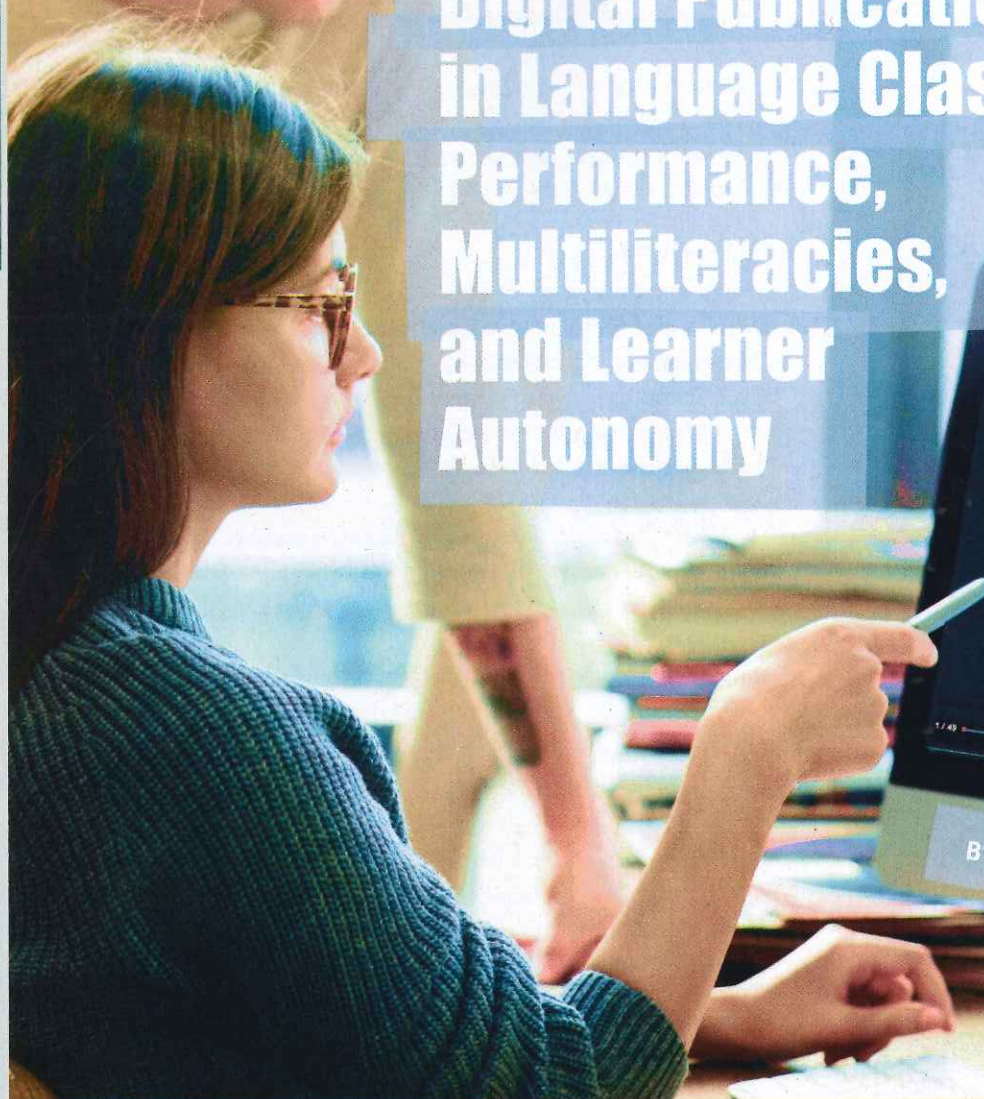


Digital Publications in Language Classes: Performance, Multiliteracies, and Learner Autonomy



BY GABRIELA C. ZAPATA AND ALESSANDRA RIBOTA

One of the aspects that distinguishes those attending Texas A&M University is their loyalty to the institution. Students are always ready to talk about their “home away from home,” and many also pride themselves in coming from the lone-star state. Every semester, a large number of these learners enroll in the four basic language Spanish classes (Novice High to Intermediate Mid/High) that we offer at the Department of Hispanic Studies to fulfill their four-semester language requirement. Often, these students’ level of motivation is low, and thus, when revamping the curriculum in our program, our priority was to find ways to motivate them. We did so by developing two specific digital projects—a profile magazine and a cookbook—that allowed students to use Spanish to share their Texas pride with a broader audience.

Both projects were grounded in the tenets of the *Learning by Design* pedagogy (Kalantzis et al., 2005, 2016), and thus incorporated tasks that guided students through the framework’s four learning processes:

(1) experiencing the known and the new; (2) conceptualizing by naming and by theorizing; (3) analyzing functionally and critically; and (4) applying appropriately and creatively.

We implemented these projects to serve various purposes:

- to increase learners’ motivation by connecting Spanish to their personal lives;
- to provide learners with a real-life like opportunity to use Spanish in the presentational mode;
- to establish a clear connection between class content and assessment;
- to develop students’ multiliteracies through the understanding of how digital media work, and how multimodal resources can be combined to convey specific meanings; and
- to promote learner autonomy through their collaboration with peers.

We present the two projects separately in the following sections.

Digital Profile Magazines in Novice High Classes

The digital profile magazines became part of the Novice High, first-semester Spanish course, the themes of which focused on aspects of students' personal and academic lives (e.g., their classes, weekly and weekend activities, family life, and places they live). The main objective of the magazine project for this level was to provide these students with the opportunity to talk about themselves and their institution in Spanish, demonstrating to Spanish speakers in the United States and around the world what it means to be from their state and university. Each section of this class developed a digital magazine that showcased the work of the enrolled students.

The project's point of departure was teaching learners not only about digital magazines (what they look like and how they are organized and formatted), but also about digital profiles (the personal information found in this kind of genre). In this first stage, instructors additionally guided learners in both how language and tone are used to present information and how photos/video can add to the meaning conveyed by text. Once students had a clear idea of what creating a digital profile magazine would entail, they developed their personal profiles in Spanish using a specific set of detailed instructions and a template. They divided their profiles into four sections: (1) My life, daily routine, and activities as a university student; (2) my academic life at Texas A&M University; (3) my family; and (4) my home away from home. Learners used the Spanish they learned in the course to develop hybrid products (text, pictures, and/or video) for each section of the profile.

Naturally, the teachers guided the students with very specific instructions, whole-class discussion on expectations and outcomes, and examples. However, one of the goals of the project was to promote learner autonomy. To this end, students collaborated with one another throughout the semester on the development of each section of their respective profiles. Once their classmates' work was completed, they provided feedback for revision and editing. Instructors monitored students' progress, but they did not interfere with the development process. Once the learners had completed all the sections of their profiles, a group of three to four student volunteers compiled all the profiles, designed a cover and table of contents for the magazine, and published it on the free online publishing platform *issuu* (issuu.com). We chose this platform because it was free, easy to use, and accessible by a world-wide audience, which we assumed would further motivate students to participate.



Digital magazines developed by Novice High students.



The resulting magazines exemplified learners' performance in the presentational mode, synthesizing the Spanish they had learned throughout a semester. We assessed the work process and resulting product through a holistic rubric that included categories devoted to the completion of the task (e.g., the presence of all the required elements and achievement of the expected outcomes), the language used, the effectiveness of the photos/video chosen to complement what was expressed in the text, and the creativity of the overall profile. Both instructors and students embraced the project. For example, instructor Kelsey Harper felt that it was not only valuable for the development of students' performance, but also for their digital literacy, as she discovered that through their work, learners who were not technologically savvy were able to broaden their knowledge of not only photo and video editing, but also digital formatting by the end of the semester.

Learners also praised the project for a variety of academic and personal reasons. For example, they felt it allowed them to increase their vocabulary, and it helped them with other class components, as one learner stated:

I liked applying what we learned in class with each unit. It helped me learn to gather my thoughts to master the skill, but also to study for the exams. I think it will help me with my future Spanish classes. I also liked how it forced me to find vocabulary from each chapter that I would probably use the most because it relates to my life.

Another aspect learners found interesting and motivating about the project was the connection to their personal lives:

I think it is good to have an exercise that relates directly to myself such as describing my family, life at school, etc., because learning a foreign language is easier when being able to relate to the information instead of going strictly by the book.

Overall, the project seemed to have served as a motivating tool for students as language learners, as several of them expressed feeling proud of their language use, such as the one seen in this comment:

I was proud of my Spanish skills when I was working on my profile and my boyfriend read it. He speaks fluent Spanish, and he was proud of me for how well my Spanish had developed.

Digital Cookbooks in Intermediate Low Classes

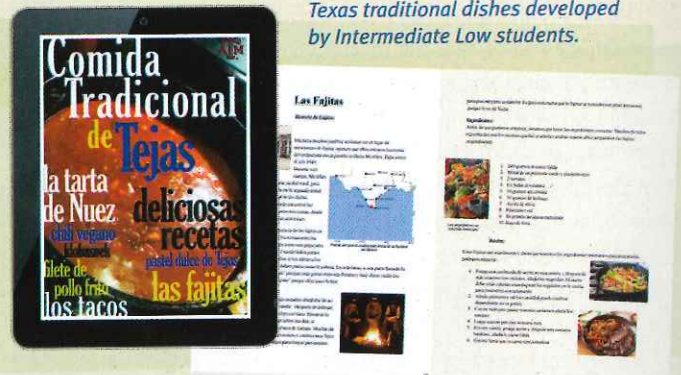
One section of our second-semester, Intermediate Low class worked on the digital cookbook project. The project was directly related to the content of the curriculum in that course and to learners' personal experiences, as we asked them to develop recipes that showcased Texan food. As with the digital magazines described in the previous section, students departed from their existing knowledge on cookbooks and were guided by the instructor to develop new knowledge that included understanding the similarities and differences between printed and digital recipe books. Learners were then organized into groups of three and were provided with detailed instructions and expected outcomes, as well as templates they could use to complete their work. Students were told to choose a typical Texan dish in one of three categories—breakfast, main dish, or dessert—and to then create a hybrid recipe (text and photos and/or video) with information about the place where the dish originated, a list of ingredients, instructions for preparation of the dish, and a short biographical excerpt on each of the student "chefs."

Throughout the semester, each group distributed tasks among its members, but they all collaborated on the overall development of their recipes, assisting one another with feedback for formatting, writing, revision, and editing. In addition, the groups were told they needed to cook their recipes, and to include original photos and/or video of their cooking experiences. The resulting recipes were then compiled by four student volunteers who designed the book's cover, table of contents, and sections. The book was published in same digital platform used for the Spanish 101 magazines, *issuu*, and learners' work was assessed in a similar way, taking into account task completion, language used, effectiveness of visual media, and creativity.

As was the case for the digital magazines, the instructor and students in the cookbook project had very positive opinions about it. The course instructor, Alessandra Ribota, also one of the authors of this article, believes that the cookbook constituted an effective, motivating, and unique way to synthesize what students had learned throughout the semester. As with the magazines, learners felt involved with their work first and foremost because there was a personal connection, this time to their home state, which drew from their Texan pride, as can be seen in this quote, "I loved that we could show how rich and interesting our food is." Using Spanish in a more realistic and comprehensive way and the digital nature of the assignment were also important to students: "It's the future! Learning how to construct one [a digital cookbook] and make it exciting, it has educational value."

We deemed the projects very successful based on not only the quality of the student work on the digital magazines and cookbook, but also on the overwhelmingly positive opinions expressed by the participating instructors and learners. We feel that the projects were extremely valuable in other ways as well. For example, they allowed students to apply their ability in Spanish in a realistic and comprehensive way: Digital media are now part of our lives, and they constitute a new, innovative way to convey our views and work meaningfully. In addition, the projects provided learners with opportunities to develop their performance in

Digital cookbook showcasing Texas traditional dishes developed by Intermediate Low students.



the presentational mode, and they fostered collaboration and autonomy. But perhaps the most important pedagogical value was how the projects motivated our students through the connection both assignments had to those aspects of learners' lives that they hold dear: their everyday experiences as young, university students, their family, and their pride in school and state. Through these projects, Spanish ceased to be a distant language disconnected from students' personal reality, and instead it became a means of self-expression that was motivating and empowering.

The successful completion of the digital magazines and cookbook was the overall result of the collaborative effort of the program's director, the instructors in charge of the classes where they were implemented, and the students in those courses. We feel that this work synthesized the positive outcomes that can be achieved when a project incorporates active and meaningful language use, effectively guides students through every step of their work, leverages user-friendly tools like digital platforms such as *issuu*, and above all, connects language learning to learners' reality and personal lives.

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Notes

The digital magazines and cookbook featured in this article can be found on the Texas A&M University Spanish Basic Language Program's website at spanprog.wixsite.com/tamu-spanprog/spanish-101-102.