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ESSAYS

Shaping Pedagogy Through Practice: Reflections on the Spanish Program in International Studies at UTS

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Abstract

As the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) celebrates 30 years of the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS), I reflect on my journey leading the Spanish program. This reflection examines the implementation of genre-based pedagogy inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which has been instrumental in bridging gaps in traditional teaching methods and fostering academic literacy. Drawing on collaborations with Spanish universities and integrating cutting-edge resources, I have witnessed the transformative impact of these initiatives on students' preparation for in-country study and their ability to navigate academic and cultural challenges. These experiences have also shaped my teaching philosophy, highlighting the value of research-informed practices in enhancing language proficiency and intercultural competence.

Keywords

Spanish Language Education; Genre-Based Pedagogy; UTS; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Intercultural Communication; Language Proficiency

Introduction

In an era defined by globalisation, learning an additional language—particularly widely spoken ones such as English or Spanish—has become essential. These languages act as bridges, enabling communication with people in Anglophone and Hispanophone regions

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(Byram 2014). Acquiring such linguistic skills helps to address potential inequities that can arise from language barriers, which often disrupt cultural dynamics. The Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS)—now the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS)—has been a testament to the importance of globalisation, multilingualism, and intercultural understanding for the past 30 years. As we celebrate its 30th anniversary, I am proud to have been a part of this journey and to reflect on the program’s impact not only on our students but also on my own professional growth. The program includes six languages, one of which is Spanish. Since 1996, I have had the privilege of coordinating and teaching Spanish language and culture within this program. Over more than two decades, I have dedicated myself to adopting and refining effective language teaching methods to support our students’ learning journeys. This milestone anniversary provides an opportune moment to share my personal reflections on how the Spanish program has evolved and how it has enabled me to develop innovative approaches to language teaching. This reflection explores how the Spanish program has influenced my teaching philosophy and methods, and how, in turn, these have shaped the program’s evolution.

Reflections on the Spanish program’s impact on my own research, teaching philosophy and methods

Over the years, the teaching and learning of foreign languages have undergone significant changes. Early methods, such as the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), emphasised written language, while later approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) shifted the focus to spoken communication. Each approach brought valuable contributions but also left gaps, particularly in addressing how learners engage with the written genres needed for academic and professional contexts. Reflecting on my own teaching journey, I’ve found it essential to rethink and refine my philosophy and methods to bridge these gaps. My academic path—from completing a Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics in 2000, a Master by Research in 2006, to earning a PhD in English in 2013—has been pivotal in shaping my approach to teaching Spanish as a second language in an English-speaking environment. These experiences gave me the tools to explore new ways of fostering deeper language learning. The BAIS/BIS program has offered an invaluable platform to put these ideas into practice, and seeing how these methods have positively impacted students’ learning outcomes has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my career.

The Spanish language program at UTS has always been driven by a research-informed approach, with the clear goal of helping students understand how academic knowledge in Spanish is constructed. This has been particularly rewarding for me as it aligns with my passion for supporting second language (L2) learners in developing their reading and writing skills. Over the years, I have moved beyond traditional teaching paradigms like GTM and CLT to embrace a more holistic approach to language instruction. Being part of this program has allowed me to connect my research interests with my teaching practice, creating a meaningful synergy that has shaped both my professional growth and the students’ learning journeys. I’ve had the opportunity to delve into how students engage with text analysis, which has offered important insights for both native Spanish speakers (L1) and L2 learners at the university level. This focus on academic literacy, supported by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), has provided learners with practical tools to construct meaningful texts and advance their literacy skills in a foreign language. Reflecting on this work, I feel proud to have contributed to addressing a key need in foreign language education, while also fostering an environment where students can thrive academically and professionally.

Innovations in Spanish Language and Culture: Genre-Based Pedagogy

Between 2012 and 2013, we introduced significant teaching innovations in Spanish Levels 3 and 4 by implementing genre-based pedagogy inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Hood, 2010;

[Martin & Rose, 2008](#); [Schleppegrell, 2003](#)). This shift was driven by the need to address a gap in traditional language teaching approaches, which often focused on either grammar or conversational skills but failed to adequately prepare students for academic and professional literacy in Spanish. Students were struggling to connect their oral proficiency to their ability to produce structured, meaningful written texts, particularly in academic contexts. To bridge this gap, I collaborated with colleagues in TESOL, including Professor Alastair Pennycook, Associate Professor Susan Hood, and Associate Professor Liam Morgan, to integrate insights from applied linguistics and academic literacy into the Spanish program. Traditionally, the teaching of languages other than English had been relatively siloed, disconnected from applied linguistics and TESOL research. However, the formation of the Language Studies Academic Group in 2009 created a collaborative space for sharing expertise across languages and fostering innovative approaches. This supportive environment enabled me to work closely with experts to advance literacy in Spanish as a second language (L2).

The program's emphasis on innovation and excellence has encouraged me to explore and adopt genre-based pedagogy within the Spanish curriculum. This approach moves beyond traditional methods to provide students with a framework for understanding how different text types are constructed, which is critical for both academic and intercultural engagement. We developed a four-semester teaching program for intermediate writing abilities in Spanish, supported by a comprehensive curriculum. This program, covering Levels 3 to 6, uses a genre-based approach that guides students from texts constructed according to time (e.g. autobiographical, biographical, and historical recounts) to those constructed according to cause (e.g., accounts, explanations, and arguments) ([Martin 2002](#)). The need for this innovation became particularly clear when considering the demands of the in-country study (ICS) year, where students must engage in both academic and social interactions in Spanish-speaking contexts. Genre pedagogy within SFL not only enhances students' ability to write and interpret complex texts but also prepares them for meaningful participation in the global workplace. By aligning with the UTS Model of Learning, which emphasizes professional practice, international mobility, and intercultural engagement, this new pedagogy has enriched the Spanish program and positioned it as a leader in fostering global competencies.

Renewal of Pedagogic Practices Influenced by Research

In 2013, I undertook a major renewal of the Spanish curriculum to address critical shortcomings in the existing resources and methodologies for teaching reading and writing. Many published materials for Spanish language instruction focused heavily on grammar or conversational skills, often neglecting the connection between oral communication, concrete experiences, and the abstract, academic discourse required in higher education. This gap became increasingly evident as students struggled to transition from everyday language use to the structured, complex writing demanded in both academic and professional contexts. To overcome these challenges, I developed a collaborative teaching and learning project between UTS and Cantabria University in Spain, working with Dr. Gonzalo Martínez Camilo and Dr. Manuel Pérez. The program's global outlook and its emphasis on fostering international partnerships were instrumental in enabling this collaboration, which provided a platform to exchange ideas, co-create authentic teaching materials, and develop innovative curriculum approaches. Over three years, we integrated texts written by Cantabria University students into the UTS Spanish program. These texts were selected and adapted to align with genre theory, creating a resource base that facilitated students' progression from basic literacy to advanced academic writing.

The incorporation of these authentic materials, rich in cultural and linguistic content, was essential for advancing students' literacy development. Using a genre-based methodology, we employed the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) as a framework for literacy instruction. The TLC, which has proven successful in teaching English ([Martin & Rose 2008](#)) and other foreign languages ([Colombi 2009](#)), provides a

scaffolded approach to learning. It guides students through key stages: deconstruction of model texts, joint construction of new texts, and independent construction of their own work. Field-building and context-setting are integrated throughout, enabling students to connect their learning to real-world applications.

This renewal of pedagogic practices not only addressed the immediate needs of students but also positioned the UTS Spanish program as a leader in integrating research-based methodologies into language instruction. By enhancing students' ability to construct coherent, complex texts, the program ensures they are better equipped for the demands of in-country study and global professional environments. For me, this process has been a deeply rewarding journey of professional growth, allowing me to collaborate with international experts and contribute to the field of second language literacy development.

Professional Development and Scholarly Activities

Since 2013, I have had the privilege of mentoring a dedicated team of sessional and casual academics in the Spanish language program. This mentoring has involved organising workshops, observing classes, and engaging in team-teaching to share strategies and foster a collaborative teaching environment. Through these activities, I have sought to create a culture of professional growth where team members feel supported in refining their teaching practices and developing their expertise. The role of our Spanish teachers extends beyond simply delivering content; they are instrumental in facilitating intensive group work and fostering meaningful oral interaction. By systematically scaffolding students' understanding—starting with guided joint construction of texts and progressing to independent production in both oral and written forms—they enable learners to build confidence and competence. These practices align with the broader goals of the program, which values active engagement, critical thinking, and skill development in a globalised learning environment. Mentoring this team has also allowed me to reflect on my own pedagogical approaches, reinforcing the importance of collaboration and innovation in language education. The program has provided a platform to support my efforts in building a community of practice, where educators prioritise continuous improvement and engage in scholarly activities. For example, our team has regularly participated in academic discussions, sharing insights into effective teaching practices and exploring ways to enhance student outcomes.

Reshaping the syllabus has not been without challenges, particularly given the reliance on casual academics, which often limits the continuity of teaching staff. Despite this, we have successfully developed cohesive teaching materials, converting them into comprehensive activity books that align closely with the curriculum. These materials, purchased by students at the start of each session, provide a structured yet flexible framework for learning and ensure consistency across classes. The collective efforts of our teaching team were recognised in 2016 with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Teaching Award for 'Advancing Spanish as L2 at University Level through International Engagement.' This accolade was a testament to the commitment, creativity, and professionalism of everyone involved. For me personally, this recognition affirmed the value of investing in professional development and scholarly collaboration, both of which are central to the program's success. As I reflect on this journey, I feel immense pride in the way our team has grown and the positive impact we have had on students' learning experiences.

Engaging with Host Countries, Language, and Culture

In 2017, faced with the challenge of reduced teaching weeks at UTS, I took the opportunity to innovate by designing and coordinating six audio-visual teaching materials that authentically introduce students to Hispanic cultures. These resources, which combine video lessons, reading and writing materials, and listening texts, aim to represent the personal and social environments of the Hispanophone world—spanning Spain, Latin America, and the increasingly significant Latino USA. By addressing topical issues relevant to these regions, the materials help students connect with real-world contexts while

strengthening their language skills from the very start of their learning journey. This initiative reflects my ongoing commitment to providing students with rich, immersive learning experiences. While creating these multimedia resources was a complex process—requiring careful planning, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration with technology experts at UTS—it was also one of the most rewarding aspects of my role. The process highlighted the importance of integrating technology into pedagogy, enabling a dynamic and engaging approach to language learning that resonates with students.

The BAIS/BIS program not only supported but encouraged this initiative, underscoring its commitment to fostering innovation and adaptability in teaching. Through this project, I was able to align my pedagogical goals with the program's broader vision of preparing students for global engagement. Developing these resources also deepened my own understanding of how technology and culture intersect in the classroom, further refining my skills as an educator. What stands out most for me is how these materials have enriched students' learning experiences. By providing access to authentic cultural content and engaging multimedia formats, the resources have supported the development of both linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge, essential for the program's international focus. Looking back, I feel a sense of accomplishment in knowing that these tools continue to play a vital role in equipping students for meaningful engagement with host countries and their cultures during their in-country study year.

Conclusion

The successful implementation of genre-based pedagogy in the Spanish program, informed by SFL genre theory ([Martin & Rose 2008](#); [Hood 2010](#); [Sheldon 2022](#)) and intercultural communication competency ([Byram, 2014](#)), has greatly enhanced students' literacy skills in Spanish. Upon arrival at our partner universities in Spain, students undertake a level assessment test, and achieving a B1 or B2 proficiency enables them to enrol directly in courses corresponding to these levels. This achievement highlights the effectiveness of our teaching practices and curriculum in equipping students for the academic and cultural demands of in-country study. These results are a testament to the program's commitment to research-informed teaching and its focus on integrating language acquisition with intercultural competence. The collaborative nature of our international partnerships has further enriched both the curriculum and students' experiences, offering them a robust foundation to engage in immersive academic and social environments within a globalised world.

Reflecting on the evolution of the International Studies program over the past 30 years, I am filled with a deep sense of pride and gratitude. This program has been central to my career, providing a platform to grow as an educator and researcher while fostering innovation and collaboration. It has been immensely rewarding to witness the program's growth and its lasting impact on students, preparing them not only for their in-country study but for meaningful global engagement in their future careers. The longevity of the program represents a steadfast commitment to addressing the challenges of an interconnected world with resilience and creativity. Through dedicated teaching practices and a forward-thinking curriculum, the Spanish language program at UTS has established itself as a leading example of how foreign language education can adapt to meet the needs of a globalised society. By equipping students with the linguistic proficiency and intercultural skills required to access higher-level courses at partner universities, we have created pathways for their academic and personal success, ensuring they are well-prepared to thrive in international contexts.

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