

How and why did the Spanish curriculum get supersized? And how can we fix it?¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the state of the introductory Spanish curriculum from a pedagogue's perspective and discusses the cultural, professional, and societal forces that have expanded it. This paper connects the cultural movement of postmodernism to curricular expansion. The introductory Spanish curriculum is overloaded and has been "supersized" over the last few decades. A case is made for reducing the curriculum with an eye to pruning the introductory Spanish grammar canon in particular.

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The purpose of this paper is to look at the state of the introductory Spanish curriculum from a practitioner's perspective and to consider the forces that have expanded it. I will also advocate for reducing the curriculum. The introductory Spanish curriculum is overloaded and has been "supersized" over the last few decades. The complete grammar sequence is now taught along side the generous amounts of culture, learning strategies, and extra-disciplinary materials that currently form the introductory Spanish menu. Much like Colombian artist Fernando Botero's figures, the introductory Spanish curriculum has grown "overinflated." The time has come to reach an agreement about what needs to remain in it. That consensus should reflect the will and experience of Spanish teachers and researchers. I am calling particularly for pruning the grammar sequence to construct

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a sustainable introductory Spanish curriculum. We should plan this reduction in the context of the entire introductory Spanish curriculum through discipline-wide discussion, consensus, and implementation.

For purposes of this discussion, I understand “introductory Spanish” to mean the first two beginning semesters of college Spanish and/or the first two years of high school Spanish. I understand the “traditional introductory Spanish curriculum” to mean coverage of all verb tenses, a fixed set of grammar points, and high frequency vocabulary items.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, full geo-cultural coverage was being added to introductory Spanish. More recently, a variety of additions like learning strategies, literacy development, process writing, and community engagement have all crept into the introductory Spanish curriculum. At present, most of us are attempting to teach what could be called “introductory Spanish plus,” which is a combination of the old traditional introductory Spanish grammar and vocabulary curriculum along with culture, connections, and communities as originally advocated by the

Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century (1996).

The supersizing of the introductory Spanish curriculum has been in the works since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, when new, definable foreign language teaching methods came onto the scene as innovations. [...] Yet, despite the boom in delivery methods, the introductory Spanish curriculum remained steadfastly focused on grammar and vocabulary.

Let us consider how introductory Spanish became supersized in the first place. The supersizing of the introductory Spanish curriculum has been in the works since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, when new, definable foreign language teaching methods came onto the scene as innovations. Foreign language educators transitioned from the “old reliable” grammar/translation approach to the Audio-lingual Method; yet others sampled Suggestopedia or the Silent Way. The fresh techniques were instructional methods that promoted self-awareness and drew attention to process and a desire to invigorate foreign language learning.

Motivated by evolving knowledge about language acquisition and a will to be up-to-date, many foreign language instructors were consumers of the latest foreign language teaching methods. Yet, despite the boom in delivery methods, the introductory Spanish curriculum remained steadfastly focused on grammar and vocabulary. Teaching methods evolved, but the traditional curriculum did not. Revealing the misalignment between static content and evolving processes, the expansion of the repertoire of methods helped set the scene for the expansion of content that blossomed in the 1980s.

With the shift in the humanities from structuralism² to postmodernism, content was reconsidered and curricular boundaries broadened. This motivated us to include more and more content in the introductory curriculum. We added more culture to prepare our students to be global citizens, we added Spanish for the workplace to prepare students professionally, and we included varieties of spoken Spanish to highlight regional variations. By the 1990s and on into the new century,

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a variety of forces fueled the content boom in our field, including postmodernism, globalization, a growing preference in educational circles for interdisciplinarity, and the publication of *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996). Additionally, all of this coincided with the establishment of digital communication and a new abundance of potential subject matter.

The period label “postmodernism” was popularized in the late 1960s and 70s. To this day, postmodernism continues to dominate as the descriptor of our period. Postmodernism is a broad term that suggests the paradoxical nature the “subject.” As our present subject is the pedagogy and curriculum of Introductory Spanish, early postmodernism challenged fixed boundaries and helped lead the foreign language field to question and reform many practices in methodology and much traditional content. Postmodernism helped explain the boom in language teaching methodologies that were popularized in the early 1970s. Later the tendency toward postmodernism as an intellectual movement also catalyzed the inclusion of diverse cultural content from marginal cultures (along side hegemonic cultures) in the Introductory Spanish curriculum. Undoubtedly, postmodernism led us to question the conventions in our field, and it enhanced the complexity and size of the Introductory Spanish curriculum through more inclusion. Early postmodernism tended to “problematize” and individualize pedagogical and curricular practices. As postmodernism evolved, more recently it has been adopted and mainstreamed by corporate entities such as educational institutions, professional organizations, and the publishers of our instructional materials. Ironically, early postmodernism divided and fragmented our discipline, but the newer “evolved” postmodernism offers potential for unity through its “corporate capacity” to encourage debate and dialogue through institutional structures. Even as early as the 1990s, a corporate postmodern approach (that recognized multiple points of view) could be witnessed during the discipline-wide debate about standards in our field. The dialogue, guided by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, produced the *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century* (1996).

The Standards’ five Cs—Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities—became the handmaiden of postmodernism. They defined goals for our teaching and moved us outward from the basic grammar and vocabulary set. We compared L1 (language 1) with L2 (language 2), C1 (culture 1) with C2 (culture 2), made connections with other disciplines, and engaged with other communities. The Standards still stand as the only document that sought a national consensus, from the grassroots to the leadership level, to define our teaching. Our professional renewal through the articulation of the Standards followed the broader societal tendency toward postmodernism.³

Let me provide a concrete example about how postmodernism influenced the introductory Spanish curriculum. Postcolonial theory,⁴ inspired to a certain extent by postmodern philosophy, raised concerns about Eurocentrism in school curricula and

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demanded the teaching of multiple histories and people. The insistence on leveling differences was (and is) considered part of enlightened teaching and learning. Our introductory Spanish courses included increasingly broader definitions of Spanish-speakers and the Spanish-speaking world. Our books and syllabi covered more Spanish speaking populations than ever before. The claim of full coverage in introductory Spanish, which originally encompassed only full grammar coverage, ballooned to include cultural representations from the entire Spanish-speaking world.⁵

Another driver of curricular expansion is the movement toward interdisciplinary teaching and learning, which crosses traditional academic boundaries. Since the reports published by the Modern Language Association (MLA)—*Foreign Language and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* (2007) and the *Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature* (2008)—the MLA has codified and canonized interdisciplinarity as the avenue to revitalize our profession. The reports challenge Spanish programs to be more interdisciplinary and cite the success of examples like “Spanish for the Professions.” To be sure, languages for the professions have increased enrollments in Spanish, but there is no doubt that hybridized curricula stimulate an even more inflated introductory Spanish course. For example, students on the Spanish for the Professions track need to be engaged in Spanish-speaking communities early for optimal success.

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As postmodernism encouraged more and varied content, it also brought us the concept of customization of the introductory Spanish curriculum. We were now able to customize our introductory courses with additional content, rarely adding student contact hours or subtracting other material. The introductory Spanish curriculum became more and more like a buffet. Many of the dishes did not make students or professors wise, but instead stuffed them with trivia, because we did not (and do not) have enough time to examine facts in their socio-historical context. Meanwhile the full grammar sequence remained unscathed as we added features to serve our own interests and/or the needs of our student populations. These additions were not bad in themselves. They enriched our students and us and stimulated more critical interactions in our classes. But introductory Spanish just kept supersizing.

The staggering array of ancillary materials that accompany introductory Spanish textbook programs is evidence of the impact of customization. On the up side, we can reach out to individual learners with customized options. On the down side, postmodernism moved us further away from seriously considering the issue of overload and analyzing what really belongs in the introductory Spanish curriculum and why. Dialogue about the excess should have occurred, but it did not due to the divisive tendency and fragmented nature of early postmodernism. As a result, a singular professional discussion about the introductory Spanish curriculum became more and more remote.

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In the mid 1990s and the new millennium, as postmodernism was adopted by corporate ideology⁶, Spanish teachers found themselves in a quandary. We needed to sell Spanish to keep our student enrollment numbers high, which affected the quality of the students' education. We sacrificed quality for the sake of quantity and got a hefty curriculum and increased student enrollments. The overinflated introductory Spanish curriculum became dangerous because it watered down learning through information overload. Students cannot properly digest the feast of information provided to them in a two-semester college or two-year high school introductory Spanish course sequence.

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Other scholars and teachers have raised the issue of overload and questioned the full grammar sequence. Notably, Heining-Boyton (2010), wrote a position paper titled "The Case for a Realistic Beginning-Level Grammar Syllabus: The Round Peg in the Round Hole." Heining-Boyton (2010) argues vigorously for the reduction of grammar:

The time has come to create a realistic grammar syllabus in our beginning language courses. Yet why do some in our profession insist that all grammar must be taught in the first year of language learning? Abundant data from decades of research on topics such as human memory, chunking, and second language acquisition exist that overwhelmingly support not to do so, but rather to frontload language learning with only the necessary grammar to have students communicate at a beginning, appropriate level. The research supports the goal of presenting grammar at the point of need and usage. (p. 96)

I concur that have we spent too many years with an embargo on reducing the traditional introductory Spanish grammar sequence, especially when this front loading of grammar—the premature teaching of grammar with the expectation of early production—contradicts what we know about second language acquisition (SLA). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking and Writing that reflect the cumulative knowledge of SLA research. The proficiency guidelines suggest that Novice- through Intermediate-level learners over time develop emerging skills in narration and description (at the Intermediate-High level). The guidelines also state that learners are not able to hypothesize until the Advanced proficiency level (ACTFL, 1999, 2001). The proficiency guidelines support the notion that comprehensive coverage of grammar tenses is not necessary in the introductory curriculum.

We resist the redesign of the full grammar sequence in introductory Spanish for a number of reasons.

1. **Practicality.** Making changes in introductory Spanish impacts later courses and implies a total curricular overhaul.
2. **Fear.** If we subtract grammar, it will look like we are doing less than

our peers. Ironically, the accountability “push” blocks reform because of assessment pressure. In the absence of a national curriculum, accrediting agencies typically ask us to compare what we do with our Spanish programs at our peer institutions. Accountability proponents argue that measurement encourages reform, but reform is paralyzed when we are told that our Spanish programs are measured by what is being done at our peer institutions. There is no motivation to appear to be doing less than those at the peer institution.

3. **More fear.** There is also the perception that transfer students will not be able to keep up if they do not “get exposed” to the full introductory grammar sequence. Measurement of coverage is part of a review process that works against containing the amount of grammar. The assessment of grammar is concrete and measurable, while the measurement of proficiency and performance is not as tidy, so grammar instruction maintains its appeal.

I recently served as an external reviewer of a Spanish program for an unnamed university. I suggested that they slow down the two-semester introductory Spanish program (that included all grammar tenses) and spread it over three semesters. The adjunct instructors who taught introductory Spanish were interested in this because of their frustration with the sprint to cover the full grammar sequence over the entire book. The Spanish program leadership, who were junior faculty members, felt obligated to stick with the amount of material that had been taught at the institutions where they

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went to graduate school. They also feared that senior faculty members would think that they were trying to “dumb down” the curriculum and that students would be less prepared for the major. I have heard similar statements made by high school Spanish teachers who fear not preparing students for AP Spanish language or the National Spanish Exam.

Textbook publishers follow the market data that they collect from professors and teachers and often hear statements about the inclusion of comprehensive grammar because there is a perception in the teaching corps and the professoriate that limiting the grammar sequence would imply a downgrade in learning.⁷ Publishers are not motivated to produce materials with a truncated grammar sequence because such materials are risky to market. There has been some experimentation with an abbreviated grammar sequence, but it has not reached the mainstream. Meanwhile, we continue to tell publishers that programs should include everything and still provide

flexibility and lots of options. As instructors we clearly fear not covering our bases.

4. **Elitism.** Heining-Boyton (2010) points out that there is the strong belief in the myth that all grammar must be taught in introductory Spanish (98). The complete grammar canon myth is self-propagating, deeply personal,

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and relates to the inner snob of some foreign language instructors. At its heart is the view that if “I had to learn all of the grammar in the first year of Spanish, then so will my students.” As Spanish instructors, many of us take great pride in explaining difficult grammar points and our students and others think that we are geniuses! With proposed grammar reform in the introductory courses, we need to move this grammar glory and prowess to upper-level courses.

Both research and practicality support trimming full grammar coverage from introductory Spanish. Over the last few years, there has been a grassroots effort to slow down the grammar (and other content) in introductory Spanish by using an introductory text over three semesters instead of two. We have done this in my institution’s Spanish program. There are no published data about how many post-secondary institutions are doing the same, but publishers of Spanish textbooks will share anecdotally that there is a growing trend to use introductory texts over three semesters. This is a partial and temporary solution.

Heining-Boyton (2010) suggested using proficiency descriptors to refocus the grammar scope and sequence so that students can effectively narrate in the present and begin to do so in the past and future tenses in introductory Spanish (99). Second language acquisition specialists need to share solutions informed by their research and stimulate this discussion about grammar and content reform. It is in our best interest to reach a broad consensus on the amount of grammar that belongs in introductory Spanish. A successful discussion about the definition of introductory level grammar allows us to include what we—teachers, professors, and researchers—view as essential to teach at this level. The construction of the grammar canon should belong to the men and women who are best qualified to decide what students should learn: their teachers.⁸ I am not advocating that all of the other elements that have supersized the introductory Spanish curriculum be tossed aside, but that a more reasonable amount of content be included. I am arguing that our curriculum has become too full and that it is our responsibility to reduce it. Let us consider the whole introductory curriculum and particularly the grammar sequence.

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Teachers are under considerable pressure to produce, have their students produce, and define what students should know and be able to do. In this paper, I have acknowledged the tension that is served up by a variety of cultural, societal, and professional trends, especially postmodernism, which was originally used to subvert and lead society to a general crisis of meaning, but over the years has been mainstreamed by state power and the corporate world. Foreign language education is likely to follow this trend. The postmodernism of the 1980s set us off on curricular tangents and helped supersize the introductory Spanish curriculum. Ironically, “evolved” postmodernism may now help us discuss and define how much and which grammar belongs in the

introductory Spanish scope and sequence. As it stands, the introductory Spanish curriculum is too unwieldy for us to teach and for students to grasp. We need to tackle this problem directly and propose a sensible scope and sequence. It behooves us to take a unilateral stand as a profession if we expect to see any change in what is expected of us as professors and of our students as second language learners. Let us make this discussion a priority.

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Notes

1. This paper is adapted from a panel presentation given at the 2010 American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese in Guadalajara, Mexico. The panel was titled "Less is more: Addressing the bloated curriculum." My co-panelists were Bill VanPatten and James Lee. In the interest of full disclosure, VanPatten, Lee, and I are coauthors of different introductory college Spanish textbook programs. Through textbook development, revisions, and feedback received from colleagues and publishers, we meet matters related to introductory Spanish content head-on with regularity.
2. Structuralism of the 1950s and 60s was concerned with the analysis of language, culture, and society through the examination of signs, symbols, and semiotics. Audiolingualism was the language pedagogy most closely associated with structuralism in the United States.
3. I do not want to suggest that the postmodern movement has been the sole impetus for change in our field in recent times. Evolving knowledge about language learning has informed our collective progress as well. In this paper, I emphasize the influence of postmodernism on the foreign language field because it has been overlooked in our professional literature.
4. Postcolonial theory is typically discussed as part of the postmodern movement. Postcolonial theory is a term that describes the multiple approaches used to examine the culture(s) of the former colonies of the European empires (Makaryk, 1993). Postcolonialists question heritage and civilization directly and have a long history of presenting a narrative to counter cultural hegemony.
5. Some theorists and practitioners suggested that the erosion of the curricular boundaries and the beefing up of multicultural education would lessen ethnic, religious, or political strife and promote world peace.
6. Corporate ideology has been able to apply the questioning nature of postmodernism to business practices to produce philosophies such as "continuous quality improvement." Practices of this nature have entered the educational arena. Additionally, the capitalist underpinnings of corporate ideology have promoted accountability and outcomes-based educational practices. For better or worse, these practices have impinged on the status of the traditional liberal arts education

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and have affected the foreign language field. Despite current data suggesting the need for more language teaching in the United States, foreign language instructors have been put on the defensive due to increased corporatization. For an in-depth account of the growing corporate culture in education, see *The last professors: the corporate university and the fate of the humanities* (Donoghue, 2008).

7. This is ironic because reducing the grammar curriculum would better prepare learners by giving them time to digest, acquire, and internalize the material before they proceed on the language-learning continuum.
8. As instructors, we *do* need to accept responsibility for the current curricular crisis. Instructors need to be educated and engaged in curricular decision making.

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