

## ¡Hablo un Poquito de Español! Strategies to Develop a Spanish Course Using Technology in PDS Settings

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**Abstract:** This article examines how a conversational Spanish course was designed and delivered in a PDS site that identified teachers learning Spanish as necessary to improve communication with their Latino families. The article discusses how the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and technology were used to develop the course with the intention of having educators practice their Spanish and improve their pedagogical practices. The authors explore how teachers integrated the language learned using technology in order to facilitate instruction and increase family engagement. The article shares examples and lessons learned through the perspectives of the faculty teaching the course.

**KEYWORDS:** English language learners, Professional Development Schools, Spanish speaking, Universal Design for Learning

### **NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need; and
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;

Professional Development Schools (PDS) must provide educators with professional development opportunities that meet their needs (NAPDS, 2008). This article examines how a conversational Spanish course was designed and delivered in a PDS site that identified teachers learning Spanish as necessary to improve communication with their Latino families. The article discusses how the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and technology were used to develop the course with the intention of having educators practice their Spanish and improve their pedagogical practices.

The educators of this PDS site understood that enhancing communication between school and home was critical because it could assist families in becoming more engaged in the education of their children. Research states that family engagement influences children’s development and academic success (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Durand, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Lopez & Caspe, 2014). Thus, these teachers wanted to encourage and engage families in their children’s education by creating school activities and using innovative practices at school.

Unfortunately, families and children who speak another language sometimes find it difficult to participate in these type of school activities or educational programs. Often, the schools fail to eliminate the barriers that inhibit families to participate in these events (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Takanishi, 2004). The most evident barrier for immigrant families is communication in English (Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009). Many times, educators are not able to communicate effectively due to the language barriers with families and are unprepared to include culturally and linguistically appropriate practices in the classroom (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This PDS wanted to address these needs by having the university deliver graduate courses for their teachers targeting these areas. Consequently, the university's graduate reading program and the school worked in collaboration to establish the objectives of this initiative in order to meet the school's needs (Mogge, Martinez-Alba, & Cruzado-Guerrero, 2017).

### Nature of the Course

The conversational Spanish course was developed at the request of teachers at a PDS located in the northeast of the United States by a university institution in that area. The population of this school had a drastic increase of Spanish speaking families who came to the United States from countries such as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Consequently, the teachers felt the need to learn Spanish. The PDS team approached the university to share their concerns and work in collaboration in order to offer professional development opportunities for the teachers. Thus, the university offered a series of four courses that focused on teaching English to speakers of other languages and parent workshops in Spanish for families. The titles of these courses were: *Social, Cultural and Curricular Contexts for Second Language Learners*, *Instruction and Assessment for Second Language Learners*, *Linguistics for Educators*. (For a more detailed description of the university-partnership and other courses, see Mogge et al., 2017). The last course taken by the teachers was the *Conversational Spanish for Teachers of English Language Learners*.

The conversational Spanish course was designed to (1) help educators to communicate informally with children and families who speak Spanish; (2) explore strategies on how to use the Spanish language to facilitate the teaching and learning of children; and (3) learn more about the language and culture of the families (Mogge et al., 2017). The course was not intended for teachers to become fluent in Spanish but to learn words and phrases that are useful to communicate with families. In addition, the course aimed to engage all teachers in using the language in a low risk environment. These objectives are consistent with research practices that show that families tend to become more involved in the education of the children when the communication between home and school is mutual and effective, and when the schools consider and value the language and culture of the families (Gonzalez et al., 2005; NAEYC, 1995; Takanishi, 2004).

The development of the Spanish conversational course used a communicative language teaching approach to make the course meaningful to the diverse group of teachers enrolled. Communicative language teaching focuses on communicative objectives and meaningful activities to meet the communicative needs of the learner (Littlewood, 2013). The course assignments were designed to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their Spanish skills using authentic speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities as well as to explore the Latino culture in the classroom and school community. The course participants were elementary school teachers, speech pathologists, para-educators and the principal. These educators had different ability levels

in speaking Spanish and using technology. Most of these educators were females who represented a variety of ages, cultural backgrounds, and years of experiences working in schools.

UDL principles were used as a framework to develop the course. The UDL framework responds to the diversity of students in the classroom and eliminates instructional barriers in order to make learning accessible to all students (CAST, 2011). CAST (2011) emphasizes three UDL principles that should be considered when designing instruction in order to make it intentional and significant to teachers. The principles are to provide (1) multiple means of representation; (2) action and expression; and (3) engagement. According to the UDL National Center (2012) these principles emphasize that students differ in the way they understand and perceive information, express their knowledge, and feel motivated and involved in learning. Consequently, these principles allow teachers to design instruction, to decrease barriers, and identify technologies to make content accessible to students.

### **Course Activities Using Technology**

Class activities included technology in several ways to make the material accessible and comprehensible to the teachers taking the course. The course was held at the school for a semester and classes were offered once a week after school for 15 weeks. The content of the classes focused on conversational Spanish. Therefore, the teachers had sufficient time to practice their conversational skills and explore strategies and resources in Spanish to improve communication with families and children who spoke Spanish during the week at school. The instructor used the English language when exploring educational strategies and the Latino culture during the course.

The format of the course included an opening activity with the whole group, then small group center activities, and closing with a whole group activity. For the opening activity, we reviewed the new material in Spanish, provided examples with different visuals, real items props and technology, explored cultural notes, and explained centers. Then, teachers completed differentiated small group activities in heterogeneous language proficiency groups. In the centers, teachers had opportunities to practice their vocabulary with their group members and use language applications such as Duolingo to help them with their pronunciation, role-play situations, read books, talk about different topics, and explore the cultural notes and personal experiences. Some teachers used these applications on their iPhones and others on their iPads. The applications included gamification elements that teachers found engaging and useful to learn the language (Nielsen, 2015). Last, we closed each session by reviewing the material and explaining the next topic and assignments.

In this course, the content was presented using multiple means of representation. Teachers also had the opportunity to share what they were learning using multiple means of action and expression. The instructor employed multiple means of engagement that kept students motivated in class. Table 1 includes UDL principles, guidelines, and examples of multimedia tools used in the course (CAST, 2011).

Table 1

*UDL and Technology*

<i>UDL Principle</i>	<i>Related UDL Guidelines</i>	<i>Examples of Multimedia Tools</i>
Multiple means of representation	Provide different options for perception	PowerPoint presentations with embedded audio and videos (YouTube) were used in class and on Blackboard.
	Provide multiple options for language and symbols	Google images, books and songs online to stress vocabulary through visuals and audio were used throughout the course.
Multiple means of action and expression	Use multiple media for communication	Teachers had the option to design videos, digital stories, or PowerPoint presentations for school projects, such as for the final project.
	Provide options for expression and communication	Facetime and Skype (video chat applications) were used to practice oral language skills individually with the instructor. Teachers practiced greetings, farewells, and how to make appointments with families.
Multiple means of motivation and engagement	Provide options to optimize individual choice, relevance, authenticity, and autonomy; and minimize threats and distractions	Teachers had options to work in small groups or individually on projects and to choose the context of projects. Classroom centers had a variety of activities targeting beginners, intermediate and advanced Spanish skills.
		Teachers had options to select themes for their projects depending on their interest, language proficiency level and technology knowledge.
		The instructor provided options to reduce anxiety and distractions by allowing teachers to practice language skills in small groups, individually with the instructor using video chat applications (or in person), and using language applications such as Duolingo.

**Final Project**

The final project required teachers to develop an oral presentation/activity for students and families in their classroom. The teachers had the opportunity to complete the final project on a topic that was relevant and meaningful to them using the technology tool or software of their

choice. Specifically, the option of creating digital stories or videos was presented for the purpose of reducing anxiety when speaking Spanish and to increase oral skills. These options were provided to teachers because videos and digital stories when created in small groups have been found to improve oral skills (Lee, 2014; Lys, 2013); reading fluency (Ortiz, Burlingame, Onuegbulem, Yoshikawa, & Rojas, 2012); and recognition of vocabulary (Castañeda, 2011) among students learning another language. In addition, the use of multimedia tools promotes social interaction, expression, and speaking fluency (Lee, 2014). In class, we discussed the importance of creating an environment in which students and families feel secure and comfortable. These options also make students feel less anxious about speaking another language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Sun, 2009).

Teachers could choose the context or theme for their final project. The project needed to include an introduction, the content which used vocabulary and phrases learned in class, and conclude with a farewell and personal contact information (Mogge et al., 2017) These areas were practiced during the semester. The areas that were specifically evaluated in this project were: (1) vocabulary, (2) pronunciation, (3) content (introduction, relevant content, farewell, contact information), and (4) format and quality of the presentation using technology. The teachers were required to complete a final reflection about their experiences and practices in the classroom using Spanish. They had the option to write the journals in English and/or Spanish. Teachers also had the opportunity to share these experiences orally during our class discussion. The reflections and discussions allowed the instructor to reflect on the lessons learned and future recommendations.

Teachers had the option of developing this final project individually or in collaboration with another teacher. Forty four percent of the class decided to work in collaboration with another colleague while fifty six percent of the class completed projects individually. Teachers also had the option to choose the type of technology and format for the final presentation. For this final project teachers used different technology and mobile devices to develop their projects. For example, some teachers used their iPhones, iPads, and software applications such as Movie Maker or iMovie to create and edit their videos. Other students presented their projects orally in class using PowerPoint. In class, teachers had the opportunity to brainstorm ideas and decide how they wanted to make their projects. Most of the teachers selected personal technology tools that they felt comfortable using individually or with a colleague. The instructor reviewed proposals and provided suggestions and resources before the projects were created.

The teachers developed their final presentations for different purposes depending on their immediate need in relation to their students and families. The vocabulary and content presented in the projects were also different. For example, some teachers used the vocabulary about the parts of the body and numbers, while others used vocabulary to describe services, events, and activities. Table 2 illustrates examples of the content of videos and the use given to it by the educators in the school environment.

Table 2

*Examples of Video Content*

<i>Videos</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Use of Videos</i>
Back to School Night	Teachers provided a guide to the school and introduced teachers.	New students, school assemblies, Parent Teacher Association meeting
Strategies to Read at Home	Teachers demonstrated strategies for families to use when reading in the home.	Parent workshop
Story Time	Teachers read a book, asked questions before, during, and after the story, and included an after reading activity.	Reading center and family reading activity
Cooking Recipes	Teachers shared recipes for making play dough, cookies for your pet and discussed information on healthy snacks.	Learning center activities, home school activities to extend learning about units of study
Homework Strategies	Teachers shared information about homework, strategies and materials that students need to do homework at home.	Parent workshop
Children's Songs	Common songs sung in class as part of the routine.	Classroom routines, family activity

**Lessons Learned**

The conversational Spanish course was developed and implemented to meet the specific needs of this PDS site (NAPDS, 2008). Key lessons were learned about collaboration among teachers and the PDS partners, the use of technology, and language learning.

**Collaboration.** The partnership between the university and school principal, PDS coordinator, teachers, children, and families was critical for the overall initiative but also for this course. The instructor took the feedback from the PDS to specifically address the needs of the teachers and create a low anxiety environment for this course (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). As explained in this article, meaningful activities were created relevant to school themes and families. Being able to include the ideas of the PDS partners in developing the course strengthened the relationship. In this school, the teachers signed up for this course voluntarily and had the motivation to learn the language. Motivation, attitude, and interest in learning another language have been found to impact language learning (Mustafa, Rashid, Atmowardoyo, & Dollah, 2015). In addition, the principal of the school took the course and participated actively in class. This positive energy promoted the use of Spanish with students, families and teachers in the school.

Collaboration among the teachers was also evident in completing assignments and class activities because the course provided multiple means of engagement, action and expression.

Therefore, it was critical to use the principles of UDL in planning the course. Teachers had the option to collaborate, which they did in small groups. They also began to visit each other to observe, exchange ideas, and make decisions about their projects, which is crucial for learning. Teachers identified their classroom needs and made projects relevant to them and their families. Some teachers worked on these projects with their students using their native language and in doing so, they used best practices and valued the language and culture of their students (NAEYC, 1995). This outcome kept teachers engaged and motivated to learn Spanish.

**Technology.** Another important lesson was preparing to use technology in the classroom. In this course, teachers had the opportunity to explore, learn and integrate technology in their school using Spanish. In addition, technology was used to practice the language and reduce their anxiety, document their experiences learning the language, and create materials to use in the classrooms or with families. Overall, technology was a great tool to engage the PDS community in speaking some Spanish “un poquito de Español” and use their projects for future PDS events. It is important to note that the instructor dealt with having to plan for different skills levels in Spanish and technology. Therefore, it was important to be flexible, provide options, allow teachers to collaborate with other teachers in using the technology to practice their skills and have resources available for them. For example, for one of their assignments, teachers were tasked to explore their school community. To complete this assignment, the teachers were provided with a variety of options. They could visit a restaurant, store, organization or attend an event in the community where Spanish was used as the medium for communication. Students had to take photos, observe, listen, and interact (speak) with community members. Then they had to report what they learned in class. Some students worked in groups and presented their work using videos and PowerPoint presentations. The teachers felt this activity was relevant and useful because it was a real experience where they could participate in the community.

**Language.** It was beneficial to take a communicative approach when teaching the course. Emphasis on communication as well as including some traditional techniques was ideal for this course (Littlewood, 2013). These activities worked well when teachers with different levels of skills and knowledge of Spanish worked in small groups. For example, when teachers created videos, they divided their tasks based on their level to report the content. In one of the groups, one teacher narrated the video while the other teacher introduced the staff in the building. In another video, the teachers shared the task of showing how to make biscuits for dogs following a recipe children could do with their families. Other teachers prepared their videos after using more traditional methods, such as question and answer drills to feel more prepared before creating their videos.

In class discussions, teachers recognized that learning a language takes time and opportunities to practice the language are essential. Teachers shared that they now understood the frustration or anxiety that sometimes students may feel when they cannot do the task or activity using the English language. Nonetheless, the teachers felt positive about the course experience. The teachers felt they improved “un poquito” and initiated changes in the school to promote the use of Spanish with more teachers and families. Teachers were enthusiastic about supporting Spanish in the classroom through various events and activities. The exchange of these ideas also resulted in event planning. For example, they created a video for family Back to School Night. Teachers made a video touring the different classrooms of the school and presented it to other teachers. The teachers who created this video, taught other teachers who did not take the course how to introduce themselves in Spanish in the video. This video will be used in future Back to

School Nights with the purpose of guiding new incoming students and families. Teachers felt comfortable presenting videos and using the technology they chose for their projects. The instructor felt these presentations demonstrated how teachers improved their pronunciation and use of vocabulary and phrases in Spanish in order to communicate with families.

The use of Spanish in the classroom was more successful for some teachers than for others. Some teachers were able to establish communication with children and families quickly and effectively. For other teachers, establishing communication was more difficult as their Spanish skills were at the beginner level. These teachers could have benefited from more practice in effectively integrating Spanish in their classrooms. Nonetheless, these educators created videos in which they taught songs to their students to reinforce unit vocabulary. For example, one teacher created a video showing the students how to sing a song about the parts of the body. Another teacher created a video telling the parents the list of items they needed to buy at the beginning of the year. That teacher also used the video with the students to practice the vocabulary in both languages.

It is important to create a positive learning environment in which different languages and cultures are valued by the school. The Spanish course created a space to explore how to use the native language of children in the classroom. The teachers reported that using Spanish in their classroom motivated students and increased the interest of students when delivering instruction. Some teachers believed that this was one of the causes by which many students improved their behavior and completed their work in class. For example, teachers began to create letters, signs, posters, and graphic organizers in Spanish to include in their teaching. Completing the final project provided teachers with more confidence to use Spanish and put it into practice in their lessons and informal interactions with the families. Families began to notice this change by increasing their communication with teachers. For example, educators reported that they could engage in simple conversations with families. One of the first changes that educators implemented in their classroom was to greet and say goodbye to their families in Spanish. Doing this provided teachers with the opportunity to practice their Spanish as well as begin to make families feel more comfortable with them. The teachers found that parents began teaching them some words and helped them with the pronunciation of words.

### **Future Recommendations**

This section will outline recommendations related to the *NAPDS Essentials* (2008) and the Spanish course.

Essential #3: Ongoing and reciprocal professional development guided by need.

This PDS initiative was guided by the need to support teachers in better serving culturally and linguistically diverse children and families (Mogge, et. al, 2017). This need was shared by the teachers in the school and supported by the principal of the school. In order to create these opportunities, university-school partners must work in collaboration to share their needs and develop a plan taking into consideration the ideas generated by the school community and the resources available.

In planning a language course, it is important to take into consideration the needs of the teachers taking the course, such as their time. It was important to build sufficient time to practice the language with children and adults in the PDS setting. Therefore, the course was designed to be once a week and included assignments that allowed the teachers to practice during



the week with students and parents in the PDS. However, teachers had other educational demands that limited their time after school. If teachers expressed the desire of having more class time or time to practice with families, the university could provide the option of having the course meet more than once a week and/or could include time to prepare materials in class. Also, the instructor could invite PDS families to participate in the course once a month to have the teachers practice their Spanish with them and families could practice their English. This idea could be developed with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or school staff development team and the university instructor.

Essential #4: A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants.

Commitment was evident in the participation of the teachers and the principal taking a series of courses delivered by their university partner. Participation in language courses could be facilitated by creating flexible learning environments using technology and taking a communicative approach. Principles of UDL must also be taken into consideration to create flexible learning environments to address the variability of teachers (CAST, 2011). In planning and delivering instruction, include differentiated activities in Spanish and provide different technology tools for all levels. Teachers who participated in the course had different levels of proficiency in Spanish and technology. The instructor differentiated group work and provided examples of technology and how to use it. This helped educators and facilitated the process of teaching and learning. The instructor could include time in the school's technology lab to carry out some of the projects or include the technology specialist from the school as special guest. This could simplify some of the problems encountered by teachers when editing videos, exploring applications and using new software programs. Also, if the university is delivering more than one course, a technology course could be one delivered before the Spanish course.

### Conclusion

This Spanish conversational course facilitated the learning of Spanish for teachers even though time, educational demands, different skill levels in Spanish and technology were challenges when delivering the course. The teachers felt they could speak some Spanish and felt proud of their final projects. Creating videos, digital stories, and/or oral presentations facilitated teaching and learning Spanish. Therefore, technology impacted the nature of the course. The fact that the course was delivered in the school environment was beneficial because it provided opportunities to teachers to practice with children and families in a natural environment. In addition, teachers were able to create their projects using technology and implement them in their PDS. The PDS served as a medium to practice Spanish and create meaningful projects relevant to the needs of teachers, children and families. These outcomes are aligned with the objectives identified by the PDS team. Consequently, the PDS benefitted greatly from this initiative.

In the future, this course could be replicated in a PDS site to investigate its effectiveness. In doing so, research studies could be conducted by teachers, student-teachers, or university faculty to explore a variety of topics related to learning a second language, technology tools for language learning, and family involvement. In addition, after taking the course one could explore how teachers use Spanish and other strategies to facilitate the teaching and learning in order to highlight best practices. Universities could facilitate this process by organizing inquiry groups in schools, encouraging action research projects for student-teachers targeting these areas, and providing a

forum and resources to share their findings in conferences, such as at local or national PDS conferences.

As mentioned before, the course was not designed to make teachers proficient in Spanish, but to begin the process of facilitating communication with Latino families. With the completion of the course, the teachers learned some Spanish, practiced their skills with families and felt their pedagogical practices improved by using Spanish and technology to deliver their projects.

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