

ENED 6330 Literacy Learning Analysis Paper

Start E-learning: Using iLrn to Learn Beginner-level Spanish

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Learning a new language has always been fascinating to me as a multilingual learner. The idea of learning Spanish didn't occur to me for the first time when I decided to use it for this learning analysis. But it was this assignment that gave me a good reason to put my thoughts into practice at the right time. Apart from my self-interest, there are two main reasons motivating me to start learning Spanish, one of which is my strong desire to communicate with people living in South American countries while I traveled there, the other is because there are a lot of bilingual materials, which can be used to teach bilingual students, introduced by professors and classmates in my graduate program. If I want to understand these teaching materials and leverage them in my future teaching practices, it would be better for me to have a good understanding of texts in both languages.

Before I selecting materials used for self-study, I actually asked one of my classmates who audited the Spanish class at Vanderbilt University last semester for suggestions, and she recommended me an online language-learning platform along with the book they used in class called *Conectados*. The book is actually a communication manual involving paper-version of e-contents in the platform—iLrn. iLrn is a language-learning platform containing all-in-one resources to help language learners improve and understand a new language as they listen, read, write and speak in the target language they are going to learn. This platform could be used for both in classroom study and independent study from which I chose the latter one because I didn't have enough time available this semester to audit class in our school.

Since being fully proficient in a new language is not achievable in several weeks,

rather than displaying how many words, sentences or grammatical rules I learned, this analysis focused more on how I used this online platform to start my e-learning experience and how technology was leveraged to assist me making progress in learning beginner level Spanish. I would use my first four-week study for analyzing and I finished learning the first three chapters of the whole book.

As content on iLrn platform is accessible either with a purchase of a corresponding textbook or with an independent purchase for online content only, I bought *Conectados* as a supplementary tool considering my preference in reading paper books and writing notes in it. In the next part, I would specify my learning processes in details.

Learning Process

When I opened iLrn for the first time, I need to create an account first and then use the access code in the communication manual book to make all contents accessible. As I didn't attend a specific class, so I just chose the independent learning mode.

The first chapter is a preliminary lesson. This lesson introduced the 5-step learning path used to guide learners (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Since all instruction in this platform followed the same 5-step pathway, I would use the first chapter as an example to specify the functions of each step, approaches and different modalities used in each step while specifying how I learned by following each step. In

terms of my learning experience of other chapters, I would focus on the central knowledge point in each chapter. Because each chapter was topic-centered and all grammar, vocabulary and sentence patterns designed for learners in the same chapter were used in conversations around that topic.

Contents in the preliminary lesson included setting a personal goal for learning Spanish, learning how to greet other people in both formal and informal ways and ask someone’s name, learning how to say your name and spell it. In the *READY?* step, list of topics and communicative tasks in this chapter would be displayed and some simple exercises would be designed for warming up. For example, at the beginning of the preliminary lesson, it asked me to match Spanish expressions and words to the corresponding English translations (Figure 2).

Lección preliminar > Autopreparación > Ready? Autopreparación

i á é í ñ ó ú ü Á É Í Ñ Ó Ú Ü ¿ i Review to material in the **paso**. By focus your attention on the lesson ahead.

1. Interacting with others—whether in person or online—is the key to acquiring a new language. So you will begin your study of Spanish by learning how to introduce yourself, greet others, talk about your classes, and understand your instructor’s directions. Even if you’ve never studied Spanish before, you can often use your powers of deduction to figure out meaning. Match each of the following Spanish expressions to its use.

1. <input type="text"/> iHola!	a. To ask a professor how she is doing
2. <input type="text"/> Me llamo (Taylor Jones).	b. To say “hi” to a friend
3. <input type="text"/> ¿Cómo está, profesora García?	c. To introduce oneself

2. Because many words look quite similar in Spanish and English, you will be able to recognize lots of new terms by sight. To exchange information about courses you are taking, you will use words such as the following. Match each Spanish course to its equivalent in English.

1. <input type="text"/> la biología	a. <i>education</i>
2. <input type="text"/> la educación	b. <i>calculus</i>
3. <input type="text"/> el cálculo	c. <i>biology</i>

Figure 2.

Without any prior knowledge in Spanish, I made some guesses in the first match exercise based on punctuations used in each expression. It was easy for me to match cognates in the second parts. Honestly, these cognates gave me some confidence in next steps.

The *LEARN IT!* part is really interactive (Figure 3). I was able learn how to greet people and ask their names in Spanish by looking at the texts and pictures and listening to the audio of each sentence. When I hover the icon on each sentence, the English meaning will appear. I can also listen to the pronunciation of each sentence by clicking it.



Figure 3.

One of the most important things I learnt in this chapter was the alphabetic system in Spanish. They also have 26 letters but they all have entirely different pronunciations. I followed the audio to repeat each pronunciation. Then, in the *PRATICE IT!* part, I did

some exercises to strengthen my previous learning part. The exercise given in this chapter was to spell the word by listening to the audio. I didn't do all of them correctly at the first time. But I could step back to try it again which is one of the best parts I think this platform provides. The *USE IT!* step often needs a partner to work with like making a conversation. Since I chose the independent learning mode, so finding a partner became a problem. I solved this problem by seeking help from one of my colleagues whose name is Michelle, and she is a Spanish native speaker from Honduras. I printed those communicative sentences I learned and did conversations with her after work. She not only helped me practice conversations, but also corrects my mistakes every time. The last step is *GOT IT?* in which the platform provided me with a form of checklist (Figure 4). This form helped me to check whether I've achieved each goal or not.

READY? LEARN IT! PRACTICE IT! USE IT! GOT IT?

Eval Autoevaluación

Now that you've finished the **Lección preliminar**, what are you able to do? Select the columns to indicate what you are able to do and what you need to work on. Return to the sections indicated for further practice.

TIP Take this opportunity to reflect on what you have learned and what you need to work on. Congratulate yourself on your learning progress!

Can you do the following?	Yes, I can do this.	No, not quite.
Say hello, state your name, and ask your classmate his/her name.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spell your name with the Spanish alphabet.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Greet friends informally and greet people formally using their titles.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ask a classmate what classes he/she has and name six academic subjects.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Follow common classroom commands.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 4.

The last step also included a review part that aimed to test all knowledge points in this chapter. I used this last part of the preliminary lesson to review what I learned in the previous steps.

In the next chapter (Capitulo 1), the most useful thing I learned was how to count numbers, which was also the central topic of this chapter. Admittedly, the 5-step path of learning was helpful, but I also found my own strategy, which was to make use of my prior knowledge in French. Based on my learning experience in French at my undergraduate school, I found that the expressions of numbers in Spanish are very similar to expressions in French. Table 1 has shown numbers from 0 to 10 both in Spanish and

#	Spanish	French
0	cero	zéro
1	uno	un(e)
2	dos	deux
3	tres	trois
4	cuatro	quatre
5	cinco	cinq
6	seis	six
7	siete	sept
8	ocho	huit
9	nueve	neuf
10	diez	dix

Table 1.

in French. We can see that the beginning sounds of the same numbers are pretty similar between Spanish and French. This attribute effectively helped me remember the pronunciation and spellings of words. After learned the numbers, I was able to tell my phone number and time in Spanish, both of which are important parts in social communication.

The central topic of the last chapter I learned in this four-week self-study was about describing people in your family and your friends. Therefore, knowledge of pronouns and adjectives dominated this chapter. At the beginning, this chapter introduced masculine and feminine nouns. Because words used with nouns like articles, verbs, and adjectives

need to match the gender of them. I didn't have a big problem in understanding the grammatical gender of nouns in Spanish because the same thing exists in French. I even compared the general rules in Spanish that learners can follow to determine if a noun is feminine and masculine with those in French. For example:

In Spanish:

- ◆ Most feminine nouns end in **-a**. Ending in **-a** indicates that a person or animal is female or that an object, idea, etc. is grammatically feminine.
- ◆ Most masculine nouns end in **-o**. An **-o** ending can indicate that a person or animal is male or that an object, idea, etc. is grammatically masculine.

(retrieved from: <https://www.spanishdict.com/guide/masculine-and-feminine-nouns>)

In French:

- ◆ Feminine noun endings: The majority of words that end in **-e** or **-ion**. Except words ending in **-age**, **-ege**, **-é**, or **-isme** (these endings often indicate masculine words).
- ◆ Masculine noun endings: Most words with other endings are masculine.

(retrieved from: <https://frenchtogether.com/french-nouns-gender/>)

This kind comparison helped me understand these rules more easily than those people who knew nothing about grammatical gender in a language.

The last part of my study of each chapter was my favorite part, because it was about cultural learning. This platform would provide articles or videos about Spanish speaking countries and my four-week learning ended with an audio about celebrations in Spain and a video about Madrid (Figure 5 & 6). I will talk more about this cultural learning part in

the next section.

Read the cultural information about Spain and complete the statements that follow.



Figure 5.

Watch the video about Madrid. Then match each place with its corresponding image.



Figure 6.

Analysis

When looking back to my motivations of this learning a new literacy experience, the argument raised by the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement introduced by Gee in his book immediately came to my mind. The NLS argued that literacy should be primarily considered as a social phenomenon rather than merely as a mental ability (Gee, 2015). With regard to two main ideas motivated me to learn Spanish, one is originated from my passion in traveling, and another is to beneficial my current learning in the graduate school and my future career development. Specifically, on the one hand, some countries on my travel list such as Peru, Mexico, and Honduras use Spanish as the official language and I have a strong desire to know these countries by not only visiting there but also having opportunities to communicate with local people and experience local culture. On the other, I encountered many bilingual situations in my graduate program, especially bilingual books in English and Spanish. As a prospective teacher, I'd like to make full use

of teaching materials instead of choosing some part I'm proficient with but ignore unfamiliar part. In this way, learning Spanish does have effect for me, as it will be used in different social contexts.

This learning experience was new to me not only because I learned Spanish as a new language, but also because it was the beginning of my independent e-learning experience. Obviously, technology and Internet was the biggest 'sponsor' of my progress in this four-week study as the platform I used is totally online and full of digital media. The word 'sponsor' here, as Brandt defined, means "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy- and gain advantage by it in some way" (Brandt, 2001, p19). By saying iLrn is an all-in-one source of language learning platform, activities and contents in it used my listening, reading, speaking and writing abilities at the same time. As shown in the learning process section, I need to read both English and Spanish texts, to listen to the audios, to repeat the audio and to type in answers of questions. These interactive activities included in the 5-step path of learning integrated different literacy skills and made the development of each skill dependent on other skills. Therefore, the learning process followed a positive circle starting from learning to practicing, to using, to assessing and then back to learning again. In order to encourage learners and also introduce learners to the next step, this platform included 'supervised sandbox' that students could explore several times in their assessment parts until they found the right way (Gee, 2007). For example, when I chose an incorrect answer of a question, this

answer would change to red color and then disappear, then I can have the chance to choose another answer (Figure 7). The sandbox that Gee mentioned in the video game provided learners with a safe place in the real game that protected the learners from quick defeat (Gee). From my perspective, the design of a sandbox is a transitional stage before the learner getting into totally independent learning and playing, and it also gives learners encouragement and confidence. Similarly, the iLrn platform also provided learners this kind of opportunity. Exercises like those in Figure 7 are transitions for learners before they doing the real tests in the self-test part. Beginners like me can immediately tell whether we choose right answers or not without worrying about the final score. I was able to try as many times as I want. Whenever I did them totally right, I got increasingly encouraged and motivated to continue my next stage of learning.

2. Do you recognize what these phrases mean? Drag each English phrase to its Spanish equivalent.

My name's Carlos. **Hi!** **What's your name?**

a. ¡Hola! **And you?** _____
b. ¿Cómo te llamas? _____
c. Me llamo Carlos. _____
d. ¿Y tú? _____

Figure 7.

As I mentioned previously in this paper, one of my favorite parts is the cultural involvement in each chapter. Cultural learning was engaged in various formats including reading texts, pictures and maps and videos. As language learning can never be separated from culture embedded in it, by involving cultural elements, this platform offered information of Spanish speaking countries such as the geographical distribution,

demographic information, festivals and customs of celebrations etc. If this platform is used in classroom teaching at schools, these cultural involvements could give students a deep understanding of cultural and linguistic flexibility in our globalized world (Paris & Alim, 2014). In my learning experience, I made use of my previous knowledge in French and English in learning some grammars and understanding word meanings. For youth only with prior knowledge in English, the bilingual instruction in this platform would also engage their previous knowledge and promote culture exchange, which can be regarded as typical reflection of cultural sustaining pedagogy in literacy teaching (Lee & Walsh, 2017).

The change of identity at different stage and in different environment of learning was also interesting to me. I was first a language learner as I followed the 5-step learning path to learn vocabulary, sentences and grammars. When I asked Michelle questions about Spanish and she corrected my mistakes, her identity changed to my teacher and partner from a colleague while my identity changed from a colleague to a student. When I learned about cultural knowledge, I felt like I was more of a tourist who was visiting these countries by watching videos and reading related texts. At the same time, I also took the identity as a teacher to myself who set learning goals, processed knowledge and evaluated my own progress of learning by taking self-test and correcting mistakes. These changes of identities had offered me a comprehensive view of my learning process.

Finally, I'd like to make a reflection on my independent learning experience. This four-week self-study has transformed me from a person nearly with no knowledge of

Spanish to a beginner, who is able to pronounce whatever Spanish words with knowledge of pronunciation of each letter, to greet people and introduce my basic information to others in Spanish, to count numbers and tell time and date in Spanish, and to understand cultures of Spanish speaking countries etc. My study of Spanish won't stop after this short beginning and these progresses I've made in this four weeks would encourage me to learn this fascinating language more deeply and more proficiently.

In addition, I also saw the big potential of e-learning in assisting youth's literacy development no matter in or out of the school environment. The iLrn learning platform is a great sample of the conception of multiliteracies raised by the New London Group (1996). With bilingual (English and Spanish) display of all instruction, leveraging of multi media and inclusion of cultural elements, this platform greatly reflected cultural and linguistic diverse pedagogy. For students with strong self-regulation abilities, this kind of online learning platform is a great sample of how technology could benefit their independent learning by teaching language points and cultural knowledge with multimedia. For those students who need teachers to guide their learning processes, this platform could offer them various learning tools including multimedia, sharing space, assessment and evaluation etc. As we are living in this more culturally diverse society that inevitably and deeply affected by different technologies, we need to consider ourselves as learners while we are using them to teach our students. Considering those controversies regarding whether technologies benefit or distract our students more from their study, only if we teachers try to be familiar with the products of specific technology,

can we guide our students to take advantage of them rather than being distracted.

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