students to bond. A study conducted by Lee (2011) observed how students who participated in online blogs developed community and according to Troyan and Cammarata (2014) the community aspect is often overlooked when learning world languages. A separate study conducted by Lee (2007) demonstrated how real time conversation affects world language development. It showed that nonverbal cues played

a vital role in helping nonnative speakers' proficiency. From this, I propose that if this project is to be continued, students have the chance to have real time conversation in order to help build their proficiency.

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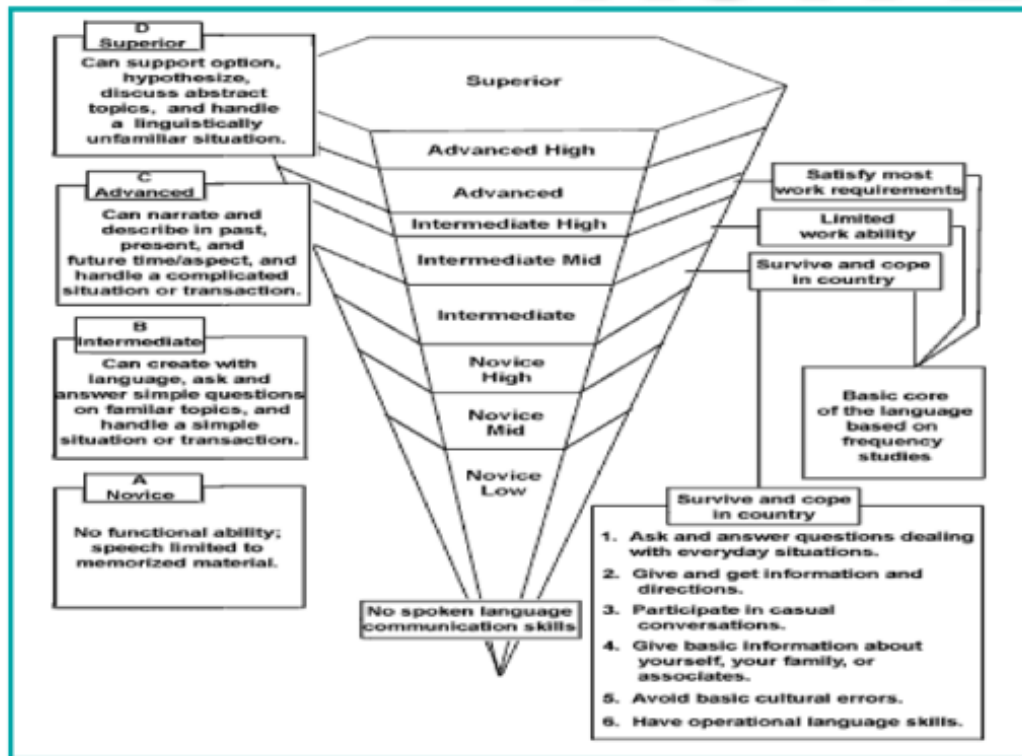
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Appendix A: First Student Survey

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Major:
5. Which of the following best represents your college level? (mark only one level)
 - a. First Year
 - b. Second Year
 - c. Third Year
 - d. Fourth Year
 - e. Higher than Fourth Year
6. Are you a member of La Comunidad or Currently Studying Abroad?
 - a. Currently in La Comunidad
 - b. Currently Studying Abroad
7. How long have you studied Spanish? (mark only one)
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. 1 year
 - c. 2 years
 - d. 3 years
 - e. 4 years
 - f. 5 years
 - g. More than 5 years
8. How many hours outside of the classroom do you speak Spanish per week? (mark only one)
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. 3 hours
 - e. 4 hours
 - f. More than 4 hours
9. How many hours outside of the classroom do you read Spanish materials per week? (mark only one)
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. 3 hours
 - e. 4 hours
 - f. More than 4 hours
10. How many hours outside of the classroom do you listen to Spanish materials per week?
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. 3 hours
 - e. 4 hours
 - f. More than 4 hours
11. Have you ever participated in any online discussion in Spanish before (excluding this project)? And if so, for how long? (ex: chats, blogs, Facebook, etc.)

ACTFL



12. Based on the above image, how would you rate your speaking ability? ONLY SELECT ONE OPTION *
- Novice low
 - Novice mid
 - Novice high
 - Intermediate low
 - Intermediate mid
 - Intermediate high
 - Advanced low
 - Advanced mid
 - Advanced high
 - Superior
13. Based on the above image, how would you rate your writing ability? ONLY SELECT ONE OPTION *
- Novice low
 - Novice mid
 - Novice high
 - Intermediate low
 - Intermediate mid
 - Intermediate high
 - Advanced low
 - Advanced mid
 - Advanced high
 - Superior
14. Based on the above image, how would you rate your reading ability? ONLY SELECT ONE OPTION *

- a. Novice low
 - b. Novice mid
 - c. Novice high
 - d. Intermediate low
 - e. Intermediate mid
 - f. Intermediate high
 - g. Advanced low
 - h. Advanced mid
 - i. Advanced high
 - j. Superior
15. What would you consider your weakest area in the language and why? (ex: reading, writing, speaking, listening)
 16. What would you consider your strongest area in the language and why? (ex: reading, writing, speaking, listening)
 17. For current La Comunidad members only: Have you ever studied abroad in a country that speaks Spanish? If so, where?
 18. For current La Comunidad members only: Do you plan on studying abroad in a country that speaks Spanish? If so, where?
 19. For current La Comunidad members only: Do you believe that being in La Comunidad helps prepare students to study abroad? Why or why not?
 20. For students currently studying abroad only: Where are you currently studying?
 21. For students currently studying abroad only: At the end of the semester, how much time would you have spent in the country?

Appendix B: Student Contract

Honor's Project Participation Contract

I _____ (print name) hereby agree to participate fully in the honor's project as designed by Tyler Anthony, undergraduate student at Bowling Green State University.

I agree to abide by all of the procedures and regulations established by the creator of the honors project and Carmen Alvarez, Director of La Comunidad. I understand that changes may arise and I agree to follow these changes if they are proposed within a timely manner and reflect the goals and intended outcomes for the project.

I agree to participate in the blogs, both video and written, in the target language only and will do so on or before the date assigned.

I am aware that if for any reason I am unable to participate in any part of the project after signing this contract, I must inform the creator of the project as soon as possible. By participating in this project, I acknowledge that I will be waived from participating in the scrapbook project assigned by Susana Juarez and/or it will reflect my participation grade in the oral proficiency class.

Printed Name _____

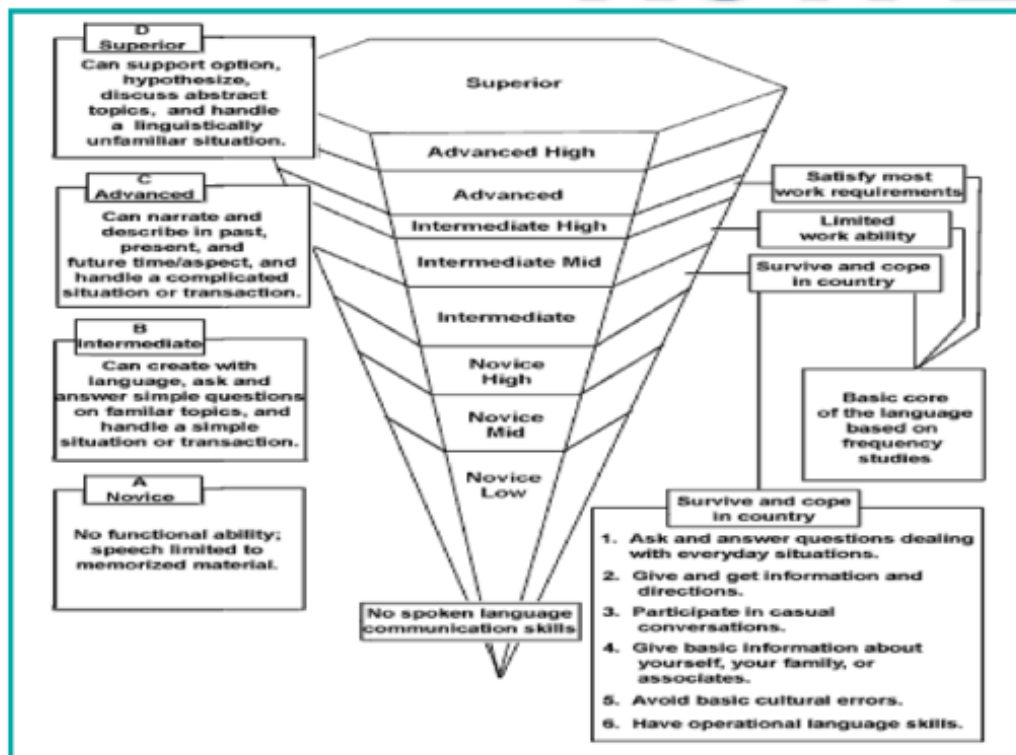
Date _____

Signature _____

Appendix C: Follow-up Student Survey

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Major:
5. Which of the following best represents your college level? (mark only one level)
 - a. First Year
 - b. Second Year
 - c. Third Year
 - d. Fourth Year
 - e. Higher than Fourth Year
6. Are you a member of La Comunidad or Currently Studying Abroad?
 - a. Currently in La Comunidad
 - b. Currently Studying Abroad
7. How long have you studied Spanish? (mark only one)
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. 1 year
 - c. 2 years
 - d. 3 years
 - e. 4 years
 - f. 5 years
 - g. More than 5 years
8. How many hours outside of the classroom do you speak Spanish per week? (mark only one)
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. 3 hours
 - e. 4 hours
 - f. More than 4 hours
9. How many hours outside of the classroom do you read Spanish materials per week? (mark only one)
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. 3 hours
 - e. 4 hours
 - f. More than 4 hours
10. How many hours outside of the classroom do you listen to Spanish materials per week?
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1 hour
 - c. 2 hours
 - d. 3 hours
 - e. 4 hours
 - f. More than 4 hours
11. Have you ever participated in any online discussion in Spanish before (excluding this project)? And if so, for how long? (ex: chats, blogs, Facebook, etc.)

ACTFL



12. Based on the above image, how would you rate your speaking ability? ONLY SELECT ONE OPTION *
- Novice low
 - Novice mid
 - Novice high
 - Intermediate low
 - Intermediate mid
 - Intermediate high
 - Advanced low
 - Advanced mid
 - Advanced high
 - Superior
13. Based on the above image, how would you rate your writing ability? ONLY SELECT ONE OPTION *
- Novice low
 - Novice mid
 - Novice high
 - Intermediate low
 - Intermediate mid
 - Intermediate high
 - Advanced low
 - Advanced mid
 - Advanced high
 - Superior
14. Based on the above image, how would you rate your reading ability? ONLY SELECT ONE OPTION *

- a. Novice low
 - b. Novice mid
 - c. Novice high
 - d. Intermediate low
 - e. Intermediate mid
 - f. Intermediate high
 - g. Advanced low
 - h. Advanced mid
 - i. Advanced high
 - j. Superior
15. What would you consider your weakest area in the language and why? (ex: reading, writing, speaking, listening)
 16. What would you consider your strongest area in the language and why? (ex: reading, writing, speaking, listening)
 17. For current La Comunidad members only: Have you ever studied abroad in a country that speaks Spanish? If so, where?
 18. For current La Comunidad members only: Do you plan on studying abroad in a country that speaks Spanish? If so, where?
 19. For current La Comunidad members only: Do you believe that being in La Comunidad helps prepare students to study abroad? Why or why not?
 20. For students currently studying abroad only: Where are you currently studying?
 21. For students currently studying abroad only: At the end of the semester, how much time would you have spent in the country?

The following questions are for all students (unless specified otherwise)

22. How do you feel this project affected your use of Spanish outside of the classroom? (In regards to speaking, writing, listening, and reading)
23. Do you feel that you bonded with other students after participating in this project?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
24. What did you like about this project?
25. What did you dislike about this project?
26. Overall, did you enjoy participating in this project? Why or why not?
27. What suggestions would you like to make for the project?
28. If given the opportunity, would you participate in a similar project in the future?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
29. Final comments (optional)

