

SPAN4003 – Developing autonomy in Spanish language learning

Category: Capstone Course

Year: Fourth year of study

Semester: Offered in the second semester

1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

Autonomous learning has been described as “the ability to think and act critically and independently, to self-manage study and learning, and realistically to appraise one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner” (Crome, Farrar and O'Connor, 2009:5). The development of autonomous learning habits in language learning is of primary importance to students. On the one hand, language learning situations such as classroom instruction have no intrinsic relationship to personal autonomy, meaningful learning or the development of successful skills of social interaction in a foreign language. The communicative approach we adopt in our teaching tries to challenge the restrictions of classroom instruction when learning a language, but it only overcomes this problem up to a certain extent. On the other hand, students need to get used to learning on their own, becoming responsible for their own learning and exposing themselves to real language in different daily situations, just as native speakers do when immersed in society. This will also be crucial once they graduate if they want to keep on learning.

The objective of this course is to enable students to develop autonomous habits in Spanish language learning, at the same time as they get exposed to authentic samples of uncut linguistic and cultural production. Through a portfolio of activities, students will demonstrate mastery of the skills they have developed and the knowledge they have gained during their Spanish Major studies, as well as reflect on their academic, personal, social and linguistic development. This will provide them with the culminating language learning experience that will prepare them to keep on learning once they graduate. All these goals fall within the aims of what is known as 'capstone experience' in Higher Education.

1.1 COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course students should be able to	
1	Demonstrate an improvement in their communicative competence by having integrated different language skills in authentic tasks.
2	Demonstrate the acquisition of autonomous learning habits in Spanish language learning.
3	Put in motion all knowledge and skills acquired so far in Spanish and apply them to the real world, as well as keep on learning independently upon graduation.

1.2 PRE-REQUISITES

Students wishing to be admitted to SPAN4003, must have completed SPAN3002 - Spanish III.2. Students wishing to be admitted to SPAN4003 without having previously completed SPAN3002, will need to contact the Programme Director, Mrs. Rocío Blasco (roblasco@hku.hk) in order to prove that they have attained elsewhere the required standard for this course.

1.3 ASSESSMENT

100% coursework through a portfolio that consists of the compilation of a series of worksheets related to the activities students choose to carry out.

2. COURSE CONTENT

The course has 2 contact hours per week during the first two weeks of the semester. Attendance is expected to these classes and non-attendance may affect students' final grade. In these sessions students will be provided with all the information needed to work autonomously during the semester. Throughout the semester students will have individual/group meetings with the teacher in order to discuss activities and progress. The capstone experience is entirely student-driven and fully teacher-monitored. Students are required to complete a portfolio consisting of a series of activities of their choice within a given repertoire (e.g. watching a film in Spanish, analysing a historical documentary, summarising and critically assessing the contents of weekly news bulletins, etc.). Each activity is worth a fixed number of points and students need to complete the corresponding worksheets upon completion of the activities until they reach an amount of 150 points. This not only makes students put into practice all language skills and cultural knowledge they have developed so far, but also helps them acquire autonomous learning habits. The design of the portfolio places constraints on the situational freedom of the students, but never on

their autonomy. Students choose what activities they will carry out and when they will do all the work. Teachers provide them with worksheets to exploit, facilitate and monitor their work. By the end of the semester students should have compiled the number of activities / points as required and should have demonstrated that they can self-manage their language learning.

The following table shows a breakdown of some of the tasks that can be included in the autonomous learning portfolio:

Learning to learn:
Watching a Spanish / Latin American movie in Spanish
Watching a Spanish / Latin American movie in Spanish at HKU Hispanic Month
Reading a book in Spanish (except the core readings of content courses in the Spanish programme)
Watching the Spanish / Latin American news on TV in Spanish
Reading newspapers in Spanish (one-week monitoring and newspaper comparison)
Doing grammar exercises on a topic they've always found hard to understand
Watching a documentary in Spanish
Travelling to a Spanish-speaking country
Attending a conference on a topic related to Spanish-speaking countries / cultures / current affairs in Hong Kong
Filming a short documentary about Hong Kong in Spanish
Attending an exhibition or performance related to Spanish-speaking cultures / artists
Writing a blog in Spanish during the semester on your life and reflections on Spanish language learning
... (Any other activity that involves language practice in real contexts and / or an improvement of students' cultural awareness is open to negotiation)
...
Learning through teaching:
Peer tutoring of Year I students of Spanish at HKU
Basic Spanish language classes ("tasters"), open to the University community
...