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Fostering Intellectual Investment and Foreign Language Learning Through Role-Immersion Pedagogy

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Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of increasing the intellectual viability of lower-level foreign language (FL) study while facilitating connections between academic practice, learners' lives, and global communities. This article reports on a content-based role-immersion simulation (RIS) designed to incite a critical orientation toward language learning, as 16 postsecondary intermediate Spanish learners adopted alternate identities and took part in a culturally grounded scenario centering on resolving problems related to drug trafficking and violence at the U.S.-Mexico border. Self-reported data from this qualitative study reveal that a majority of participants considered the simulation to approximate an intellectually stimulating real-world immersive encounter; however, some learners approached it as a language-learning exercise. The article elaborates on criteria that contributed to these divergent perceptions and concludes with implications for foreign language curriculum design.

INTRODUCTION

Cultivating learners' critical thinking and higher-order reasoning skills is widely accepted as vital to U.S. undergraduate educational systems (Carnes, 2014; McPeck, 2017). Critical thinking can be described as an "intellectually disciplined process" of tapping into elevated cognitive capacities such as synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating information as a means of guiding belief and action (The Foundation for Critical Thinking, n.d.). In an era of globalization characterized by unpredictability, mobility, and dynamism, developing in learners such a "way of thinking" is not only sustainable and transferable to new situations, but is crucial to ensuring they are prepared to navigate the unfamiliar scenarios they will encounter once they have left the classroom (Kramsch, 2014; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2007). Yet, concerns have emerged among researchers, educators, and employers alike regarding if and how higher education is fulfilling its mission of equipping learners to develop and regularly activate such higher-order thinking skills (Davies & Barnett, 2015). In fact, one study revealed that 45% of university students did not improve their abilities to think critically during the first two years of their undergraduate careers and 36% did not develop these capacities at all over their four-year tenure (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Such staggering statistics are alarming considering that thinking critically is associated with capabilities such as adapting, improvising, and creative problem-solving, all of which are paramount to thriving in a 21st-century environment (Thomas, 2009).

Mirroring this broader national dilemma, Kramsch (2014) echoed that in foreign language (FL) education "there has never been a greater tension between what is taught in the classroom and what students will need in the real world once they have left the classroom" (p. 296). She and others have suggested that the widely held conception that FL learning entails simply

memorizing a static set of linguistic elements or acquiring tidbits of cultural knowledge associated with a particular country or language is no longer sufficient (Byrnes, 2006). As the global landscape is now marked by national, linguistic, and cultural hybridity, the importance of cultivating language proficiency while also recognizing and problematizing its interconnection with expanding global, cultural, and interdisciplinary understandings has emerged as vital to the FL curriculum (Magnan, Murphy, & Sahakyan, 2014; MLA, 2007; National Standards, 2015; Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016). For example, the Global Competence Position Statement released by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in 2014 highlights the need for learners to deepen their awareness of issues of global importance and nurture their ability to think critically in relation to these topics in order to operate successfully in diverse contexts. To promote such broad aims in FL learning, academic practice must strive to mirror the complex real-world scenarios and discourses that learners may encounter outside the classroom. However, specifically at the lower levels of FL instruction, this expanded curricular scope presents challenges for educators, not the least of which is the rising pressures faced by language programs to produce high levels of proficiency while being afforded limited time (usually only 2-4 semesters) to do so (Byrnes, 2012). It is unsurprising, then, that often a narrower focus aimed at developing learners' linguistic repertoire through grammar-driven curricula is adopted (Martel, 2013). Although such an emphasis may seem fitting, Cammarata (2016b) asserted that honing in on, and often isolating, linguistic features may actually be contributing to unsatisfactory proficiency gains. It also does little to promote "integrated language learning from an interdisciplinary perspective" (Magnan et al., 2014, p. 12), as promoted by the World-Readiness Standards (2015). In other words, by maintaining grammar as an overarching curricular organizer, introductory and intermediate FL courses have been regarded as "thinking-light" subject matters in which recalling and regurgitating linguistic information has received priority over inciting learners to practice and refine higher-order thinking abilities and helping them develop multiple competences that are fundamental for emerging graduates (Martel, 2016).

Thus, the present study explores possibilities of a content-based curricular alternative in an intermediate Spanish course with the intention of expanding the intellectual viability of FL learning at the lower level of instruction and helping learners make clearer connections between their classroom experiences and the local and global communities in which they may participate. Specifically, selecting authentic and intellectually engaging material has the potential to "better connect with students' lives and interests" (Cammarata, Tedick, & Osborn, 2016, p. 4) as well as promote inquiry, curiosity, and a desire to learn more. In other words, the goal is to allow learners opportunities to grapple with real-world situations and contexts, engage in complex problem-solving, and apply and expand their language resources as they wrestle with content in the target language (TL). The scenario used in this study centers on problems of drug trafficking and violence at the U.S.-Mexico border, as these are provocative and controversial issues that may pique learners' interest and problematize potential stereotypes while also being geographically relevant to students in the U.S. To facilitate active participation in the scenario and offer appropriate scaffolding of authentic content and artifacts, this module was developed using tenets from two experiential learning pedagogies, *Reacting to the Past* (i.e., role-immersion) and *Global Simulations* (GS). Learners adopt real-world identities, each with a personalized agenda so as to encourage meaningful interaction with content, language, and peers to foster deep intellectual and personal investment in their learning. The objective is to ensure that as learners engage critically with the material, the language and cultural content become consequential to them.

PROMOTING INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH RICH CONTEXT AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

For language and content to be relevant and encourage critical thinking, curricula must offer abundant opportunities for exposure to and experiences with language in context. However, linking language and content to create a rich context in which learners are actively engaged “cannot be taken for granted, it is not always automatically ‘there’ in students, teachers, and course providers. It needs to be developed” (van Lier, 2004, p. 141). In other words, when the contextual pillars that surround language use do not facilitate for learners a deep sense of connection between the language and communication that is relevant and meaningful to them, this disconnect can result in classroom language practice that differs greatly from the language used to communicate ideas appropriately in real-world scenarios (Savignon, 2017). On the other hand, because the brain is wired to consider the entire situated experience, where language and its context are inextricably linked, foregrounding contextualized and interdisciplinary content during the language learning process allows learners to extract and internalize meaningful patterns, linguistic and otherwise (Kennedy, 2006). In so doing, the language and content become significant for learners as such a process “more accurately represents the reality and nature of knowledge” (Reagan & Osborn, 2002, p. 74).

Although highly contextualized scenarios are compatible with developing language proficiency and can facilitate connections between academic learning and learners’ own worlds, also of great importance is the initiative (or not) learners put forth to participate in that context (van Lier, 2008). When learners become active participants, or “are forced to think about, reflect on, grapple with, explain, synthesize, support and/or defend aspects of the course,” (Bowen & Watson, 2017, p. 121) they are exhibiting deeper levels of mental engagement that are often observable. Inherent in this definition of active learning is a sense of obligation and accountability on the part of learners to participate fully and in cognitively stimulating ways in their learning. When opportunities for disengagement become less available and a larger number of learners share their creativity, understandings of the world, and intellectual capacities in a learning environment, opportunities for active meaning construction are maximized, according to constructivist epistemologies (Fosnot & Perry, 1996; Mitchell & Myles, 1988; van Lier, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). That is, when learners individually and collectively tap into their unique experiences, knowledge, and belief systems and apply and (re)interpret them within the language learning context, classroom activity has the potential to transform into an experience that may “come to terms with the learners’ reality and somehow create contextual conditions that are appropriate to them and that will enable them to authenticate it as discourse on their own terms” (Widdowson, 1998, p. 712).

PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORKS THAT PRIORITIZE LEARNER INVESTMENT AND REAL-WORLD CONTENT

Curricular approaches that take into account not only materials and content, but also instructional frameworks that have shown to harness learners’ energies toward becoming invested in their learning hold promise (Vaughn, 2014). Active and experiential learning models are now promoted by many educational institutions (Austin & Rust, 2015). By encouraging whole-person engagement through activating learners’ thoughts, feelings, and actions, these models lend themselves to a personalized and meaningful learning experience,

as they typically coincide with high degrees of learner involvement, self-initiation, and discovery (Kohonen, Jaatinen, Kaikkonen, & Lehtovaara, 2001). One such pedagogy that continues to grow in its prominence and popularity is Reacting to the Past (RTTP). RTTP, with its roots in the discipline of history, refers to a set of role-immersion games in which learners adopt the roles of historical characters grounded in classic texts and take part in an elaborate learner-directed game set in the past (Reacting to the Past, 2018). Role-immersion differs from the commonly held notion of role-play in FL learning, both in its temporal duration and depth of engagement. Role-play, particularly in FL learning settings, is generally carried out as an exercise in which learners briefly take on roles with an objective of mimicking a scenario one might find while abroad (i.e. ordering food in a restaurant, meeting someone, etc.) in order to practice grammatical structures or new lexicon needed to operate successfully in the situation. Such activities allow for communicative practice, but rarely provide additional opportunities for learners to gain an in-depth understanding of underlying cultural or situational circumstances that might surround such a scenario. In contrast, role-immersion games last weeks or months and allow learners to develop a multidimensional understanding of real-world anchors associated with their individual character roles while also aiming to deepen learners' awareness of the circumstances that shaped the diverse character perspectives. In addition to considering a unique vantage point, each alternate identity incorporates individual objectives, which serve to incite personal accountability and promote intellectual investment, as each learner is responsible for reaching his or her character's goals. As learners embody their alternate subjectivities within the classroom community, they participate in a series of learner-directed class sessions and must adhere to the philosophical ideology and historical pillars related to their characters while also devising their own course of action to "win" the game (i.e. achieve their character's goals). Students have repeatedly remarked that being afforded such agency in the classroom has prompted them to dedicate more time and energy to RTTP than other classes applying traditional instructional approaches (Carnes, 2014). In sum, by providing learners opportunities for direct and personalized experience with collective and individual historical narratives and then tasking them to actively do something, RTTP aims to give "life texture and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts" (Kolb, 1984, p. 21).

Because RTTP has shown to ignite learner investment with course content, it has expanded to many disciplines, including FL study. In an upper-level French class Schaller (2012) carried out a game situated in Paris during the late 18th century focusing on socio-political issues of the time. The class was conducted in the TL, and much of the game materials were available to students in French and English, though the instructor encouraged learners to engage with the texts in French. Data indicated positive outcomes related to content knowledge, learners' ability to articulate a perspective supported by historical facts, and learners' general perceptions of the game. Confidence and performance related to spontaneous language production improved, and learners themselves overwhelmingly noted that peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration were highlights. Albright (2014) also carried out an RTTP game set in medieval Rome in an intermediate-level Latin class taught in English with Latin texts. Through self-reported data, the majority of students (88% of those who completed the survey) indicated that they learned a significant amount about Roman authors and Roman history and were able to make clearer connections between authors' language choices and the culturally and historically situated meanings behind them. To my knowledge these games have also been implemented in a handful of other upper-level FL courses (S. Slaughter, personal communication, January 26, 2015), but due to the extensive textual analysis necessary to

participate in RTTP and the almost instantaneous autonomy given to learners at the start of the game, engaging with the content while also remaining primarily in the TL has proven challenging, even for advanced learners. Thus, the current study aims to leverage the benefits of this pedagogy, namely promoting language development, activating higher-order thinking abilities, and inciting deep learner engagement with culturally relevant content, by using the RTTP model at the intermediate level. However, to facilitate initial access to language and content for lower-level learners, one key element from intermediate-level GSs¹ was integrated: strategically sequenced teacher-led activities (e.g., Dupuy, 2006; Kearney, 2012; Levine, 2004; Michelson, 2017; Mills & Péron, 2008, Péron, 2010). That is, unlike most role-immersion games in which learners assume control of the class at the onset, in this role-immersion simulation (RIS), learners were afforded increasing degrees of freedom, ultimately culminating in three entirely learner-directed class sessions.

THE STUDY

As part of a larger project, the data presented in this article addresses learners' perceptions of the RIS, a novel curricular design, by considering the following research questions:

RQ1: How did participating in the RIS influence learners' perceptions of their FL classroom experience?

RQ2: What specific conditions or elements of the RIS led learners to these perceptions?

Context and Participants

The RIS took place in a fourth-semester intermediate Spanish course at a large university in the southeastern United States. Designed by the researcher and conducted in Spanish, the RIS lasted four weeks (weeks 11 through 14 of a 15-week semester), meeting twice per week for 75 minutes each.

Phase 1: Orientation to content and context. Phase 1 spanned five 75-minute class periods (Week 1, Week 2, and Day 1 of Week 3). During this time, learners developed a general understanding of relevant historical, cultural, and political topics related to the U.S.-Mexico border. They read excerpts that highlighted historical approaches by both countries to combat the transport of illegal drugs and narratives related to how violence affects the border region. The texts, adapted for intermediate learners and translated from Franco's (2013) materials, reviewed the U.S.'s efforts to eliminate the production of illegal drugs and Mexico's attempt to dismantle the drug cartels. Additional readings included a recount of a U.S. Border Patrol agent's killing of a 15-year old Mexican boy at the border as well as the 2014 Iguala mass kidnappings in Mexico. Responding to discussion questions in groups, learners contemplated various perspectives and factors contributing to the present-day issues of drug trafficking and violence at the U.S.-Mexico border. In order to expose and challenge possible stereotypical views toward the border and Mexico, learners watched videos related to U.S. and Mexican stereotypes and considered how these concepts reflected their own beliefs (or not). To prepare learners to engage in culturally appropriate practices during the summit (Phase 3), learners

¹ For more information on global simulations and simulations in FL learning, see Levine (2004) and Jones (1982) respectively.

performed out-of-class research on cultural differences related to negotiations in the two countries.

Phase 2: Character selection and development. The first five class sessions (Week 1, Week 2, Day 1 of Week 3) were also dedicated to character selection and development. The character roles in this RIS, also adapted from Franco (2013), included political figures, community stakeholders, United Nations (U.N.) Representatives, and a news reporter. On Day 1 of the RIS, the instructor distributed the list of character roles, each with an abbreviated description. To tend to learner interests and promote personal involvement with their characters, learners ranked and submitted a rationale for their top three character choices as homework via the learning management system. On Day 2 of Week 1, the instructor assigned each learner a character accompanied by a half-page description of the role. In the event that one of the learner's top three choices was not available, the instructor took into consideration the learner's rationale and attempted to accommodate these preferences through another role. In such cases, the instructor had a brief one-on-one conversation in English with the learner.

Character information and objectives touched on controversial issues such as the possibility of legalizing drugs, building a bi-national city, and factory workers' (maquiladora) rights at the border, among others². The various perspectives within the roles intentionally set the stage for conflict and debate, as learners had to use the TL to critically contemplate a variety of interrelated issues, strategize possible solutions, recruit allies, and reconcile diverse interests (See Appendix A for a list of roles and objectives). Although other characters may not have had clear opponents, they were charged with determining how to achieve their own objectives, allocate limited financial resources, and make determinations about their positions on the interlocking web of issues for the final vote (Phase 4).

After receiving roles, learners spent the next two class periods (Day 2 of Week 1 and Day 1 of Week 2) shaping this persona on the social media platform Google Plus. To deepen the personal connections between learners and their characters, each learner was afforded the freedom to co-construct aspects of his or her role: gender, imagined personality traits, family, hobbies, and likes and dislikes. Their profiles also included a picture and a cover photo. As homework between Weeks 1 and 2 and throughout Week 2, learners sent private messages to others to forge relationships, promote their agendas, consider and share potential solutions, and attempt to establish preliminary alliances. Throughout the second week and Day 1 of Week 3, learners gave formal in-class character presentations and participated in informal meet-and-greet activities. The goals of these exercises included helping learners practice advancing their own character platforms while also familiarizing themselves with the many topics and controversies present in the RIS.

Phase 3: At the summit, preparing the proposals. This phase consisted of two learner-directed class sessions (Day 2 of Week 3 and Day 1 of Week 4) during which learners participated in one or both caucuses (drug trafficking or border violence), each led by a U.N. Representative character. As the crux of the experiential learning encounter, each learner fully embraced the essence and voice of his or her character. Drawing on previous materials, discussions, and their own expanding understandings, learners devised

² Due to the sensitive nature of these topics and the associated roles, it is important to acknowledge potential ethical implications of this pedagogy. For further information regarding how U.S.-Mexico border themes and characters may influence learners' moral and human understandings of the issues, see Drewelow & Finney, 2018. Carnes (2014) also broaches topics of morality, empathy, and global citizenship with regard to the RTTP model.

concrete solutions to the problems of interest to their character and worked to ensure others' support. The U.N. Representatives documented characters' proposed solutions and uploaded a working version of the proposal to Google Plus after each summit day for others to view. At different points during this phase, learners were able to switch caucuses as well as gather in smaller groups to discuss options and develop allies.

Phase 4: At the summit, voting on the proposals. On the last day of the summit (Day 2 of Week 4), the U.N. Representatives introduced a final version of each proposal to the Presidents of Mexico and the U.S., whose goal was to modify the proposals on the projector screen and resolve any conflicts. Other learners commented on the Presidents' choices as they edited the proposals. Once finalized, all learners except the U.N. Representatives and the News Reporter cast their vote for or against the two proposals. A majority passed (or not) each one. The U.N. Representatives did not vote, as they were neutral parties invited to the summit with the purpose of moderating the caucuses and advocating for peaceful solutions. Likewise, the objectives of the News Reporter focused on covering and reporting highlights of the caucuses and, thus, he or she did not have a stake in the outcome of the summit.

Participants. All learners (17) in the course initially agreed to participate in the study, however one was removed due to absences during five of the eight class sessions. The remaining 16 participants (7 males, 9 females) were native English speakers between the ages of 18 and 24 except one male who was 49 years old. To avoid bias, the instructor of the course was not a participant or the researcher. The researcher was present during all RIS class sessions.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the class session following the completion of the RIS, all participants completed a 20-minute online questionnaire in English (Appendix B). The questionnaire was developed using Drewelow's (2011) survey. After piloting the instrument, it was adapted to include exclusively open-ended questions due to the advantages of allowing respondents to express ideas in their own words, as outlined by Brown (2009), Dörnyei (2003), and Mackey and Gass (2005). To address the RQs, which aim to explore learners' perceptions of the RIS experience and the conditions that led to these perceptions, questions elicited general learner impressions (items 1 and 2), their opinions on adopting an alternate identity (item 3), and their thoughts on how the RIS influenced their language development (item 4). The last item (item 5) allowed for additional comments. Prior to the RIS, learners provided bio data identifying information on a pre-questionnaire. To elucidate 11 learners' post-questionnaire responses in which they made vague claims regarding the RIS experience (e.g. the RIS was "a lot better than just learning out of a book"), these participants took part in an individual face-to-face semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher in a separate room. The researcher first read each learner's quoted text aloud and probed using phrases like "What did you mean by this?" or "Can you elaborate on this?"

Adopting a qualitative and exploratory approach, the data were analyzed following Charmaz's (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory. Initially, data from the questionnaire and transcribed interviews were coded line-by-line to identify trends related to general learner impressions of the RIS (RQ1). Based on commonalities in remarks, two distinct perceptions of the RIS emerged, which led participants to be placed into one of two groups. All data were then recoded to identify aspects, components, or practices of the RIS noted by participants.

New codes were reexamined separately and comparatively between the two groups using an iterative approach to establish correlations (RQ2).

FINDINGS

Data³ suggested that almost two-thirds of learners (10 out of 16) described their participation in the RIS as reminiscent of an immersive encounter they might find outside an academic learning setting (group one) and the other participants (6 out of 16) characterized their RIS experience in academic terms of how it advanced (or not) their language abilities (group two).

To organize these findings, I discuss each group separately, starting with group one and their impressions of the RIS (RQ1). Then, to address RQ2, two RIS criteria contributing to group one's impressions are described: (1) critical engagement with content and (2) personal accountability. For group two, data on perceptions of the RIS are divided into two subcategories: learners who perceived their language to have improved (four learners) and those who considered their language to have remained stagnant (two learners). To answer RQ2, data from group two are considered in terms of the criteria put forth by group one to understand and determine possible correlations.

Factors Contributing to Learners' Perceptions of the Classroom as Immersive

To describe the RIS experience as akin to real-world interactions, the first group of ten learners depicted it as “real” and “practical,” and likened it to “being abroad.” These learners also made stark contrasts between their RIS experience and their conceptualization of a typical FL classroom format, which they described using phrases like “traditional,” “textbook,” “normal class,” “memorized,” and “a piece of paper” and compared these conceptions with terms like “communicate,” “adapt,” “immersing,” and “deep.”

Learners' remarks describing the practices in the RIS that contributed to this impression revealed two themes: (1) the need to apply various skills simultaneously, particularly activating critical thinking while engaging with content in the TL, and (2) a sense of accountability to communicate ideas to advance their agendas.

Activating higher-order thinking through in-depth engagement with content. These ten learners contrasted the content-driven RIS to their experiences in other FL classes. Such a distinction revealed that learners perceived the two approaches to differ significantly. Learners characterized the RIS by stating they had to “talk more on topics,” “go deeper,” and reach a new “level of thinking.” Prevalent in these remarks are themes of increased thought and in-depth participation with the topics, which suggest that learners perceived a heightened intellectual engagement with the RIS content. For example, Audrey⁴ contrasted her perception of the RIS as a means to “get us thinking more” with an impression of traditional FL curricula in which one might just say “*cómo estás* [how are you] blah blah.” Her use of a greeting (“how are you”), a straightforward memorized phrase with limited cognitive demands, coupled with repetition of a term void of meaning (“blah”), display her attempt to express, by way of comparison, how the RIS challenged her intellectual capacities in a new way. Isabel echoed this idea by stating that in other FL classes, the “goal” is to “figure out if [the answer] is right,”

³ Because researcher subjectivity plays an inescapable role in qualitative data analysis, the findings presented in this section represent just one possible interpretation of the data.

⁴ Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity.

which implies that once a right-wrong conclusion is drawn, there is no need for additional thought or reflection. She distinguished this dichotomous conception with the RIS explaining, “there was a lot of communication” and “a lot of negotiation,” which she insisted was “nicer.” The terms “communication” and “negotiation” suggest that she perceived the RIS to have afforded her ongoing opportunities to grapple with topics and engage in a back-and-forth exchange of meaningful information. Such a process requires an active approach to comprehending the content as well as synthesizing and conveying relevant messages, as opposed to identifying a correct answer. These descriptions of the RIS indicate how learners perceived the curriculum to invite them to take a critical and holistic approach to using the language, which they contrasted with conceptions such as “follow[ing] all the little grammatical rules” (Zach) or honing in “on a specific tense for however many days” (Javier). In these remarks, typifying grammar and tenses as “little” and “specific,” learners revealed an impression that developing knowledge about tenses and grammar can be considered limited or isolated. In contrast, Javier asserted that in the RIS he had to use “an amalgam of knowledge,” underscoring how learners considered the process of becoming involved in the simulated scenario to be a comprehensive endeavor, lending itself to integrating different areas of learners’ skills and knowledge. Engaging in practices in which language use and critical engagement with content were inextricably linked led learners to feel that they were activating competences that might be useful in the real world, such as learning “how to voice [their] opinion logically” (Richard) and how to “adapt [their] skills to different situations” (Javier). These data suggest that the content-based nature of the RIS was a crucial contributor to triggering learners’ higher-order cognitive capacities.

Personal accountability: The impetus to engage in “real” communication. The highly contextualized scenario provided appropriate topics and opportunities for learners to engage meaningfully and deeply with language and content; however, data indicate that the personal accountability related to individualized objectives in the RIS stimulated active learner participation. The ten learners in this category used words like “had to” and “pushed” to indicate a sense of responsibility to take a proactive approach to engaging in the learner-directed class periods. Learners also explained that they felt obligated to communicate, but further pinpointed that synchronous speaking, without time to practice or prepare, contributed to perceptions of engaging in “real conversations” or participating in “a dance” that one might do “with Spanish speakers.” Such remarks point to a link between feeling urgency to communicate with their peers and their perception of real-world language use.

During the summit (Phase 3), the classroom shifted from a teacher-directed structure to two learner-managed caucuses. As the two U.N. Representatives led the caucuses, asking questions and probing for details, learners indicated that they began to feel obligated to participate in the talks, with Audrey stating, “it was nice to be forced to speak Spanish” and April asserting, “it made me use the language.” To explain why they felt compelled to engage with the language, Samuel noted that he “had to present [his] case to the class” and Zach stated, “I had the agenda that I wanted and I wanted to get my way in the [RIS], so I not only put in extra effort with my messages and with my thinking strategically the right words to use [sic], it just started becoming more natural.” This remark emphasizes the connection between having character objectives, which created in learners a sense of accountability to actively pursue their goals, and the need to use the language to do so. Zach elaborated that in the process of trying to achieve his character’s agenda, he was reminded of his time abroad: “I felt like I was back [in Honduras].” Through this comparison, data reveal that at some point the academic atmosphere to which he had become accustomed had shifted to mirror a

communication setting akin to his encounters abroad. Likewise, Evie described the RIS explaining:

For me personally, I felt that it was very helpful to have like an experience of just coming into class and speaking Spanish being able to write and- it challenged me to do speaking, listening, and writing all at the same time.

She also compared these RIS practices to “being abroad and not having a choice but speaking Spanish.” These remarks illustrate how focusing on using a variety of modes of communication to achieve a task evoked in her a sense that she was back in Spain, which she perceived as a TL-rich environment. April echoed that to achieve her goals, she had to use the language “to write stuff out” and then “talk about that exact thing that [she] had written out in person and elaborate more and just use [the language].” In other words, in order to achieve her goals, she remained focused on discussing, both in writing and verbally, the issues that mattered to her character with others, a process she later equated to an immersion experience. What is salient in these learners’ comments is the urgency they felt to use the language as the primary semiotic resource to construct and share meaning within the interactions. Focusing on reaching their individual character goals led to a perceived transcendence of the contrived nature of the academic setting, allowing learners to experience their discourse and communicative interactions as more authentic.

In addition to highlighting how they engaged in various types of communication (i.e., writing, speaking, listening), these ten learners also explicitly articulated that the need for synchronous and impromptu conversations with their peers during class sessions facilitated perceived connections between classroom and real-world discourse. Jed explained that the summit was like having an “actual conversation” because he “actually had to respond to people’s comments,” which required “thinking about it right on the spot.” Paul said it helped him to “be able to speak quickly and have real conversations” and Isabel added that it aided her in “actually applying [the language] in conversation.” Their repeated use of “actual” and “real” suggest that they distinguished the RIS experience from other classroom activities that involve peer-to-peer interaction, which they depicted using descriptions such as “structure,” “memorized,” and “organization.” Evie emphasized that while she appreciated having opportunities to learn “how to do things like organized sentences,” she believed the RIS helped her “practice” what she had learned, as she was able to have “a conversation for one hour straight.” Her remarks accentuate that to participate in the RIS, learners indeed needed to have the linguistic foundation to converse with others, but it also demanded that they access and use their language resources appropriately to immediately convey ideas. Engaging in unscripted meaningful exchanges challenged learners to simultaneously activate multiple skills oftentimes not required to complete more structured activities. For example, Richard articulated the various skills he tapped into to interact successfully. He appreciated “being able to say something to someone and then hearing what they say back and thinking how [he has] to rephrase what [he] wanted.” These remarks highlight how learners shared ideas, comprehended those of others, synthesized them, and responded appropriately. He expanded that if he “wasn’t coming off the right way,” he could reflect and respond in order to “understand what they were confused on.” This quote uncovers how learners were tasked with navigating emergent miscommunications that occurred in conversations by thinking critically and then adjusting replies accordingly. These types of unrehearsed encounters prompted learners to not only exchange information in real time, but also formulate thoughts to advance

character agendas and express them in comprehensible ways in the TL, a process that mirrors the intellectual demands of real-world communication. Data illustrate that it was, as one learner put it, the challenge of figuring out “certain ways of speaking, thinking on [their] feet,” that created a sense that learners were engaging “in semi-real circumstances.”

Learners Foreground Language Development

The second group's (six learners) comments centered on how the RIS facilitated the development (or not) of isolated language skills and abilities. Unlike group one, these six learners made no comparisons or contrasts between the RIS and other FL classroom experiences, nor did they describe the RIS as mirroring a realistic setting. Based on their descriptions, each learner in this group was placed into one of two subcategories: (1) perceived language development (four learners); (2) perceived language stagnation (two learners). Because data suggest that two primary criteria, the content-driven curriculum and a sense of personal accountability, played a significant role in nurturing a perception of the classroom as approximating real-world and in-depth encounters, data for these six learners is also examined in terms of these two criteria to shed light on how they impacted (or not) these learners' impressions.

Perceived language development. Four learners' remarks centered on the abilities they believed they had improved, such as vocabulary (two learners) and speaking and listening skills (two learners). Two of these four learners (George, Connie) mentioned that they felt a sense of accountability to use the language; however, data suggest that only one learner (Connie) in this group progressed toward a deeper sense of engagement with the content, remarking that her character “was a common person who represents a large body of people actually suffering. Research for the role was horrifying and sad.” She explained, “looking for pictures [...] like looking at femicide was really gruesome, and then just looking at pictures in Juarez” contributed to her perception. Specifically, pouring through online photos made the topics seem more real and consequential. When compared to learners in group one, this learner differs in the medium through which content gained significance: visual images. The other three learners in this group either abstained from mentioning the RIS topics or they described the acquisition of facts, as illustrated by Tyra's comment: “Honestly I had no idea either [border] cities [El Paso/Juarez] were real until I did research.” This quote reveals that one of the more striking aspects of engaging with the content for her was a realization that the two border cities existed, pointing to a limited intellectual investment in the real-world issues present in the RIS. The two prevalent characteristics of these learners' comments include a central focus on language and the absence of any substantive reference to the thought-provoking content.

Perceived language stagnation. The other two learners in this group explicitly stated that the RIS “neither positively or negatively affected” their language abilities. Only one of these learners, Ellen (U.N. Representative), indicated she felt compelled to use the language, stating, “it was hard because I had to make sure I understood what everyone was saying and make sure the proposals were correct.” Her remark suggests that she not only felt a sense of accountability, but also that she engaged her intellectual capacities through comprehending and synthesizing information from her caucus as well as negotiating meaning to create the proposals. Yet, unlike the learners in group one, she did not expressly correlate such experiences with language or any other skills development that she perceived to be beneficial. The other learner (Ingrid) explained, “I learned how to negotiate with others in Spanish,” a

process that also involves complex cognitive strategies. Yet, she perceived this practice to have little bearing on her language abilities.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the present study reveal that the U.S.-Mexico border RIS created conditions that prompted a majority of learners (10 of 16) to perceive their academic practices to approximate real-world encounters. Data point to two factors contributing to these perceptions: the sustained focus on relevant real-world content and the personalized character agendas. The former created circumstances conducive to an immersive experience within the classroom while the latter incited critical learner investment in the scenario. These findings support Cammarata et al. (2016) who highlighted the importance of incorporating thought-provoking topics that are “deeply connected to authentic life concerns” (p. 10) as a viable option to facilitate deep levels of learner thinking and engagement. That is, the individualized roles and objectives compelled learners to evolve into active agents of their learning, motivating them to analyze and wrestle with the personal narratives and circumstances related to the U.S.-Mexico border, effectively tapping into higher-order thinking and problem-solving capacities. As such, the language and contextualized scenario “came to life” for them. Data from this study thus also underscore the importance of incorporating an intentional mechanism in FL curricular design aimed at triggering learner inquiry in order that they “practice and refine their critical thinking skills” (Martel, 2016, p. 114) and perceive links to real-world practice.

The other six learners (out of 16) did not consider the RIS experience to be immersive, but instead embraced an alternate orientation of it as a language-learning exercise. These learners viewed the RIS primarily through the lens of how it advanced (or not) their language skills. Because they deemphasized or disregarded the role that intellectual investment and accountability played in the RIS, data indicate that this language-centric orientation toward FL learning became an obstacle impeding these learners from perceiving other possible advantages of the RIS. This point is particularly salient in the case of Ellen, who acknowledged feeling compelled to remain critically engaged throughout the RIS, yet stressed that the RIS experience had no incidence on her as a FL learner. She and others in this group adhered to a hierarchical view situating explicit linguistic skills development above all else. Thus, for these learners, a pedagogy favoring the integration of language, content, and multiple skills development encumbered their ability to easily pinpoint which language skill or mode each activity aimed to advance. These findings coincide with several studies (e.g. Chavez, 2011; Drewelow & Finney, 2018; Michelson & Dupuy, 2014; Michelson, 2017) in which learners’ preexisting beliefs and ideologies about FL study persisted even when confronted with alternate instructional approaches. Acknowledging this tendency within FL learning is important as educators and researchers continue to explore and implement innovative curricular alternatives that coincide with the broader academic mission of creating globally and intellectually engaged citizens. The RIS fosters a learning environment in which critical thinking on global issues and meaning-making with the TL are brought to the fore. Such a shift may feel unfamiliar and unsettling for some who adhere firmly to previously ingrained expectations of their classroom as a place purposed first and foremost for cultivating language competency. However, Chavez (2011) asserted that as FL instructional practices increasingly reflect expanded educational goals, over time, learners’ expectations are also likely to evolve. In other words, by being socialized into a new paradigm of FL learning in which content and

context are prioritized and intricately interwoven with language use, learners with strong preferences toward fostering specific language abilities may be more likely to find value in alternate approaches. That said, one limitation of this study is that additional unknown factors such as learners' backgrounds, previous experiences with communities in the RIS, and incoming perspectives, to name a few, may have also contributed to learners' orientation toward the RIS as a language-learning exercise. Future research aimed at exploring and uncovering other potential influencing factors could help reduce barriers for these learners.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the growing body of empirical research illustrating the possibilities of role-immersion pedagogies to maximize learning and engagement, particularly in a FL educational setting. The RIS created the circumstances for a holistic immersive experience for intermediate FL learners by challenging them to engage critically with real-world topics in conjunction with practicing advanced cognitive and language functions. As learners were afforded opportunities to become active participants in an imagined real-world realm, many of them moved beyond passively complying with academic and teacher-driven norms, and instead opted to make situated decisions regarding how to act and express themselves, which a majority perceived to mirror real-life endeavors. As such, the RIS addresses the appeal for FL curricula to nurture in learners a critical orientation by activating their inquiry and engagement with complex and relevant topics (Cammarata, 2016b). Cultivating thinking-rich academic environments are particularly important in lower-level FL courses, as such an emphasis has not historically been a principal focus (Menke & Paesani, 2019). Doing so may create a broader path for all learners to develop language proficiency while also cultivating in them the “intellectual skills necessary [. . .] to become capable autonomous thinkers and critically minded reflective citizens” (Cammarata, 2016a, p. xii), a vision embraced in FL education and across disciplines, both within and beyond higher education institutional settings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Political and Law Enforcement Characters

Characters	Character agendas
Mexican President	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit maquiladora workers' right to strike • Renew Merida Initiative
Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage collaboration among Mexican participants • Limit maquiladora workers' right to strike
Juarez Chief of Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate violence in Juarez • Fire corrupt police officers and obtain funds to hire new officers
Mayor of Juarez	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate \$228 million budget • Pressure the U.S. to provide funds to stop drug trafficking

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine stance on bi-national city
U.S. President	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure U.S. border security • Do not legalize drugs in the U.S. • Determine stance on Merida Initiative • Allocate \$500 million budget
U.S. Secretary of State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote productive options for U.S. • Renew Merida Initiative
U.S. Drug Enforcement Agent (secret agenda)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify a strategy that appears to combat drug trafficking • Ensure (secretly) that the Zeta drug cartel continues operations/paying you bribes
Mayor of El Paso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure violence from cartels does not infiltrate El Paso • Determine stance on bi-national city
United Nations Representative (2 participants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate summit meetings and document participants' provisions • Promote peaceful solutions

Civilian Characters

Characters	Character objectives
Mexican poet and activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support legalization of drugs • Encourage strategies that eliminate violence
Resident of Lomas de Poleo neighborhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convince others you own Lomas de Poleo neighborhood • Convince others to vote against the bi-national city • Remain on your neighborhood land at any cost
Zaragoza family member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convince others that you own Lomas de Poleo neighborhood • Sell the Lomas de Poleo neighborhood land to the Global Contractor and build a bi-national city on this land
Global Contractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy the Lomas de Poleo land from the Zaragoza family to build the bi-national city • Garner the El Paso and Juarez mayors' support for the bi-national city
Mexican maquiladora factory worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the grave working conditions in the maquiladora factories • Increase your salary and improve working conditions • Advocate for workers' right to strike
News reporter, La Jornada Mexican	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage controversial quotes by participants for your News Flashes

newspaper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a 90-second provocative news flash covering relevant happenings after each summit meeting
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Description of topics

Topic	Description
The bi-national city	A potential city to be situated across both border cities (El Paso, United States and Juarez, Mexico). Would include a six-lane highway, new hotels, retail shops, and development areas for new maquiladora factories.
Maquiladora factories	Factories located in border cities that employ primarily women and are characterized by extremely low wages and unsafe and unsanitary working conditions. Women working at the maquiladoras are also often targets of violence.
Lomas de Poleo neighborhood	A longstanding neighborhood in Juarez. The construction of a bi-national city would require this land and the displacement of its residents. A dispute exists regarding who holds rights to this land, the Zaragoza family or the neighborhood residents.
Merida Initiative	A United States pledge of funds (\$1.5 billion) for training and resources (i.e. aircrafts and drug detection tools) allocated to Mexico to curb drug trafficking at the border.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

1. Share your overall impression of the simulation (likes/dislikes; anything that stood out to you; general thoughts).
2. What is the most significant thing you learned during this simulation?
3. Talk about the experience of adopting a character for the simulation. What did you like/dislike? What stood out to you about becoming a character?
4. Share how this simulation affected (positively or negatively) your Spanish language abilities.
5. Share any additional comments.