

LATIN AMERICA IN THE SPANISH CLASSROOM: LEARNING AND TEACHING SOLIDARITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Over the past two academic years the Latin American Solidarity Centre (LASC) has received funding from World Wise Global Schools to develop and deliver a development education (DE) project aimed at secondary school Spanish language students. The focus on the Spanish language classroom and curriculum provides unique opportunities for DE practitioners to link their work and methodologies with the learning aims and methods of L2 (Second Language) instruction. Drawing on feedback from teachers, the proposed continuation of the project in the next academic year will include an expanded focus on collective student action on topical issues that link Ireland to Latin America, and increased teacher capacity through workshops to ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of DE within everyday Spanish instruction at secondary school level.

Key words: Development Education; Global Citizenship Education; Spanish; Post-Primary Education; Latin America; Leaving Certificate; Modern Foreign Languages; Second-Language Education.

Introduction

Over the past two academic years the Latin American Solidarity Centre (LASC) has received funding from World Wise Global Schools to develop and deliver a development education (DE) project aimed at secondary school Spanish language students. The focus on the Spanish language classroom and curriculum provides unique opportunities for DE practitioners to link their work and methodologies with the learning aims and methods of L2 (Second Language) instruction. Drawing on feedback from teachers, the proposed continuation of the project in the next academic year will include an expanded focus on collective student action on topical issues that link Ireland to Latin America, and increased teacher capacity through workshops to ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of DE within everyday Spanish instruction at secondary school level. This article aims to give an overview of the project over the past academic year, as well as offer observations of the challenges that arose and feedback from teachers and students.

It will also look at the options to grow and expand the project and ensure its long-term sustainability within Spanish instruction at secondary level.

LASC and development education

Solidarity, defined as ‘an expression of empathy and common purpose with those in struggle for social justice, equality and genuine freedom’, (LASC, n.d.) has informed the work of the Latin America Solidarity Centre (LASC) through changing contexts. Since the founding of LASC in 1996, cultural and educational activities have been central to its understanding of the forms that solidarity can take. Trócaire defines development education (DE) as:

“an active and creative educational process which aims to increase awareness and understanding of the world we live in. It should challenge perceptions and stereotypes by encouraging optimism, participation and action for a just world” (Trócaire, n.d.).

This definition of development education matches LASC’s understanding of DE as a participatory educational process that is not limited to traditional educational settings, but expands outwards to take meaningful and engaged action - solidarity, in other words - to make change in the world. For critical educationalist Paulo Freire (1985), true education is the reflection and action of the person upon the world in order to change it; the possibility of transforming the world through action.

The process of learning derives from an interpersonal dialogue. Paulo Freire (1985) proposes a fusion of the concepts of educator and educated, overcoming the contradiction between these concepts and accentuating the guarantee that both are educators and learners at the same time and always. There is no dichotomy, which gives us the proposal of a dialogical education, in which the teacher and student learn from each other. Many of these concepts from critical pedagogy inform much of LASC’s work in the development education sector. For several years now, with funding from Irish Aid, LASC has delivered an annual development education project relating to Latin America. However, what has been missing from LASC’s development education work until recently has been a sustained, direct engagement with young people in their primary places

of education and socialisation. This changed in 2017, when LASC received a grant from WorldWide Global Schools (WWGS), a formal sector programme funded by Irish Aid with a focus on the introduction and expansion of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) into post-primary schools across the south of Ireland (WWGS, n.d.).

Uniquely, among all the non-government organisation (NGO)-led projects funded by WWGS, LASC's GCE project was centred on the Spanish-language classroom and curriculum, drawing on the cultural and linguistic connection with Latin America. The unique opportunities provided by incorporating DE perspectives and methodologies into language education are however not merely linked to content (cultural and linguistic links) but also to form (through the unique methodologies that relate to second-language education and acquisition).

Development education and the Spanish curriculum

The 'Latin America in the Spanish Classroom' project opened the door to a broader understanding by Spanish-language students of the range of places and cultures in which the language is spoken, building a decolonial framework that decentred the default Eurocentric understanding of Spanish. All of this tied in closely to the Cultural Awareness aspect of the Spanish Senior Cycle curriculum (Department of Education and Skills, 1995), with a focus on analysing modern-day texts and on understanding everyday life in Spanish-language communities in an expansive way that refused to constrain this cultural awareness to an Iberian context.

However, the project was not limited to the Cultural Awareness aspect of the Spanish Leaving Certificate syllabus, but also touched on the two other strands of the curriculum; Basic Communicative Competency and Linguistic Awareness. For example, activities from the workshops tied in with communicative Learning Objectives such as 'engaging in discussion', as well as linguistic awareness objectives such as 'exploring meaning' (Department of Education and Skills, 1995). Many of the themes explored in the workshops were also key topics for the Spanish oral exam, including migration and borders and global warming and the climate crisis, further tying the content of the project

to the curriculum aims that are so vital to student learning in the exam-centred environment of Senior Cycle Irish state education.

The language-learning component of the workshops were not sidelined, but were an integral part of the project, with the introductory activity often centred on building or revising vocabulary relating to the theme of the workshop. Of particular interest are the educational opportunities provided by second-language (L2) learning as a site for development education. As acknowledged by Irish Aid, the skills and methodologies of development education and language learning have a significant overlap (Honan, 2012). Unlike many other subject areas, discussion and debate, content production, and learning through actions are already core elements of the Communicative Approach framework of L2 education now accepted as best practice throughout the world. This approach contrasts with the traditional Grammar Translation approach for example, where emphasis is placed less on communication, and more on students' abilities to translate content between languages.

The Communicative Approach to language education is student-centred, active-learning, with emphasis placed on students sharing their knowledge and working together – for example, by breaking into pairs or small groups for discussion-based activities - with the goal of maximising student communication time, and minimising their time spent passively listening to the teacher. As a result, many of the activities favoured by L2 teachers map neatly onto DE teaching styles. An example that highlighted the cross-over of L2 and DE teaching methodologies in both form and content, was an activity in which students were given images of Latin America and asked to describe them using keywords in Spanish, making the activity at once a student-centred vocabulary-building exercise and a DE discussion. Other activities that echoed this match-up of pedagogical aims and styles included walking debates on food sovereignty and role-plays relating to extractivism.

Action for Change

Another key aspect of the project is student action. Students who participate in DE activities gain the understanding that learning does not end in the classroom, and that acting on new knowledge and understandings is as much a part of the

learning process as the discussions in the classroom. Throughout the project, student learning was constantly linked back to LASC's member-led campaigns, in particular the 'Stop Blood Coal' campaign (LASC, 2019b) against the use of coal from Colombia to power Ireland's electricity grid, making the connection between secondary school language classes, climate action, human rights, and broader civil society grassroots activism. Elsewhere, in the context of workshops on gender issues in Latin America and on women indigenous land defenders, students were encouraged to join in a (Spanish-language) Twitterstorm on the 21 February 2019 demanding exoneration for *Mapuche weichafe* (guardian/leader) Moira Millán for her part in the occupation of an Argentinian courthouse (MMIBV, 2019). Students' learning about the impacts of climate change and extractive industries on Latin American (especially indigenous) communities also brought that learning with them into their activism as part of the student Climate Strike on 15 March 2019 (O'Sullivan, 2019).

A decolonising of the curriculum

Key to the project was a resource developed by LASC for teachers with DE activities related to Latin American social justice issues, all linked to learning objectives within the Spanish curriculum (LASC, 2018). This resource has been updated and refined as part of a dialogical process involving teachers, recruited to the project through outreach to ATS Ireland (Association of Teachers of Spanish), and LASC staff, with effective activities maintained and less effective ones tweaked and updated. This teachers' resource can be seen as a decolonial intervention into a Eurocentric Spanish curriculum that remains focused on Iberian culture at the expense of other Spanish language communities around the world (Ibid). In place of a focus on Spanish culture, the activities in the resource examine cultural issues, from geography to food sovereignty, in Latin America. It also includes an entire section devoted to indigenous issues, with a focus on the diversity of cultures and worldviews in Latin American indigenous communities, but also on their ongoing resistance to colonial and neo-colonial power structures. Other sections that have been developed and are available online at LASC's website include a section examining the history and legacy of slavery and Afro-descendent cultures on Latin American societies, and a section devoted specifically to colonialism that invites students to look with a different perspective at the received

history they have been taught about Columbus and other European colonial adventurers, and their impacts on indigenous communities.

These new activities and exercises further developed the links to environmental and ecological sustainability within LASC's development education work in post-primary schools. The environmental link to human security proposed by those who wished to advance the relationship between development education and Education for Sustainable Development was a key topic explored in this year's project (Hogan & Tormey, 2008: 8). Students looked at the Irish government's use of coal from Colombia, site of the Cerrejón coal mine, in its coal-fired electricity plant in Moneypoint, Co. Clare. The mine has been linked to environmental and human rights abuses, and students explored the links between the environmental degradation locally, wider climate chaos as a result of fossil fuel reliance, and the responsibility of Ireland in this case (Healy, 2018).

Development education can sometimes inadvertently contribute to racist and discriminatory ways of thinking (Bourn & McCollum, 1995: 87). Rosalind Duke (2003) has shown how much of the discourse relating to development education is a result of a legacy of colonialism and missionary evangelism, in turn reinforcing supremacist attitudes towards communities in the global South. She claims that 'true equality cannot emerge from a discourse which considers that others have not yet reached the level that we have attained, and may never do so without our help' (Duke, 2003: 203). In the same context, Alam highlights how images of individuals and communities in the global South that are published for consumption in the West tend to depict their subjects as abject and helpless, reliant on Western assistance (Alam, 2007: 59). Instead of images of drug culture or abject helplessness, images that tend to exoticise Latin American realities, and in-class discussions were prompted by images and media that show communities speaking for themselves and exercising collective power, such as photos of the protests when the communities around the Cerrejón mine successfully shut down train lines supplying the mine.

LASC also actively sought the participation of migrant communities, in particular Latin American migrant groups, in Ireland. At the end of the project,

classes that had participated in the project and received workshops were invited to attend an event on the theme of 'Latin America in Ireland', led by migrants from the Latin American community, the Immigrant Council of Ireland and Radio Latina. As well as drawing connections between the development and social issues faced by communities in Latin America, which the students had discussed in the in-school workshops, and the social issues faced by migrants in Ireland, this event provided an important intervention that re-situated migrants as activists and 'equal partners in DE and development' (Graves, 2007: 89). According to Graves 'there needs to be more genuine partnerships between long-term resident Southern and Black people and DE groups' as 'an informed perspective from Southern activists can be a meaningful contribution to DE practices and demonstrates that people are involved in their own struggles at different levels - as activists, analysts and researchers' (Graves, 2007: 89).

This can be viewed through the prism of Neal's critique of the absence of anti-racism discourse from higher education, which is also applicable to much of post-primary education in Ireland:

"Although equal opportunities discourses and policies have obtained a place on Higher [and post-primary] Education agenda[s], antiracism as a specific discourse and as a strategic approach has not...the willingness of [educational institutions] to address an equal opportunities agenda has been dependent on an institution's ability to de-politicise equality issues and approach them through a rationalist and technicist policy framework" (Neal, 1995: 18).

In place of this 'technicist framework' student participants actively brainstormed responses to racist and racialised talking points within a pointedly anti-racist framework. In an increasingly multicultural Ireland, with many schools having students from up to 50 nationalities, this focus on the experiences of migrants and people of different cultures resounded with teachers expressing surprise at how eagerly students from migrant backgrounds engaged with the content of the workshops.

Teacher capacity-building

The scope of the project was not limited to student workshops in schools, but also involved building teacher capacity and confidence to introduce DE themes and perspectives in their Spanish teaching. Theorists and practitioners of DE have long been conscious that ‘the teacher is key’ pointing to:

“the need for professional development that builds capacity and confidence amongst teachers so that they can see the opportunities to engage in development education and have the necessary skills and knowledge to take such an approach” (Honan, 2005: 28).

This is particularly vital in L2 education. As Susanne Ehrenreich argues: ‘if we want to educate our young generation to become active citizens who are competent ‘cultural border walkers’, we need foreign language teachers who are not only linguistic but also intercultural experts’ (Ehrenreich, 2003: 161).

Apart from participating in the in-class workshops, teachers also attended two teacher training workshops in different parts of the country. As with the student workshops themselves, these trainings were learner-centred; instead of privileging the supposed expertise of the facilitator, teachers were invited to draw upon their own deep well of experiences of discussing and dealing with social justice issues in the classroom and to share their strategies with their colleagues. Many teachers from a Latin American background were in attendance who were able to give examples of how they introduced discussions of the culture and social struggles of their countries into their classrooms. Teachers brainstormed possible activities they could deliver to bring Latin American issues into the classroom, and, in what was for most the newest and most challenging aspect, discussed what kind of actions they and their students could take to turn the classroom experience into real action in the world.

The next edition of the project, in the 2019-2020 academic year, will build on the experiences and feedback from the 2018-19 project. The teacher training sessions at the beginning of the project will be followed by a teacher skillshare at the end. This final session will be a forum for teachers to discuss and share their strategies for dealing with all the unforeseen and unexpected issues and reactions that arose during the project.

Challenges to the delivery of the project

In the first year of the project (2017-2018), LASC worked with only four teachers. In the last 2018-19 academic year, however, the project rapidly expanded. LASC worked with 24 teachers in eleven different schools; a more than sixfold increase on the previous year. The increase in demand was in part the result of LASC's engagement with the Association of Teachers of Spanish in Ireland (ATS), an organisation of Spanish subject teachers. LASC representatives attended the ATS AGM in October 2018, and used the event to outreach to Spanish teachers. More and more teachers contacted LASC during the course of the project, to the extent that the full series of six workshops could not be delivered to all of the teachers who approached LASC. This was a clear sign of the demand among Spanish teachers for engaging DE material and methodologies that broaden students' awareness of the cultural basis of the language beyond just Spain. This is reflective of an increasingly diverse and global Irish society. For example, many teachers who participated in (or wished to participate in) the project were Latin American migrants themselves, or Irish people who had travelled or lived in Latin America, and who wished to bring their experiences to their students. In total, during the course of the year, almost 500 students participated in LASC workshops or other activities in the course of 104 workshops with 19 Transition Year groups and six 5th Year groups.

In the context of building teacher capacity, it is clear that 'teachers cannot tackle the preconceptions which students bring to class unless they have themselves analysed and become aware of the power of the discourse they use' (Duke, 2003: 210). A major issue raised by teachers through feedback mechanisms after the project was how to deal with students who have opinions that might be considered 'wrong', without belittling their opinions. One teacher wrote on the feedback form that 'sometimes it's difficult to hear some opinions without you feeling you have to explain the "right" way of thinking. It's a fine balance between some of the "silly" things student's might think or have heard from home without insulting them or belittling their voice'. Building the capacity and confidence of teachers not only to introduce GCE themes into their language education, but also to meaningfully engage with student doubts and criticisms - in a way that doesn't unconsciously enforce their own biases and preconceptions

- will have to be a key part of teacher capacity building in future editions of the project.

Fitting the project around the tight timetables and exam-oriented focus of Senior Cycle Spanish teachers was a further challenge. This was a major issue identified as a challenge in teacher feedback forms: 'I found it hard to fit into an already busy schedule with my 5th years and spend the time it merits with my classes'. In the Irish educational system, and in particular in the Senior Cycle leading up to the Leaving Certificate in 6th (final year) many teachers and students are very focused on teaching (and learning) to take the test. Many teachers who approached LASC to participate in the project sought the workshops primarily for their Transition Year students, with fewer teachers willing to use up precious exam preparation time in 5th and 6th year that could instead be devoted to covering and revising Leaving Certificate course content.

A crucial aim of the project was to overcome these misgivings by making clear to teachers how the topics discussed and the activities undertaken in the workshops could be related to specific curriculum learning objectives. Time spent in the workshops should also be seen as time spent covering curriculum linguistic objectives, rather than a completely separate, extra-curricular activity. Nonetheless, an important goal for the project going forward is to more closely integrate the GCE and curricular goals of the project, and to make sure that both teachers and students see the workshops as an integrated part of normal curriculum learning, rather than as a break from regular educational activity.

While incorporating development education into language teaching offers unique educational opportunities relating to the overlap of techniques associated with both areas of education, delivering GCE through what was for most students a foreign language also brought with it some major obstacles. One of the key drawbacks was that many students, although well aware of many of the issues, and quite capable of discussing them and voice their opinions on them in English in their History, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), or Business Studies classes, lacked both the level and the confidence to discuss them in Spanish. A key challenge, made more difficult by the short duration of the project in schools, was building up students' confidence to attempt to articulate their own

ideas about the topic in Spanish, rather than merely describing an issue or an image.

Individualism v collectivism

Society at large and the education system in particular, tend to view solutions and responses to problems in individualistic terms. For example, in response to climate change and environmental degradation, students are often encouraged to take highly individualised forms of action, for example keeping a log of their personal recycling habits. From LASC's perspective, a key aspect of development education is to encourage *collective* modes of action as well as of learning. Breaking the habit of thinking, in which only individual actions are recognised was a key aspect of the project this year. In thinking about what forms of action they could take, students were encouraged not only to think of individual actions, but also actions they could take as a class, a school, a community, and as a nation. Examples of school actions included taking control of school social media for a day to raise awareness, and examples of community actions were organising a protest at local county council offices. Fostering the development of students who see themselves not only as agents of change, but as *collective* agents of *collective* change, is crucial to building the kind of skills and attitudes essential to meaningful and effective global citizenship.

The key problematic at the heart of LASC's work, including its DE work, has always been 'Solidarity'. The question of how to encourage and empower people not directly affected by distant issues, to take action in solidarity with communities far away from them, who may never even know about the actions they have taken, has been central to our work through the years. Unlike many other DE projects in schools, which relate directly to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and which can be linked to local issues that students can take action on, LASC's project was specifically centred on issues in Latin America (UN, 2015). As a result, a key challenge was finding forms of action students could take that felt relevant to their lives and the issues they were facing in their own communities, and also meaningful and effective to the communities affected by the issues in question.

In 2019-20, LASC plans to make our ongoing campaign against Ireland's continued purchase of coal for electricity production from the Cerrejón mine in Colombia our primary focus when discussing possible actions students can take with students and teachers. This issue, which very clearly links everyday activity - the use of electricity - with a major environmental and human rights issue in Latin America, gives a clear direction for student action in terms of lobbying the Irish government and protesting their policy of buying coal from Cerrejón.

Conclusion and the future

Unique educational opportunities are provided by integrating DE into language instruction. The overlap in methodologies between the communicative approach to second-language teaching and the active learning methodologies central to DE create a space where DE might be smoothly incorporated into the teaching styles of language teachers, even teachers who might have been unfamiliar with DE or its methodologies until recently. Language education is an area in which outreach to teachers in Ireland has been neglected by DE practitioners in Ireland for quite some time, but, as the huge demand from Spanish teachers to participate in LASC's DE project of teacher training sessions and classroom workshops this year demonstrates, MFL (Modern Foreign Languages) teachers are eager to find ways to incorporate new and alternative themes and viewpoints into their instruction. Despite inexperience and unfamiliarity with DE in many cases, teachers saw the value of it to their students and were quickly able to understand and apply its methodologies.

Depending on ongoing funding from World Wise Global Schools, LASC plans to continue developing and expanding this project over the coming years. Crucial to future editions of the project will be an increased focus on action, one of the four key aspects of DE. Action, as the element that transforms our learning from passive to active, and our responses to it from charity into meaningful solidarity, is crucial to the theory and practice of DE. It is through action that our learning gains meaning to us, that we test the ideas we have encountered, and it is through our reflection on our actions that our learning continues. A key part of DE or GCE (Global Citizenship Education) is empowering students to see themselves as active global citizens, active agents in a global society whose actions can have an effect on the world. Overcoming the

alienation that many students express from power - the power to make change, to make those with authority listen to them - is one of the key objectives of DE in this context.

Another key aspect of future editions of the project will be an expansion of teacher capacity building to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project, and its aims and methodologies, within Spanish language education at secondary level. The necessity of a follow-up continuing professional development (CPD) session for teachers has been a thread that has run through the entirety of this reflection - as a collaborative learner-led forum for teachers to reflect on how the project went in their classrooms and its results, and to discuss problems that arose and the strategies they used to overcome them. The concept of 'solidarity', particularly collective forms of solidarity, and the question of how to act in solidarity with people affected by distant issues that are removed from our own lives is key to much of DE and to LASC's project in particular. As such, finding issues that cross national boundaries and geographical distance is essential to providing students with a focus for meaningful actions. LASC's campaign against the Irish government's policy of buying coal from the notorious Cerrejón mine in Colombia provides an ideal focus for student actions that brings together the local and the international on an issue that combines both environmental and human rights abuses.

To encourage students to reflect on their actions and its results, LASC will host an event for students in Dublin at the end of 2019. As well as providing a forum for representatives of Latin American migrant organisations to share their experiences with students and make connections between social and development issues faced by communities in distant countries with those faced by marginalised communities in Ireland, this event will also invite a group of students from each class to present their action project to their peers. This will give students and teachers from different schools an opportunity to learn from the experiences of their counterparts in other schools, and ensure that the experience and knowledge gained through the project don't remain isolated in separate schools, but are shared out among all, and will add to students' sense of themselves not as isolated actors, but as active agents within a network of action for change.

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