

# 21st Century Fostering Skills by Matching Pedagogy & Learning Environment

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In the 21st-century workplace, employers increasingly look for skills like collaboration, cooperation, creativity, and problem-solving ability in their future employees. In the spirit of rekindling the principles of our liberal-education foundation, many instructors at the University of Lethbridge are introducing these skills to their students. In my (LJO) Spanish courses, online content, digital assignments, and mobile technologies are key. These ways of learning and interacting are critical to our digitally native students of the 21st century. They are also crucial to my courses because the most important outcome for students is pragmatic competence in Spanish. Pragmatic competence stems from the field of Pragmatics, which “in

modern linguistics ... has come to be applied to the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language

in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication” (Crystal, 2008, p. 379). For foreign-language learning, the use of pragmatic competence generally occurs in an *applied pragmatics context*, which “focuses on problems of interaction that arise in contexts where successful communication is critical, such as medical interviews, judicial settings, counseling and foreign-language teaching” (ibid., p. 379).

*We must uncompromisingly forge a connection between the word and the world, and also unrelentingly help our learners see and benefit from that connection.*  
(Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 4)

## Pragmatic Competence – Global Competence !

Developing students’ pragmatic competence is a valuable way to make students aware of how to communicate appropriately in a target language. A review of pragmatics studies concludes that explicit teaching of pragmatics in the classroom is very effective in developing students’ pragmatic competence and fosters intercultural competence (Kramsch, 1993; Rose & Kasper, 2002). While pragmatic competence can be viewed through the narrow lens of language teaching, it is conceivable that pragmatic competence can be achieved in any field or specialization. Students at the end of

their academic careers will be competent in the *language* of their field, and able to speak, write, and work well within it. It goes without saying that the development of pragmatic competence necessitates an active learning pedagogy to allow students to engage, communicate, and interact with each other – in this case in Spanish! Learners of the 21st century are aware of the importance of becoming globally competent in a world where collectivism has a greater role than individualism. It is in this collectivism where they make the connection between the *word* and the *world*.

## Why the Learning Environment Matters for Pragmatic Competence

In language teaching, we could assert that active learning is a goal, because students must become independent while using their linguistic repertoire in context. In order to achieve optimal conditions for active learning, I (LJO) discovered that being an engaging teacher is not always sufficient. Rather, the learning environment has to allow for active learning. I have been advocating for a suitable classroom in which my active teaching style can flourish since I started teaching Spanish at the U of L in 2008. Interestingly, most of the classrooms at post-secondary institutions, including the U of L, do not reflect 21st century learning and teaching strategies, and are instead predominantly suited to only one style of pedagogy, which is premised on the process of traditional knowledge transfer. As Felix and Brown (2011) point out, “Traditionally, the classroom was seen as the locus where knowledge was transmitted from the instructor to the students. The challenge is to completely revise this model, designing classrooms that support, encourage, and enable active learning engagements.” However, Canadian post-secondary institutions are fundamentally behind in this trend. When the U of L built a brand-new active-learning environment, I did not have to think twice about moving all my courses into that room for the following four semesters (Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015, and Spring 2016).

Here are important elements that are crucial to the active learning pedagogy I employ:

**Classroom.** My pedagogy is facilitated in a designated classroom. This classroom has fixed tables conducive for teamwork, an instructor station in the centre of the room, and no front of the room.

**Collaboration.** In Spanish, my courses are designed to utilize collaboration in pairs or in larger groups to maximize participation and contribution to the learning process.

**Active Learning.** Students are engaged in active learning during class time. My role is to facilitate this. I lecture minimally, and mainly to explain a concept in grammar or pragmatics.

**Technology as an Organizer.** Students have access to laptops (if needed) to access in-class activities and record their work. Each group table has access to one large screen and ample whiteboard space to work on assignments together.

## Learning Environment and Engagement Study in Spanish

My (LJO) courses benefited tremendously from being held in a learning environment that suits my teaching style. I had an inkling that this was the case, but it was not until the Learning Environment Evaluation project team (LEE) came into my classes and did a formal study. Between Fall 2014 and Spring 2015, we had a unique opportunity to compare four classes based on the rooms they were held in, with two being held in traditional classrooms (one flat, one mildly tiered; 1000-level courses) and two in the new classroom (one 1000-level, one 2000-level course). We employed a survey gauging student engagement and perceptions about the learning environment. The first set of questions regarding engagement was taken from the classroom version of the National Survey on Student Engagement (CLASSE, NSSE; Leger et al., 2013; Ouimet & Smallwood, 2005; Reid, 2012). The second set of questions regarding the learning environment was taken from the LEE classroom evaluation survey.

Looking at the engagement variables, six out of seven did not produce statistically significant differences (Figure 1). However, upon re-assessing the type of questions, we concluded that frequency of participation ratings are not a complete measure of engagement. In the design of the courses investigated, students have to participate frequently to obtain good grades. Therefore, we determined all classes studied were engaging by design, regardless of the room (see Figure 1).

Interestingly, students in the new classroom worked significantly *more frequently* with their classmates outside of class than in the traditional rooms. This finding made sense in light of the group dynamics that were naturally created in the new classroom, as students were sitting together, facing their classmates, and working with them continuously. We believe that the strong community created at the tables factored into the likelihood of working together outside of class.

Looking at student perceptions of the learning environment, students in the new classroom found the room significantly more effective than the traditional rooms (Figure 2). Further, students thought that the room facilitated different learning activities better compared to traditional rooms. It also showed that the novel learning environment was physically more comfortable than the traditional environments. Lastly, and importantly, students own perceptions indicated that the new classroom facilitated their engagement in the learning process more than in the traditional classrooms. These findings were robust even when the analysis was conducted based on course, in order to rule out that the advanced 2000-level course carried all the weight of producing significant differences for room variables (see Figure 2). In addition to student engagement and perceptions of the learning environment, we also found that students in the new classroom attended class significantly more frequently, and that final grades were higher.

## Conclusions

In line with known successes from the literature, results from the Spanish classes showed that students taught in the new classroom have higher

Figure 1

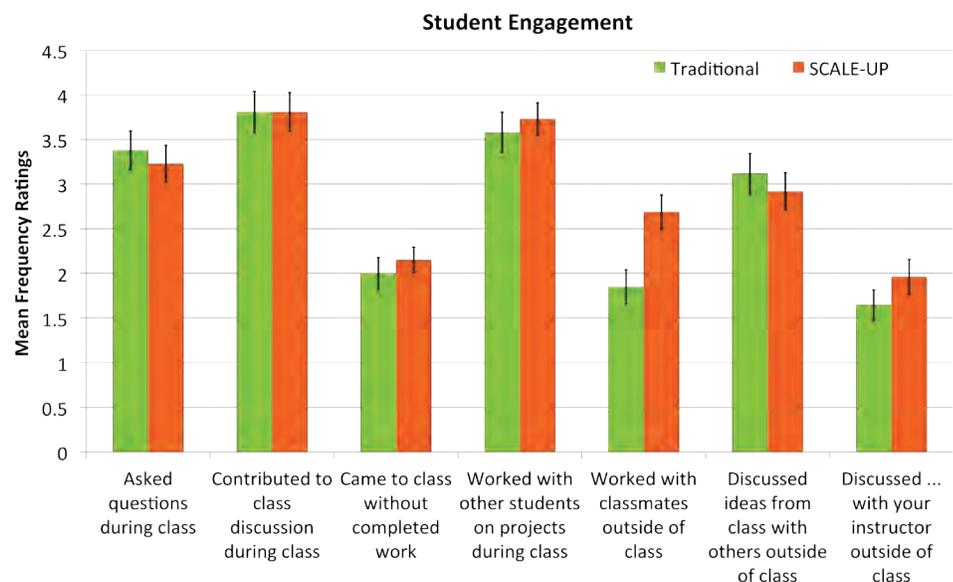
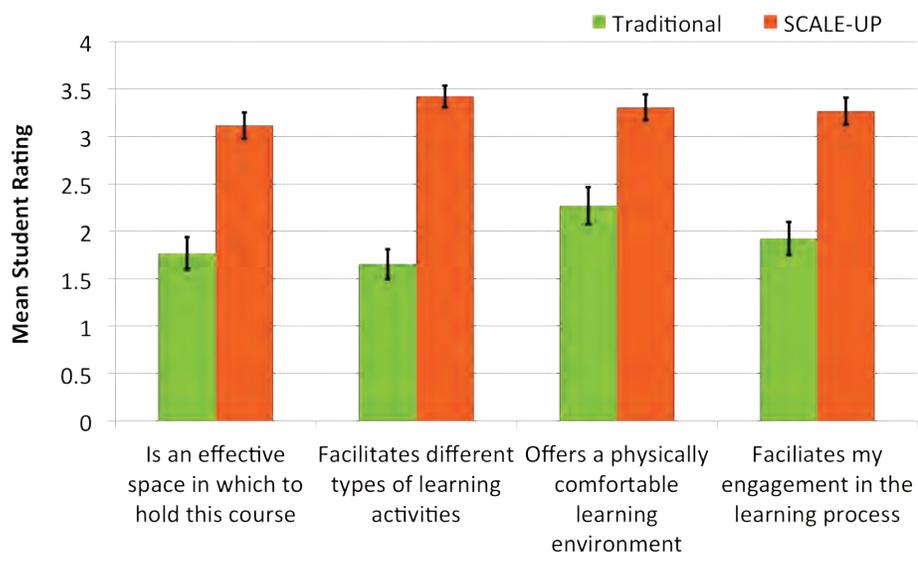


Figure 2

Student Perceptions of the Learning Environment by Room



attendance and better grades. Importantly, our study also revealed an interesting factor of engagement that is often lacking in a traditional classroom: cohesion among students. Students worked with their classmates *outside* of class time significantly more frequently than in traditional classrooms. Working together is a crucial step toward community building within a class. As borders of time and space morph into fluid entities that only depend on your Internet connection, collaboration can take place anytime and anywhere. Creating a community mentality in the classroom that allows for both synchronous and asynchronous, face-to-face and virtual collaboration is a great preparation for the 21st century collaboration requirements. As the world is changing at its fastest speed known to us, a new challenge presents for faculty: How does one keep up? We assume students are digital natives, and many of us may be digital immigrants. Yet, it turns out that sometimes we just need to move to a new perspective, or a new classroom. Existing ideas can be propelled into something new and exciting simply by packaging them into new technologies. Collaboration and pragmatic competence have never lost their relevance. There are just different ways of implementing them now.

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