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Pursuing a Foreign Language Education: A Current Student's Perspective

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As a sixth year student of Spanish looking back on her foreign language education, the author believes she has a greater understanding of what attracted her to and maintained her interest in the language. Yet she also recognizes areas in her education that could have benefited from change, including flexibility in creating her own program of study and more integration of language and culture in her courses. Such changes, she believes, would encourage more students to continue pursuing their foreign language education even after meeting their minimum requirements.

I am a currently a sophomore at Wake Forest University, where I study Mathematics and Spanish. Looking back over my six years of language study, I recognize areas where I would have benefited from changes in personal study habits, class structure, teaching style, curricula, etc. While such reflection on my education benefits me as a student, I also believe my experiences, both as they occurred and could have occurred differently, are applicable to the field of foreign language education today. Presently, the Modern Language Association (MLA) is concerned with how foreign language education is adapting to a more culturally diverse world, as seen in the title of its report, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World" (2007). I hope to address the concerns of the MLA by recalling my personal foreign language education, including what has motivated me to continue learning Spanish and areas that would have benefited from change. This insight could help foreign language educators at the high school and college level discover what drives and inspires a student and to adapt their programs accordingly.

Getting Started: My High School Spanish Education

The idea of speaking a foreign language – something that no one else around me could understand – always fascinated me growing up. I am not from a very diverse community, so I was not accustomed to hearing foreign languages growing up. On the rare occasions I heard people speaking another language, I wanted more than anything to know what they were saying. I did not have the chance to study a foreign language until my freshman year in high school, but I couldn't wait to get started when the opportunity finally presented itself. Despite my enthusiasm, I quickly realized during my freshman year of high school that that I wasn't going to be able to

speak and understand Spanish as well as I wanted overnight. It would eventually take a lot of hard work and study to master the language.

I attended a large public high school with students from a broad range of personal and academic backgrounds, and almost all freshmen in my class enrolled in a foreign language their first year. Additionally, over half of my class enrolled in Spanish because it was deemed the “most useful” foreign language. My high school did not offer a lot of choice or variety in the foreign language department. It was a four-year system where everyone was placed in the same classes and learned the same material. These factors presented a challenge for first year Spanish educators because they had to teach students with a broad range of abilities. Most students were just trying to meet the foreign language requirements necessary for college admissions, yet I excelled in my high school Spanish classes. Where many people struggled with the idea of verb conjugation and a different sentence structure than English, it came easy to me. My teacher would call stem-changing verbs “shoe verbs” and teach the class a rhyme to remember the conjugation of the verb “tener.” These techniques helped a lot of students in my class, but for me it was always just easier to write down the conjugations and see the patterns myself. With the exception of studying for tests, I rarely had to work at Spanish outside of class. Looking back on these first three years of my study of Spanish, I realize how much I would have benefited from more of a challenge. I learned only what was required by the class I was taking and was never encouraged by my teachers to push myself. I was a good student in high school and was enrolled in Honors courses in different subjects in order to be more challenged than I might have been in other classes. I think the option of an Honors Spanish class with a more rigorous curriculum would have forced me to work harder and consequently speak and understand the language better at an earlier age. The MLA report (2007) emphasizes the need for learning other languages early on in a student’s education and suggests a program for gifted foreign language learners in pre-collegiate years. This type of program would allow for more intense foreign language study and would better prepare the student for continued foreign language study in college. I think I would have benefited from such programs; instead, I coasted through my first three years and was unable to learn the language to my fullest potential.

My senior year I was able to choose between Spanish IV and the Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish Language course. I jumped at the opportunity for the more challenging AP Spanish class since I had struggled so little in my previous classes. I was in a smaller class with other students who also excelled at Spanish, and it humbled me greatly. Having never struggled before, I was forced to recognize that there were many things I did not know and that there were other students who could read, speak, and write better than I could. AP Spanish was a great experience for me because it finally gave me what my other classes had lacked, that is, a challenge. I had to spend a lot of time outside of class not only memorizing vocabulary, but also practicing reading, speaking, and writing. The class was all about mastering the language as a whole rather than simply drilling grammar. We read a novel in Spanish and my teacher used Spanish songs to teach us about uses of the subjunctive, but heavy emphasis was also placed on speaking and narrating situations. This broad study allowed me to recognize areas where I struggled most, and I focused on improving my Spanish in those areas. By taking AP Spanish my senior year I finally saw the improvement that came with hard work and practice when challenged.

Overall, I believe my high school education prepared me well for Spanish at the college level, but in looking back I see how little attention was paid to the cultural aspect of the language. All of my high school study was focused on learning the language rather than

incorporating the culture associated with it. For example, the novel I read in AP Spanish was *En el tiempo de las mariposas* (*In the time of the butterflies*) by Julia Alvarez, but I read it as a story rather than a cultural and historical narrative of life in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's regime. I believe that as a student of a foreign language it is important to develop an understanding of the language itself first before endeavoring to study the culture because attempting to learn both at the same time could be overwhelming. However, I think the integration of some cultural themes would add to the introductory levels of foreign language study because it would give the student a greater perspective for why he or she was learning the language in the first place. The MLA (2007) supports replacement of what they call the "two-tiered system" that separates language and literature for one that more closely integrates language and culture into a solid foreign language education (Transforming Academic Programs section, para. 1). Though I was well-prepared in Spanish grammatically, it was not until taking Spanish in college that I began to develop an understanding of the cultures, including their literature, associated with the language I was learning.

A New Appreciation: Spanish in College and How It Changed My Perspective

I did well on the AP exam, but I began my studies at Wake Forest University with no real intention of pursuing a further education in Spanish. I planned to fulfill the school's language requirement, an introductory course to Hispanic Literature, and then investigate courses in other disciplines that interested me. The credit I earned from doing well on the AP exam allowed me to take the introductory literature course that was required for graduation in my first semester, and this course represented a huge turning point for me in my foreign language education. In high school I had some exposure to literature, but most of it was modified to facilitate the learning of the language rather than encourage an appreciation for the language as related to culture. The introductory literature class, however, gave me the opportunity to see how Spanish was used naturally rather than in a grammar book for high school students. Spanish poetry in particular made me want to further pursue my language studies. Until that point, I had never even considered the idea of poetry in another language. Hearing the rhyme and rhythm and being aware of the study and skill that went into writing Spanish poetry gave me a new appreciation for the language. I gave a presentation on "Rima LIII" by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, and I loved the opportunity to investigate the symbolism of the swallows in the poem. This was a strange experience for me because I have never really enjoyed English poetry, but something about the flow and musicality of poetry in Spanish fascinated me. I looked forward to reading the poems on my own, and class discussions excited me because I wanted to know others' interpretations of what I had read. My fascination continued throughout the semester as we studied other areas of Spanish literature, and I began to truly appreciate the language and its creative potential.

This class also granted me the opportunity to analyze literature through writing, something I had never experienced before. Since I had the freedom to choose my own topic and analyze the literature in a way that interested me, I could express my opinions in writing and defend them using the texts under study. One of my favorite works about which I wrote was "No oyes ladrar los perros" by Juan Rulfo. In my paper, I analyzed the different symbolic meanings of the dogs in the story from multiple angles. Previously, I had only spoken or written through a teacher-supplied prompt, so I really enjoyed having this freedom to express myself using Spanish. Another aspect of this course that I believe really helped improve my Spanish, as well as encouraged me to continue my study of it, was the attention I received from the professor. It

was a small class, so the professor knew everyone in the class on a personal level and could help each student individually in areas where they struggled. Her advice and encouragement, along with my enjoyment of the material and subsequent success, convinced me to pursue a minor in Spanish. Poetry drew me in and showed me that Spanish was about more than just grammar, but I think the “hook” is different for everyone. Making the minimum requirement in a foreign language cover a broad range of material increases the chances that students will find something specific that interests them and makes them want to learn more. That desire to learn is what makes students continue studying the language after they have fulfilled the minimum requirement, so it is crucial for them to find that hook early in their foreign language career.

After my first semester of Spanish I decided that it was something I loved and wanted to pursue, so the question became what classes I would take. It turns out that my classes are essentially laid out for me for the next few years. There are three classes that are required for all students planning to major or minor in Spanish: an introduction to Spanish culture and literature; an introduction to Spanish American culture and literature; and an advanced grammar and composition course. These requirements, which serve as prerequisites to other courses in the Spanish department and account for half of the necessary credit hours for the minor, do not give me a lot of choice in what classes I can take. Since I had already had some exposure to culture and literature in my introductory class, I decided the best thing for me would be to improve my understanding of grammar of the language before delving further into the literature and culture of Spain and Spanish America. This would allow me greater versatility in my use of the language in other classes.

In the advanced grammar and composition course I studied the same Spanish grammar I had learned in high school in more detail and depth. However, in contrast with my high school Spanish, I could not glide through this class without working hard on my own to master the more complex grammar points. This class focused on building good habits through continuous practice and learning the finer details of the language. By studying grammatical rules and questioning how they work, rather than simply memorizing them, I gained a more profound understanding of the language. I also believe the hands-on style of the class was much more conducive for learning the grammar than a typical lecture course. It was a small class, and students were required to read and prepare on their own in order to spend class time going over examples. This course also involved a lot of writing, much more than I had done in my previous classes. The style of writing of this course was different because it didn’t involve analyzing literature and responding in a paper, but rather writing over topics chosen by the student. The class presented different styles of writing, including description, narration, and persuasion. I really enjoyed the chance to write about subjects that interested me and to incorporate creativity into my writing. I was able to write a book review of my favorite novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as a witty persuasive piece about something as absurd as the “benefits” of traffic. The freedom in topic choice made the writing more personally relevant to me. This personal relevance, along with weekly writing and editing, helped improve my understanding and use of the Spanish language tremendously. By creating this foundation in grammar and composition, I was prepared for the courses that were ahead of me in my Spanish education.

The next semester I took the next required course for the major, which was a literary and cultural study of Spain. I was very excited when I saw that a small history book was part of my required textbooks for the class because it meant I would be doing more than just reading stories and poems as I’d done in my first literature course. Learning about the historical events that went along with different works of literature allowed me to see and appreciate what may have

motivated the authors or poets. For example, it is impossible to fully comprehend the significance of mid-20th Century Spanish literature and art, including Pablo Picasso's emotional depiction of suffering and chaos in "Guernica," without knowledge of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The curriculum of this class exposes students to a broad range of Spanish cultural products, but my professor was also sure to include information about present day issues in Spain. If a topic we were discussing was relevant to a modern problem, she would show us newspaper or magazine articles to give us a sense of the modern day workings of Spain. The MLA report (2007) stresses the need for Americans to be open-minded about other cultures and grants higher level education the task of developing this greater cultural awareness. Until this class, I was completely unaware Spain has issues with illegal immigration from Northern Africa, much like illegal immigration from Latin America is often front-page news in the US. This discovery was humbling for me as an American and made me realize that the movement of peoples and how such movement is characterized is a global issue today and not unique to the US. My professor's method of incorporating modern problems into our historic study of the country is a great strategy for educating students on both past and modern cultural issues to give them greater overall cultural awareness.

Motivations for Continued Study

The only Spanish classes I have taken so far at Wake Forest have been required courses for the minor. I have not yet been able to experiment and try new things through taking elective courses. Like many foreign language students at my university, I juggle a tight schedule between my major and my foreign language minor and am rarely able to take classes for pleasure. Wake Forest offers many higher level Spanish classes that focus on a specific time period or subject matter, like "The Golden Age of Spain" or "20th Century Mexican Literature," but my workload makes it difficult to fit them into my schedule. The MLA report (2007) suggests an interesting solution to this problem. They propose interdisciplinary courses as a way of not only fulfilling language requirements for students, but also providing a cultural education beyond the study of literature alone. I think opportunities like this would encourage more students to continue their foreign language education because it would be more applicable to their other areas of study. They would develop a greater cultural awareness by learning about more than just literature and applying what they have learned in other courses to their foreign language study. I believe that too much of education is based on simply taking the classes needed to meet requirements when typically a student not only performs better but gets more out of a class if it is something they chose to take rather than something they had to take. Interdisciplinary classes would help draw a connection between classes required for a student and classes that are interesting to a student. Wake Forest does offer some such classes, like Spanish Business and Spanish for Medical Profession, but I would like to see more offered that are integrated into the liberal arts curriculum, like Political Science or History courses taught in Spanish. Such interdisciplinary courses would provide me and others like me a greater opportunity to take Spanish courses while at the same time meeting requirements of other departments.

Another amazing opportunity that I believe encourages students to undertake a foreign language education is the opportunity to study abroad in the country of their choice. I am fortunate enough to attend a university where the majority of students study abroad at some time in their college careers, and this point was a major contributing factor in my decision to attend Wake Forest. I plan on spending a semester studying in Salamanca, Spain next fall, and this trip

has served as a major motivating factor throughout my Spanish education. As I stated earlier, the most important thing is for a student to have the desire to learn, and study abroad opportunities provide just that. They create a goal for students to work toward because they want to be able to communicate in the country in which they will be living. Beyond just motivating students, studying abroad provides an unrivalled degree of cultural immersion that can never be attained in the classroom. It is undeniably the best way for a student to understand the culture that goes along with the language they are learning. As a college student, I am just now getting the opportunity to study abroad, but I think this cultural immersion would be beneficial at any stage of foreign language education.

Continuing My Studies: Looking Toward the Future

Even after six years of studying Spanish, I am still excited to continue growing in my understanding of the language. Studying in Spain will be an amazing opportunity for me to not only demonstrate and practice what I have already learned in Spanish, but to learn much more. It provides a chance for me not only to improve my speaking, but also to develop a greater understanding of the cultural workings of Spain. I think my studies in foreign languages thus far have prepared me for the challenges I will face not only abroad but in my life. Learning a foreign language is an indispensable part of a well-rounded education, especially as students navigate the diversity marking our world today, which is one of the major points of the MLA's report. Looking back on my foreign language education has been an amazing opportunity for me to reflect on how far I have come and where I might go.

Implications for Foreign Language Education

My reflections on my personal foreign language education have led me to make conclusions about foreign language education in general. The two main issues I can identify involve course layouts and curricula at both the high school and college levels. Structurally, I believe all foreign language programs should be set up in a way that gives the students more choices, including the addition of different types (e.g., Honors or AP) foreign language classes in high school and more flexibility in course options in college. Admittedly, many high schools offer Honors level courses in foreign languages, yet I encourage a more widespread adoption of diversity in foreign language courses. One way to achieve this could be through forming alliances with nearby high schools in order to create a larger and more effective Honors program for foreign language education. Such a program could also include more interdisciplinary Spanish courses, which hopefully would prepare students for such expanded offerings at the college level. Providing students with more choice at both the high school and college levels gives students more control over their own education instead of feeling as if everything is already planned for them.

I also support foreign language curriculum that incorporates a greater exposure to culture because it makes students more knowledgeable of the different cultures in today's diverse world. I understand that at early stages of foreign language education it is important to learn the basics of the language, but integrating cultural themes into learning the language would give students a greater sense of why they are learning the language at all. Finally, I think it is important for educators to not neglect the modern cultural issues while teaching literature or history because it is the modern problems that we all must eventually confront. Students with a broad cultural

awareness, those who understand how the past comes to bear on the present, will be better prepared to face current cultural issues. I strive to be such a student, and I hope my experiences as a language learner have provided insight into how foreign language educators may encourage students to stick with the program.

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References

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