

“Videos as Final Project for Assessment of Spanish as a Foreign Language in Higher Education Context”

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Abstract

The article shows how we are using audiovisual projects to assess different skills in the Spanish language of beginner and intermediate groups of students that are learning Spanish as a Foreign Language in a College context. We are using midterm and final projects to evaluate their learning process. It is a variant of Project Based Learning as during the course we give them the tools, skills and guides to create the two projects they have to accomplish every semester.

According to Bell (2010), the use of projects helps students improve communication and collaboration skills.

The videos that our students made, are not only authentic assessments allowing teachers to evaluate the learning process of our students, but also engage students' ability of collaborate learning and critical thinking. In addition to the intercultural awareness developed by this kind of project when they have to confront their world with the target language's one. Furthermore, the project stimulates the learning autonomy and the students are responsible for their own learning process. They have to collaborate, auto-evaluate their work and make decisions during the process of making their video.

This kind of tasks are very meaningful as real-world situations are simulated and require the use of a great variety of skills like writing, reading, communication, interaction, cultural explorations, etc.

Keywords: Project, assessment, video, skills, scaffolding, peer feedback, intercultural awareness, motivation

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Introduction

The world has changed dramatically over the past 15 years. Technology is an inevitable part of our every day life. We are living in a connected world that is changing every second, with every click. Education systems are reinventing themselves trying to cope and adapt to this changing world as quick as possible. Education has moved from teaching, testing facts and teacher centered approach to a further more complex student-centered approach where not only knowledge is transmitted but also focus on stimulate skills such a collaboration and communication skills, scaffolding, cultural awareness, etc. The Foreign Language Programs should embed 21st Century skills such as cultural awareness, critical thinking, collaborative skills, creativity, etc. Instructors should take the challenge of providing these skills to their students as global citizens that they are.

This article explains step by step how to use videos as a final project assessment, starting with the outline of the assessment, presenting the project to the students and guiding them during the process, ending with submission and evaluation of the project. The kind of Project Based learning that will be described in this article is an outside of class task, meaning that students will have to create their videos during their free time. The project will be only discussed in class the day it is presented to the class. The presentation of the project would be using some class time that can vary from 30 minutes to an hour class depending on the needs of your students. This is a proposal for using PBL when it is not possible to do it during class time.

1. What is project-based learning?

Project-based learning (PBL) is an instructional approach that can be very useful in teaching nearly any subject. Kalyonc & Tepecik (2010), described Project-based Learning in the following way:

“PBL approach focuses on general concepts, thoughts, and principles of a discipline. It includes students’ duties as searching, achieving information and creating a product by integrating this information in a meaningful way for the solution of the problem. It lets students work in their unique ways and build their own knowledge.” (p. 2,412).

We can also apply this to language learning where students have to create an end product, in this case a short video about a selected topic using the learned knowledge through the course. In order to accomplish this, students have to be able to get into the foreign language culture context and use the learned materials in this context to create an authentic product .

According to Stoller (2006) PBL is more than merely engaging students in projects and takes on a variety of forms depending on teachers, students and context. Consequently to that there are many ways of using projects in teaching and it has been argued whether it can be considered a PBL or not. There are many ways of using PBL depending on teachers, students and situation.

1.2. Why project based assessment:

Videos are not only authentic assessments to allow instructors to evaluate the learning process of their students, but also engage students ability of collaborative learning and critical thinking in an original setting and with an utility value for the students as they are working in a real-world issue. In addition to the intercultural awareness developed of this kind of project when they have to confront their world with the target language world. On top of that, projects stimulate the learner's motivation and learning autonomy, the students are responsible for their own learning process. They have to collaborate, auto-evaluate their work and make decisions during the process of making their video. Bell (2010) noted that through projects, students develop 21st Century skills that lead them to become member of a global society. He also pointed out that project based assessment is an authentic assessment style.

1.2.1. Advantages of Project Based Learning are:

Cooperative learning
Motivation and implication of the learner
Problem solving skills and creativity
Contextual social awareness

These kinds of tasks are very meaningful as real-world situations are simulated and require to use a great variety of skills like writing, reading, communicative, cultural explorations, etc. Brown (2002) emphasized that meaningful learning will lead toward better long-term retention than rote learning.

Frank (2013) remarked the importance of creating opportunities for both, teachers and students, to examine and reflect on the target culture and that of their own country. By implementing video projects to the curriculum it could facilitate the opportunity to facilitate students' knowledge of the target culture in the language courses, helping them to understand how language and culture are connected. According to Chamness & Mikulec (2011), knowledge of other languages and cultures not only affords individuals with connections that a monolingual individual does not have, but also helps them to understand the way in which language and culture are connected to other disciplines, as well as how one's culture affects one's worldview.

2. How to work with project based assessment:

The first thing that must be clear is the instructor and student's role. The instructors will be moderators which guide and coordinate the learning process, that way the students will have to take more responsibility and be more autonomous in their learning process. This is a student-centered approach.

2.1. Instructors role:

Instructors as moderators will guide the students, negotiate with them, motivate and give them feedback. Chamness & Mikulec (2011) emphasized that the structure of the project is essential. That said, teacher must provide clear and explicit instructions.

2.1.1.Prepare the project outline for your students.

- Suggest main topic. It is advisable to give students 3 or 4 scenarios as setting for the videos, always look for real life situations like: meeting a new friend, dating, planning a trip, cooking tutorial, etc. By giving them scenarios, they can have a better understanding of the task, that guide them to come out with their own ideas. It is important and highly motivating for them, to allow them to suggest their own scenario for their video. Students love to develop their own ideas. According to Chamness & Mikulec (2011), giving the students the opportunity of selecting their topics and freedom to determinate how to set the project would encourage enjoyment.
Finally, note that the scenarios must be related with the topics learned in class. The teacher should approve the students project ideas to make sure they will accomplish the expectations.
- If necessary, organize the student's in groups, ideally in small groups of two or three students.
- Give them deadlines (checklist): For this kind of assessment three weeks time should be enough for the students to complete their project.
 - Deadline to select their topic and project outline.
 - Deadline for the draft of their project and script.
 - Deadline for the submission of the project.
- Be very clear about expectations and provide the students with a project guideline and the rubrics for the evaluation of the project.
- Length of the video: the instructor should decide how long the video should be. Videos of at least 5 minutes works very well for partner work. In case of using small groups of 3 students a length of at least 8 minutes would be appropriate.
- Make clear what is not allowed in the project. It is advisable to remind the students that they have to act in the video not hide behind an image and read out. In order to avoid this situation, it is highly recommended to make it very clear in the grading rubrics that reading is not allowed and will be penalized.
- Guide them during the process of planning their project.
- At the end of the project students should write a reflection of their learning process.
- Evaluate the projects according to the project evaluation guideline or rubric.

2.1.2. Project's evaluation:

Rubrics provided to the students at the beginning of the process should be used for grading the project. Furthermore, it will work as an extra guideline for the students when working on the video project.

2.1.2.1. What is a Rubric?

A rubric is a scoring tool created to assess the performance of the students in a certain assessment, often it is created by the instructor who develop the task to be assessed.

The Eberly Center (2015) defined the rubric as “a scoring tool that explicitly represents the performance expectations for an assignment or piece of work. A rubric divides the assigned work into component parts and provides clear descriptions of the characteristics of the work associated with each component, at varying levels of mastery. Rubrics can be used for a wide array of assignments: papers, projects, oral presentations, artistic performances, group projects, etc. Rubrics can be used as scoring or grading guides, to provide formative feedback to support and guide ongoing learning efforts, or both.”

2.1.2.2. How to create a rubric:

There are different kind of rubrics, however, it is easier to follow a rubric with well described levels of achievement, that will guide the students when making the video. In order to create a good rubric the teacher has to plan well the following steps and incorporate them into the rubric:

1. Task description: it must be decided which kind of task will be performed by the students for e.g. a video product as we are talking about in this article.
2. Expectations: The teacher must have very clear expectations of what will be assessed and what the students are expected to accomplish.
3. Achievements levels: A good rubric should have at least three well described different levels of performance of each assessed point. However, I recommend to have at least four levels: the highest level expected for students to accomplish, the good level of performance, the adequate level of performance and the poor or unacceptable level of performance. All levels must be well described so the students have a good reference point when doing the project.

2.2. Student's role.

Students as autonomous learners will follow the assessment guideline. In this case, the guidance of the teacher has to be limited to the structure or ideas as it is an assessment and the student is not allowed any external help to create or edit the script.

Students take responsibility of the whole process of creating their video. At the beginning of the project, students are organized in groups and each group sets each member of the group duties. Moreover they decide what to do in case that one member does not accomplish them. They make their duties official by signing a group-contract.

Another great advantage of working in small groups is that students have a great opportunity to accomplish their multiple intelligence to achieve the same goal. One of my students has said in their project reflection: “*I felt that we worked well together because we had different strengths and talents*”. Other students mention how they support each other with the pronunciation, grammar, etc.

2.2.1 Planning their project:

Once the instructor has explained the project to the students and groups have been formed, the project moves away from the classroom and becomes a social interaction, connecting the new skills and real life. The process has to go through the following stages:

- Selecting their topic, context and title of their project.
- Organizing ideas and setting goals: what they want to do and how they are going to set the video.
- Creating a script
 - Language base: students make sure that they are using learned vocabulary, grammar, idiomatic expressions, etc.
 - Sociolinguistics, cultural understanding: situations, reactions, use of non-verbal language.
- Reviewing a script: peer feedback and scaffolding. Students will read their partner's part of the script and provide input, monitor grammar and discuss sociocultural points.

2.2.2 Recording the video:

Although, this is the part of the project that students might like the most, it can be very challenging, as the students have to find a way of performing and recording simultaneously. Most of the time, they take turns to record or ask for external help to record the scenes. When filming the students memorize and play their role, that way they reproduce discourse and behaviors of a native speaker of the target language. That is also the moment when students have the last opportunity to auto-evaluate and change or adapt their script.

2.2.3 Editing the video:

The last part of the process is editing the video. At this stage students have to negotiate again the sequences of their video, add subtitles and extras if they wish to. Although nowadays students have a fairly good knowledge of how to edit videos, it is always advisable to provide them an online guide "how to do videos". Another factor to consider is the technology needed to edit a video. Usually schools and universities have computer labs where students can edit the project and most of the students have good computers with the necessary software or can download it via the internet.

Particularly noteworthy is to recommend to the students that they are not expected to spend huge amounts of time editing. They tend to over do the editing. At the same time we emphasize that the most important aspect is the content and settings they choose.

2.2.3.1 Online guide for students:

There are a great variety of websites with guides for students with this part of the task. Here I will mention some of them that I used for my students:

- Tips to shooting your video with an iPhone: <http://wistia.com/library/shooting-video-with-an-iphone>

- Backlight effects: http://www.cctv-information.co.uk/i/Backlight_Compensation
- Sky camera work: http://www.ehow.com/info_8077220_image-stabilization-mean-camera.html
- Some instructions of how to use iMovie: <http://www.apple.com/support/mac-apps/imovie/>
- Some light techniques: <https://vimeo.com/33672808>
- Upload a video to Dropbox: <https://www.dropbox.com>

These are just same example of tools available online. It is advisable to look for the ones that are suitable for your students needs, such as if they use different software.

3. Benefits from the project work:

Projects give the students the opportunity to use their sociolinguistic and linguistic skills in the target language and culture as whole and through out the project. They have to use writing skills to create the script, their reading skills to read other students' work and check their group mates writing work "scaffolding". At the same time, speaking and listening skills to play their role in the short movie are also developed. Moreover, when the students are being filmed they have the chance to emulate behaviors, discourse such an idiomatic or sayings and norms of the target language. Also during the recording of the video, students could make changes of the script to fit the metalinguistic needs of the scene. There is a continuous reflection process of their learning, which reinforces their learning autonomy.

My experience with high school and university students is that they are very motivated and enjoy the process of doing such a project. Overall, students are very creative, some students try to inject humor in their projects, and others experiment with special effects. In addition, students put a lot of effort to show cultural awareness in their projects, which shows a better understanding of the cultural group of the target language.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Language (page 161)
"Successful task performance is more likely where the learner is fully involved; a high level of intrinsic motivation to carry out the task – due to interest in the task or because of its perceived relevance, for example to real life needs learner involvement; extrinsic motivation may also play a role, for example where there are external pressure to complete the task successfully"

However, it is not always all positive as sometimes students complain about the workload of such a project and unfortunately there are sometime cases when a student is not working in the project as they should and their group partners or partner have put more time and effort in the project. In order to evaluate this last issue, it is recommend to ask students individually to submit a short essay explaining how they collaborate in the project in the form of an individual reflection of their learning process.

4. Difficulties encountered:

Some students think that the video project is very time consuming, as they have to invest a lot of time to complete it. However, they are a minority.

5. Conclusion:

In conclusion, using video projects as final assessments is a very effective and authentic way of assessing students' knowledge, abilities and understanding of the target culture. It not only evaluates what students learned during the whole semester, but also is highly motivating and less stressful than an exam. In addition to that, learner's autonomy is reinforced and they have the chance to be creative. The fact that real-life situations are simulated, give the students a practical experience of using the language. Besides that, video projects give students the opportunity of applying their multiple intelligence and work collaboratively with their teammates during the project. The students find the process very engaging and enjoyable. Also, students report to have a greater ability to formulate sentence and convert ideas in Spanish after the project.

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