

## Oral History as an Innovative Language Teaching Technique for Spanish Heritage Language Learners

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Oral history is presented in this article as an interpretative exercise for historical events in a Spanish course for heritage language learners at the university level. Through the interview of a Latino immigrant family, students re-examined the history of their own families and increased their linguistic self-esteem. They were guided to become good researchers and good interviewers so that they could lead the informants into offering other perspectives when telling their stories. At the same time students were engaged in the practice of oral history, they were initiated into research while improving their oral and writing skills in a formal setting. This article describes each stage of the oral history project and the advantages and limitations of this technique with the purpose of assessing this project in a Spanish course for heritage language learners' course.

In 2010 16% of the U.S. population was Hispanic or Latin@, and in Chicago 29% of the population was identified as Hispanic or Latin@ (U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts, 2010). This data suggested that Spanish speakers are the largest immigrant group in the United States, and, therefore, there is a demand for Spanish courses for heritage language learners that our institutions have been trying to satisfy through curriculum development and creation of specific programs for this student population across the country. Additionally, most higher education institutions in the United States have a foreign language requirement. Due to the increase of this population, there are institutions that have advocated for rigorous placement methods for these students (as in L2 Spanish courses) via interviews, questionnaires, or even online placement exams (Burgo, 2013; Potowski, Parada, & Morgan-Short, 2012). Most of the Spanish heritage language learners in Chicago belong to the first or second generation of immigrants and have been exposed to Spanish to a certain degree, so they were placed into courses at an intermediate or advanced level. In this article, the use of oral history is proposed as an innovative teaching technique for a Spanish course for heritage language learners at the university level. This course was intended to connect the students with their heritage as they were developing communication skills in a formal register such as the discourse of the interview in the oral history project.

### **Oral History as an Innovative Teaching Technique to Assess Communicative Skills**

Students who were placed in an intermediate or advanced level usually spoke Spanish at home or had some kind of earlier formal instruction in the target language. They tended to have native-like pronunciation and showed high competence in their conversational skills in informal settings, but they struggled with their oral and especially writing skills in

formal or educational settings. One of the main objectives of this course was to expose students to the diverse dialectal variation in the Spanish-speaking world and to reinforce their reading and writing skills in order to facilitate the transfer of their literacy skills from English. They were also provided with opportunities to develop their communicative skills and to improve their vocabulary in academic settings through formal oral presentations of topics concerning Latin@ communities. In a course of these characteristics, there is a significant cultural component in which students learn about their heritage through readings of Latin@ and Latin American literature and by watching and discussing Latin American films. Due to the importance of increasing their cultural awareness, an important factor for assessing their linguistic skills (oral and written) while reconnecting with their community was through their final project: an oral history interview with a Latin@ immigrant family (their own family, if possible), one of the most important topics affecting the community.

Oral histories have a cross-disciplinary nature since narrative research has infiltrated many areas such as the humanities and social science disciplines as well as medicine (Ehlman, Ligon, Moriello, Welleford, & Schuster, 2011) and law. In fact, many world issues are described through the perspective of personal trauma stories. They become an encounter between politics and history with the ultimate objective of creating social change (Schuman, 2003). It has become a crossover methodology: widespread, practical, political, or historical. In the oral history project, the interview has become an innovative methodology since oral history became very popular across the humanities, bringing together experts from a variety of perspectives. The results were innovative findings via the interview from many contexts outside history, borrowing analytical techniques from other areas such as linguistics or literature. Ultimately, the process of interviewing cannot be separated from the outcome (Abrams, 2010).

### **How Can Oral History Be Implemented in the Classroom?**

This methodology was presented as an innovative technique to make the students researchers of their own families' stories as a means to study recent history from a reliable source of information. The main objective of this project within the format of this course was to establish a link between their heritage and the classroom since the oral history of the community become a shared social identity (Shopes, 2002). We as educators are in search of life experiences of our students and their families that can be integrated in our curriculum. Oral history allows filling in blanks in history through the testimonials of the social aspects of history that are less documented (Swain, 2003). But what is oral history? It is a collection of individual recollections of the past or spoken memories based on an interview conducted by a researcher (Huerta & Flemmer, 2000).

The topic of this oral history project was the immigration experience of Latin@ families in Chicago. It focused on the causes and consequences of this kind of migration. Through this method, informants offered perspectives of how communities were constituted in a new environment (Olmedo, 1997). Students ended up engaged in the practice of oral history through their family testimonials, while at the same time strengthening their oral and written skills, by establishing a dialogue that allowed them to recover their experiences and write a report to communicate the testimonials.

### **Benefits of Using Oral History in a Spanish Course for Heritage Language Learners**

During the course, students were trained to develop a research project using the following steps: outline the interview, select the questions, design the informed consent form, learn and use tips about how to perform a good interview, and write the final report. These aspects will be developed in the following sections. We will start explaining the main advantages for our students of this innovative teaching technique:

The interview resulted in an emotional journey through which students were given the opportunity to get engaged in the practice of history when interviewing the main characters of the recent history of their communities. Fortunately, this journey worked both ways: families were also thrilled to know that their stories were of interest. In linguistic terms, they improved their writing and personal communication skills at the same time that bridges were built across generations and across universities and families (Lyons, 2007).

Oral history has been shown to be an efficient vehicle for students to increase their knowledge of Latin@ immigration in the United States. Valenciana (2006) claimed that it was an underused teaching strategy that helped students reveal their families' stories and the development of the four communication skills: speaking, writing, reading, and listening. They acquired a deeper knowledge of the subject and of local and national history. In short, the interviewees' voices were heard, and histories were told in the first person.

Additionally, students felt comfortable with this method to develop an interpretation of history. They were expected to get a new understanding of history by seeing it as an active process with a continuous development of new questions to answer and new perspectives to research (Nix, 2009).

In Spanish courses for heritage language learners, immigration was one of the most relevant topics. Thus, students used the narratives created with oral histories to discuss and debate immigration issues. They worked to place historical events in the appropriate temporal frame as they were fighting against intolerance and violation of human rights (Valenciana, 2006). Furthermore, they ended up acquiring a critical perspective towards the history written in textbooks, understanding there was a conflict between memory and history (Whitman, 2000). The experiences of the families were a vivid example of history, and students created narratives to explain it. These experiences served the purpose of trying to eradicate stereotypes. For example, Olmedo (1997) conducted a study on Puerto Rican women who took leadership roles in immigration movements against stereotypes of submission.

There were other gains for students when this methodology was chosen. At a research level, students learned how to analyze data, select and summarize relevant information, and contextualize and increase their knowledge of historical events. In addition to becoming familiar with doing fieldwork and being trained as researchers, they could also improve their communication skills in order to perform successful interviews and to write their report.

In this course, culture and identity were integrated into the curriculum. Hence, a new perspective was offered by understanding culture through the use of direct sources. It was a rare opportunity to learn about culture through those who directly had experienced it in their own words; the human voice could convey more than the written page (Weatherford Stevens & Lathan, 2009). In fact, this was an antidote toward apathy for textbooks (Sitton, 1983). Students were excited about their oral presentations, PowerPoints, and any opportunities in the classroom to display their work (Huerta & Flemmer, 2000). By validating their families' knowledge as a part of history, students felt

more confident and proud of their heritage since they appreciated that their families' knowledge became part of the university curriculum.

Furthermore, a new conceptualization of multicultural education emerged through the collection of immigrants' history (Olmedo, 1997). Then, they were trained to become active producers of historical knowledge. Oral history gave them access to distinctive information to complement traditional materials. That is, they aimed to experience history in action (Weatherford Stevens & Latham, 2009). This experience resulted in high engagement of students in documenting history (Huerta & Flemmer, 2000).

The interviewing process seemed more effective in order to learn tolerance since it allowed students to establish a dialogue with those who make history and made them responsible for transmission of their testimonials (Sepúlveda, 2000). A bridging point was then established between narratives of identity and narratives of history. In the earlier, we lived with the past as part of our identity; in the latter, we lived with the past as it was (Gardner, 2003).

### **The Power of the Interview: How to Accomplish a Good Interview**

Oral history interviews were understood as a window into our students' stories at the same time they became a strong link connected to local history (Hostetter, 2009). Due to the power of the interview as a method to collect memories, we recommended students to become familiar with the topic of immigration. Most of our students were second generation, so this was a topic that was by no means new to them. Then they started working on the design of a consent form so that they could use the interviews for classroom purposes. We started with the information that the consent form might include: objectives and description of the project, informants' rights and their identity protection, the use of the interviews, the researcher's contact information, signatures of both the researcher and the informant, and the date. Then, students had to develop a plan with questions to think about following Taylor's methodology (2011). Some of them were already included in the consent form: the objective of the project, the selection of the Latin@ immigrant family, the reason that the selected family was a good representative of their community, and the information that was needed to be collected about the family. After doing this, we were able to proceed to the interview. Lyons (2007) provided a few tips to achieve a successful interview: the interviewer should make the informant relax by engaging in a casual conversation and establishing a personal rapport. He/she could also take notes during the interview and should be ready to

improvise and ask follow-up questions encouraging personal stories that could not be found in the textbooks: that is, information about the daily life of ordinary people that was not available through any other sources. This exercise gave voice to the community. On one hand the interviewer found an answer to his/her questions, and, on the other hand the informant found someone who was interested in what he/she had to say and responded to his/her human need of finding meaning to his/her existence.

According to Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003), in the first phase the interviewer had the difficult task of establishing a good rapport with the informant until he/she felt comfortable, which was key to achieving a successful interview. In order to achieve this, the setting must be satisfactory: in a quiet room with minimal background noise. Then, the research topic and the purpose of the study were introduced. We taught students how to compile all the demographic information they could obtain from their informants at the beginning of the interview in order to contextualize their experience and to interpret their testimonials. The data were collected in form of warm-up questions. From then on, thoughtful questions could be formulated so that informants could tell narratives and life experiences. The interviewer's task was leading the informant to discuss the crucial topics at a deeper level. Students had to keep in mind that one of the main objectives of the interview was obtaining detailed stories from the informants, giving them the opportunity to clarify contradictions and to reflect over what their life experiences meant in the past and what they mean now. The interview could take the form of a casual conversation or an exercise of reflection. What really mattered were both this new knowledge of the past and the interpretative perspective. Close to the end of the interview, it was very important to indicate in a subtle way that the interview was coming to the end so that the informant could finish with all the details he/she wished. Finally, the last phase referred to what happened when the voice recorder was off: thanking the informant and explaining how his/her testimonial contributed to making history. Sometimes there were conclusions, and the final remark consisted of taking care of the informant's well-being after the interview.

During the last weeks of the course, students selected short clips of these videotaped interviews, which were each approximately one hour long, to be presented to the rest of the class. Since we had a video recording of the interview, it was necessary to pay attention to the verbal and non-verbal language. In short, what really mattered was the dialogue. Throughout the process of the interview and the preparation of the oral presentation in class, we focus

students on working on the outcomes of the course: using the oral history project to improve their communication skills, as well as building their linguistic self-esteem at the same time they reconnected with their heritage culture.

### **Leading Students to Create Questions to Be Included in the Interview**

In the middle of the course, we started working on the modules of questions the students needed to ask in order to achieve a successful interview. These questions mostly had to do with the daily life of the informants.

This is the list of modules that students were offered so that they could use them as a start point (see Appendix):

1. Family, childhood, school, first job
2. Experiences at work
3. Your life in the U.S.
4. Cultural assimilation
5. Final reflections

### **Training Students to Be Good Interviewers**

The interviewer should understand what being a good interviewer entailed: he/she had a moral and ethical responsibility with the informant so he/she should be a good listener, have a logical mind and, finally, have a good memory (Legard et al., 2003). Whitman (2000) recommended becoming familiar with the principles and standards of the Oral History Association to develop these qualities before starting the project.

Since oral history depended on a well-structured interview, the role of the interviewer was to act as the guide of the content and context of the interview (Taylor, 2011). As Taylor explained, it was essential to be familiar with the equipment and make sure it worked properly to avoid any technology issues during the interview. Also, the set of modules and questions had to be very well prepared with little room for improvisation, above all for those inexperienced in these kinds of interviews. The questions should be open-ended so that stories were elicited. In order to become a good interviewer, one has to be a good researcher. Thus, we urged students to get all the information they could about the topic so that they could prepare relevant questions. If they were able to transmit their interest on the interviewee, he/she would feel special and important and would be more willing to tell more stories.

It was necessary to begin with a pre-interview with the purpose of getting to know the informant and making him/her aware of his/her rights and the purpose of the project. Informants should feel comfortable enough to trust the interviewer in order to be honest to speak their minds (Rings, 2006). As part of the training, students not only had to be familiar with the

demographic information of the informants, but also had to work on their social skills and qualities such as empathy and sensitivity (Bornat, 2003). In Clinchy's words, they had to "refrain from judgment" (1996, p. 216). Fears from both sides had to be overcome, and also their desires had to be met (Garrett, 1942). They also had civic responsibilities as interviewers whose goal was to transmit the message that informants' stories were worth being told (Whitman, 2000).

One of the most delicate tasks for the interview to be successful was that students managed to ask difficult questions without upsetting the informants (Behar, 1996). As it was mentioned earlier, a good interviewer was a good listener and chose the right questions to elicit a good testimonial. Silence was okay, and time was not an issue for the interviewer or interviewee (Taylor, 2011). Once the interview was over, it was time to analyze the historical value of the project to keep writing history.

### **Teaching Students to Write the Report**

As part of the research process, the consent form was included at the beginning of the report where the agreements between the interviewer and the subject were displayed in terms of protection of his/her identity and rights. The report had to have an organized structure. The first part provided the description of the methodology, the setting of the interview, and the selection of the questions. Then, after providing the subject's demographic information, the most rigorous part of the project, the interview, was described with intellectual honesty.

When assessing the interview, the following factors had to be considered: who the interviewer was, who the narrator was, what was being told, and what the purpose of the interview was (Shopes, 2004). Lastly, it is recommended to remind students that the most important part of the project was assessing the historical value of the interview and its placement in the recent history of the Latin@ communities in the United States. We can summarize the steps for leading students to conduct the oral history project as shown in Figure 1.

### **Shortcomings of Oral History**

Oral history is a transformative process of listening and retelling. Since it was impossible to transmit the story precisely when speaking in the name of somebody else, it was very important to be faithful to the testimonial and avoid the distortion of history (Pollock, 2006). In order to achieve this goal, the interviewer attempted to understand the informant's perspective. Therefore, he/she needed to ask for clarification or follow-up questions as needed. On the other hand, there were subjective factors (e.g., the psychological

Figure 1  
*Steps of the Oral History Research Project*

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1. Consent Form
  2. List of Modules for the Interview
  3. The Interview
  4. The Written Report
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characteristics of the interviewer and his/her political ideologies, his/her attitudes towards the topic of the interview, or the opinions and experiences of the informant) that might influence the interpretation of the story (Sepúlveda, 2000). As a consequence, the selection of the informants should be performed rigorously, and the sample must be representative of the community.

One important limitation was to overcome the gap between the culture and circumstances of the interviewer and those of the informant. The interviewer was usually in a more privileged situation, at least in terms of immigration status, since most of them were U.S. citizens. Therefore, he/she had to do his/her best to make the informant comfortable to narrow down this gap. Another point worth mentioning was the lack of clarity about the historical questions this methodology was expected to address. Narrative identity had a central role in individual memory, the primary goal of which was coherence instead of factual accuracy (Gardner, 2003).

Regarding the setting, the presence of other people during the interview might be an important problem. This factor could influence the informant by making him/her feel intimidated to express his/her mind about the topic. Due to the Observer's Paradox, the "artificiality" of the interview might intimidate the informant when trying to achieve a natural conversation. Therefore, we faced a difficult task by making him/her forget he/she was being recorded..

In order to achieve this, the selection of the questions was very important. The objective was that they could relax and speak their minds with honesty. Since the interview was video-recorded, the interviewer was responsible for the editing and organization of the story. Thus, the interviewer had a big responsibility in being faithful to the story: that is, being objective before, during, and after the interview (Taylor, 2011). Students had to bear in mind that the main character was the informant, so the interviewer had to give him/her that place. One way of doing so was by avoiding interruptions or corrections. As a resource for studying testimonials, they could count on databases. Despite the enormous advantage of the existence of

databases, the context of the words might change, and much is lost in the process (High & Sworn, 2009).

One disadvantage that could be found was the information told by the people who were interviewed. Many informants confused events and were not very accurate in the practice of oral history. This implied selective memory or mistakes in their memories (Lyons, 2007). Despite the vitality of the human element that added the oral history methodology, it could be used as a supplementary teaching tool, but not as the only one (Huerta & Flemmer, 2000). Oral history had to be understood with its limitations. That is, it could not be the only historical source to recreate the past (Whitman, 2000). Even when original interviews were unanalyzed, an oral historian should evaluate the interviewee's background to understand the potency of the interview. The interviewer had to be careful with the questions he/she asked and the outline he/she planned to follow so that they did not restrict the interviewee too much by maintaining a listening approach (Taylor, 2011).

#### **Assessment of the Oral History Project**

Since this was a conversation course, a high percentage of the grade for the final project involved the oral presentations which the students did for their classmates during the last two weeks of the course. During this presentation, students could show clips of the interview with the most relevant parts. Here the content and the form of their presentation had equal weight. Regarding the content, the presentation was required to have an organized structure (i.e., introduction, relevant ideas of the interview, and conclusion), a good selection of questions, and a synthesis providing a summary of their experience as researchers and of the main ideas of the testimonial. Concerning the form, their use of language was assessed (i.e., grammar, appropriate vocabulary for a formal register), their use of the audiovisual equipment, and their non-verbal language during the presentation.

The remaining percentage of the grade was dedicated to the written report. This report was turned in a day after the presentation and was expected to be a

Figure 2  
*Evaluation Criteria for the Oral History Project*

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**Oral Presentation (75%)**

1. Content
2. Organization (Introduction, Cohesion and Development of Ideas, Conclusion)
3. Discussion (Interpretation of the Interview)
4. Language

**Oral History Report (25%)**

1. Content
  2. Organization (Introduction, Cohesion and Development of Ideas, Conclusion)
  3. Discussion (Feedback from Instructor and Peers, Interpretation of the Interview)
  4. Language
- 

critical reflection including a good summary of the interview and their oral presentation and the feedback provided from the instructor and their classmates. Additionally, language use was also taken into consideration. A CD with the video of the interview had to be attached to the report. As Taylor (2011) suggested, a documentation sheet of the CD should include the following information: names of the interviewer and interviewees, place and date of the interview, and field notes with a summary or abstract of the interview. An assessment of the oral history project is proposed in Figure 2.

As mentioned in a previous section, there are plenty of benefits for students in using oral history in a Humanities course. Fortunately, since oral history is applied across disciplines, there is also research in other areas that predicted positive assessment by students as well. In a study conducted by Ligon, Ehlman, Moriello, and Welleford (2009) on students' attitudes towards using oral history in a gerontology classroom, they found more positive reactions after using this technique with older adults and the aging process. Therefore, Ehlman and colleagues (2011) argued that it was a successful method of addressing attitudinal changes in the classroom because of its transformational learning experience.

**Pedagogical Implications of Oral History Projects in the Latin@ Community**

A community history describes a group of people with a common identity looking at its social, political, and historical development, as well as other social factors such as economic growth, educational backgrounds, ages, and religious beliefs. Through family histories, each member contributed to the community history (Taylor, 2011). Since we have been going through anti-immigrant times and with an immigration reform that is still on hold, it was important to give voice to the Latin@ community in a

city like Chicago, where the population is significant in number but the community is still struggling for its rights. Through oral history, we could contribute to empower the community; memory became the subject and the object and it could be studied through different approaches such as linguistic, cultural, or ethnographic ones when analyzing the interviews (Thomson, 2007). This multidisciplinary facet made oral history an incredible tool to implement in the classroom and an opportunity for including the community in the university curriculum. Oral history could serve as a significant resource for making transformative histories along the line of the mission of some institutions, and therefore, having a significant impact in a community that had been silenced in the past since it did not follow the mainstream ideology by promoting social change. As Mendoza (2012) pointed out, Latin@s not only adapted as needed, but also strived to change the world in many ways through community advocacy, art, or teaching among others. They did not only aspire to aiding the survival of the community, but also to finding an equal position in the democracy by assuming these roles of change facilitators: collective action was needed to preserve the well-being of the community.

According to Bischoff and Moore (2007), oral history projects also serve many other purposes such as: creating a forum to share interviewees' emotional life stories; giving value to their lives in the background of their communities, which is usually undervalued in the larger society; revealing the details of social movements; and stirring courage for action for the sake of protecting their human rights. Overall, teaching through oral history cultivates a spirit for justice and peace. In fact, oral histories generally have an explicit social agenda, and oral historians tend to be biased in the relationships they establish with the people they interview and how they plan to use their work. Making histories is a craft formed by cultural and political conventions (Schuman, 2003). Since oral histories can be used interdisciplinary, educators should consider

creative and innovative ways of applying them inside and outside the classroom. One way of doing so could be through service learning. Reising and Spivey (2005) provided a service learning opportunity in a sociology class with a Center for Community Action; it involved local subjects recollecting stories of the social changes in their county for the last 50 years. Students had the task of recording and transcribing data that were going to become the basis for a book. In this way, students could provide service to their community, and, from a pedagogical perspective, they could gain experience in social changes and in research methodology.

Concerning pedagogical implications beyond language and culture, this method could bring students from different disciplines and interests together and could allow them to apply assorted analytical tools in order to make their own interpretation of history.

### Conclusions

Oral history is an interpretive event rather than a search for historical events. Therefore, this methodology had pedagogical as well as linguistic implications. Our expectation as educators was to make our Spanish heritage language learners reconnect with their culture and heritage through the oral history process. As they interviewed Latin@ immigrant families, they re-examined the history of their own families and raised a respect for their community and ultimately for themselves. This project extended to the community when incorporated in the university curriculum.

In sum, this article attempted to provide a description of the step-by-step oral history process in a Spanish course for heritage language learners and the benefits of choosing this methodology at linguistic, cultural, and multi-disciplinary levels in order to understand its assessment and pedagogical implications in the Latin@ community.

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## Appendix

## Modules for the oral history interview

*Family, childhood, school, first job:*

Tell me about your family and childhood.

What are the memories you have about your school years?

How was the neighborhood where you grew up?

Do you remember your first job?

*Experiences at work:*

How do you like your job?

How many jobs have you had since you arrived here?

Describe your work experience in your country of origin and compare it to United States.

*Your life in the U.S.:*

Tell me about your life here. Do you like it here? How many years have you been living here?

Do you miss the country where you were born?

What does it mean for you to be an immigrant?

*Cultural assimilation:*

What have been the positive and negative aspects of your life in the U.S.?

What have been the biggest challenges for you and your community? How could they be solved?

Would you like to eventually move back to your country of origin?

*Final reflections:*

What advice would you give to other immigrants in your situation?

Can you compare your life as an immigrant when you moved to this country and the life of recent immigrants now?

Is it easier or harder to be an immigrant nowadays?

(Adapted from Burgo, 2014)