

# 12 Student-led grammar revision: empowering first year Spanish beginner students to facilitate their own learning

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## Abstract

This paper presents an innovative project-based learning activity meant to support language beginner students to develop, via their core curriculum, five enterprise capabilities (*authentic problem-solving; innovation and creativity; risk-taking; taking action; and true collaboration*), formulated at the University of Sheffield after Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidance and based on best UK government policy and sector practice. Within the written language component of a first year Spanish language beginners' course in Hispanic studies, students undertake an optional formative exercise towards their examination preparation: preparing and delivering presentations on key aspects of the Spanish language to be employed firstly with classmates and subsequently with Year 9 to Year 12 (Y9-Y12) students in local schools, responding to requirements developed collaboratively by school teachers and the language tutor.

**Keywords: empowering students, learning capabilities.**

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents an innovative approach to tackling Spanish grammar concepts which are traditionally problematic for English native speakers. It was developed in response to the remarkable commitment and dedication of first-year Spanish beginner students (approx. 25-30 annually) on an undergraduate Hispanic studies degree at the University of Sheffield who wished to apply their Spanish language knowledge beyond the classroom environment.

The first-year (Framework for Higher Education Qualification Level 4; ‘Level 1’ within the institution) beginners’ course is conceived for students with no prior experience of Spanish. Students are expected to reach a Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) A2+/B1 level in Spanish via a programme of intensive language modules focussed on grammar and written language, designed to substantially narrow the gap between beginners and post-A Level peers by the end of their second year. As in many UK institutions, the final year of study (fourth year, post-year abroad) makes no distinction between former beginner (‘Level 1B’) and post-A Level (‘Level 1A’) students.

The project addresses the needs of Level 1B students, supporting them not only to achieve course objectives and to prepare for credit-bearing assessed presentations during their second and fourth years of study, but also to experience and to develop capabilities that potentially enhance subject learning, academic skills development, and employability.

## 2. Context

The project was underpinned by a number of pedagogical theories and approaches, namely *Enterprise Education*, *Project-Based Learning*, and *Service Learning*, as detailed below.

The University of Sheffield defines curricular enterprise education as the opportunity for students to develop five key enterprise capabilities: *authentic*

*problem-solving; innovation and creativity; risk-taking; taking action; and true collaboration*<sup>3</sup> (Riley, 2017). These emerged from research conducted among teaching colleagues (e.g. Riley, 2017) and an extensive history of embedding enterprise into subject disciplines, building on best sector practice (EEUK, 2018), government policy (Wilson, 2012; Witty, 2013; Young, 2014), and QAA (2012, 2018) guidance on enterprise and entrepreneurship education, which recommends that enterprise education responsibilities extend beyond business schools and careers services, and that enterprise skills are relevant to *all* subject disciplines.

Finally, enterprise education often incorporates project-based learning and service learning, as demonstrated by Rodriguez-Falcon and Yoxall (2010) and Sheffield Hallam University's Venture Matrix scheme (EEUK, 2015).

The present project, being formative, lacks some accepted service learning features (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Harkavy & Hartley, 2010), but is informed by such approaches. Its originality lies in the level of study at which such an activity occurs. Successful collaborative projects involving language beginners include activities such as writing wikis (Castañeda & Cho, 2013) or language dictionaries (Lopez, 2016), but unlike this project, these have not directly involved external partners.

Activities involving schools or community partners (Barreneche & Ramos-Flores, 2013; Pellettieri, 2011; Tocaimaza-Hatch, 2018; University of Leeds, n.d.) often occur post-first year. Language students in most UK institutions undertake a year abroad after their second year of study – another 'embedded enterprise' languages initiative at the same institution (University of Sheffield, 2018) occurs after this point.

In these examples, students are expected to have achieved considerably greater levels of target language competency before embarking on external engagement activity than was expected of students on the project in question.

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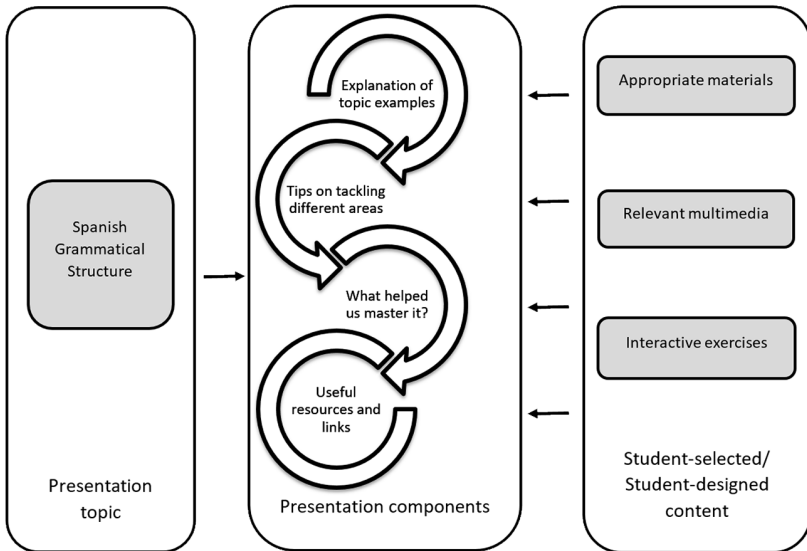
3. See supplementary material, appendix 1; <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/6w2bh2y07r9v37nhx4rw8pdq17n24132>

### 3. The student-led grammar revision project

The project involves a mid-semester revision activity (one of three formative assessments completed during the second semester) involving interaction with students and teachers from a local school and a staged series of scaffolded project activities, undertaken as preparation for an end-of-semester formal written language assessment. Students receive indicative marks, which do not contribute to the final course mark, and formative feedback to support their subsequent learning and development, as well as informal feedback at various points throughout the project.

In pairs or threes, students have three weeks to prepare and deliver a 30- to 35-minute presentation on a specific Spanish grammatical structure, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Elements of the student presentation



Students are enabled to develop enterprise capabilities as follows:

### **Authentic problem solving**

- Consolidating, building upon, and applying language understanding to address, within constraints, Y9-Y12 students' specific learning needs.
- Exploring techniques and strategies.
- Continually reflecting upon their own learning approach.

### **Innovation and creativity**

- Freedom to design presentations using educational tools of their choosing.
- Identifying and implementing effective, engaging ways of tackling the topic, using approaches appealing to young audiences.

### **Risk-taking**

- Many students' first experience of presenting to an external audience.
- Exceeding comfort zone at a relatively early stage of study.
- Uncertainties over audience reactions and responses.

### **Taking action**

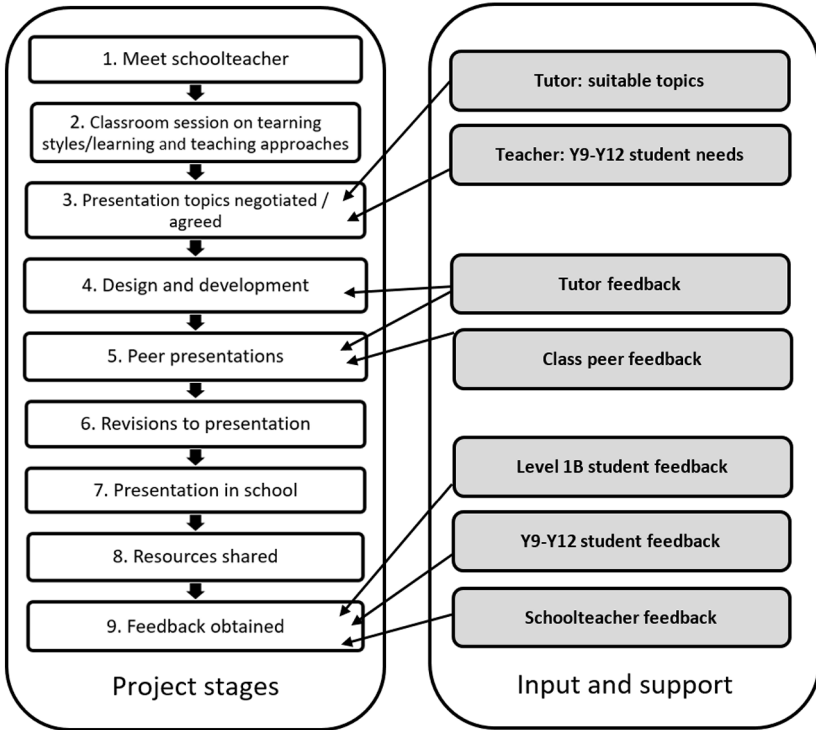
- Self-directed, student-led design, development and delivery.
- Pro-actively addressing intended audience needs within time constraints.

### **True collaboration**

- Adjusting presentation designs in response to class peer feedback.
- Engaging dynamically with, and creating value for, a community.
- Presentation materials provided to schools for further use in revising specific areas of the language, examination preparation and facilitating understanding.

Students are closely supported by their tutor throughout each of the project stages, as illustrated in [Figure 2](#).

Figure 2. Project stages and input/support



In three years of running the project with annual cohorts of 25-30, only two participating students did not fully complete it, undertaking the necessary design and preparation work in their groups and presenting in class to peers, but for personal reasons opting out of presenting in schools. In both cases, their fellow group members managed this aspect.

#### 4. Outcomes

Project feedback was obtained through three separate questionnaires completed by Level 1B students, school students, and teachers following the presentations

in schools<sup>4</sup>. Thereafter, Level 1B students and the tutor discussed their responses and the project as a whole, whilst the tutor had further discussions with participating schoolteachers.

Teachers found presentations stimulating, encouraging, and beneficial for their students, as grammar is explained from the perspective of native English speakers close to their students' own educational experience. Y9-Y12 students and their teachers have access to presentation materials as an ongoing resource.

The project has become an attractive proposition to prospective students and families at open days, inspiring local school outreach activities within the same department. It is also an excellent experience for students considering teaching assistantships as part of their year abroad. Such benefits reprise those of earlier 'embedded enterprise' developments at the institution, including the All About Linguistics project for first-year English Language and Linguistics students (Wood, 2014a, 2014b).

## 5. Discussion

A number of findings from the aforementioned student questionnaires, and from the tutor's observations, are worthy of further consideration. For instance, the approach presented is relatively uncharted territory for university-level beginner language teaching, but builds upon work undertaken elsewhere within the same institution, demonstrating transferability, across disciplines, of approaches already proven successful. Furthermore, in being conducted as a formative exercise, it demonstrates how a small-scale initiative can have considerable impact without overhaul of existing assessment methods, wholesale module re-design, or the resourcing demands such processes would entail.

Some of the challenges had to do with the less confident students as well as with the tutor's increased workload, and they were successfully overcome by

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4. See supplementary material, appendices 2 to 5; <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/6w2bh2y07r9v37nhx4rw8pdq17n24132>

encouraging, supporting, and closely working with less confident students, and finally by allocating additional hours within the Level 1B Spanish Beginners course into the tutor's teaching timetable.

Minimal negative feedback (two responses) concerned preparation putting additional pressure on an already full timetable, and teammates' lack of participation. As student feedback was anonymous, the course tutor addressed negative feelings in class, exploring with the students how best to avoid these.

Students agreed that for future group work they would try to keep within time limits, distribute work evenly, and take better responsibility for allocated roles. Managing group dynamics and dealing with difficult teamwork experiences are challenges frequently experienced in employment; thus, the practice of addressing such challenges through an authentic learning experience has potential employability benefits.

One limitation is the extent to which project outcomes are transferable beyond the cohorts discussed. It would be valuable to compare it to similar initiatives (as they emerge), and explore longer-term impacts on student progression and skills development.

## 6. Conclusions

Beyond simple language revision, this project brings a stimulating, authentic element (Riley, 2017) to the beginners' course through meaningful community connections, and students have the opportunity to create and innovate, developing skills applicable throughout their studies. In our experience, students deeply value what is often their first experience of applying subject knowledge outside the classroom.

The tutor has a key role in liaising with schools and supporting students throughout the project. Likewise, the continuous support, motivation, and encouragement provided to less confident students is of paramount importance.



Here, *all* students are empowered and trusted as teachers. It is gratifying to see them embrace the project and succeed in its execution. The tutor plans to continue the project at Level 1B Spanish Beginners and to investigate the possibility of taking the idea to other language courses within the University.

We conclude that this exercise enhances students' engagement with their course, university, and community, and leads to a more rewarding, enjoyable teaching experience, concurring, as Reinders (2010) suggests, that it is important, as teachers, to set activities to encourage students to find ways to move beyond the classroom and incorporate new knowledge into their lives.

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