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USNA Students Get Their Spanish into Ship Shape with iLrn™

Silvia Peart is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at the United States Naval Academy (USNA) in Annapolis, Maryland, where she has been teaching for five years. USNA midshipmen (male and female) have a demanding course load, so the academy's teachers are particularly attuned to helping them learn effectively and efficiently. For Silvia, that has meant using the Cuadros series of textbooks from Cengage Learning, accompanied by iLrn™: Heinle Learning Center, an all-in-one course management system with unique communication tools that encourage students to use language outside of the classroom.

COURSE STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPANTS

The USNA core curriculum is designed to qualify students for practically any career field in the Navy or Marine Corps. All students in the Humanities are required to take four semesters of a language, unless they take a placement test that exempts them from one or more classes. Silvia's intermediate-level Spanish course is primarily filled with students who recently completed the introductory course.

Silvia and her colleagues were introduced to iLrn when reviewing options that would allow students to transition easily from introductory to intermediate Spanish, and use a single online platform. "The idea was to have a cohesive set of teaching and learning resources and be able to recycle vocabulary and grammar structures while providing students with clear explanations, vocabulary practice, and a variety of activities. We believed that *Cuadros* and iLrn would allow us to accomplish those objectives," says Silvia.

THE CHALLENGES

According to Silvia, the biggest challenge for students at the intermediate Spanish level is integrating the various skills that they learned earlier. "At the introductory level students learn vocabulary, grammar, and cultural aspects of the language, but language isn't simply a collection of separate elements," says Silvia. "At the intermediate level, students have to be able to apply those skills to produce the language orally and in writing. They know the vocabulary and the grammar rules, but they often have trouble when they attempt to put it all together."

She continues, "Cultural factors affect Spanish, and there is significant variation within Spanish societies. Military personnel should be able to "read" the degree of formality needed in a given situation. This is a very important skill in order to navigate certain Latin American societies. Determining the appropriate degree of formality means not only taking into account who is speaking to whom, where, and for what purpose, but also calls for at least some knowledge of the social context in which the language is needed. A grammatical mistake can be forgiven

continued

CHALLENGES

- **Teaching Spanish requires instructors to cover multiple skills** — reading, writing, listening, speaking, and culture
- **Students often have difficulty integrating concepts** such as vocabulary and grammar into cohesive sentences and paragraphs when they write and speak.
- **Students need abundant, varied practice** to build language skills and confidence.

SOLUTIONS

- iLrn: Heinle Learning Center
- Long, Sheri Spaine, María Carreira, Sylvia Madrigal Velasco, and Kristin Swanson, *Cuadros*

RESULTS

- **Instructors can target discrete skills and tailor assignments** to the needs of students, with diverse tools such as voice-enabled activities, a collaboration tool to encourage writing and speaking practice, pronunciation and vocabulary exercises, and grammar tutorials.
- **Students learn and integrate skills** with many of the same resources that allow instructors to teach the skills. Voice-enabled activities allow students to record and hear their own speech, building their confidence. Students can hear pronunciations by clicking on terms in the iLrn eBook. "Share It!," a class collaboration tool, engages students in communicating in Spanish outside of class.
- **Varied, auto-graded exercises promote the practice necessary for skill development.** Students can see their correct and incorrect responses, which encourages additional study as needed.

“Share It!’ is easy to use and very effective in engaging students to communicate in the target language. It improved their oral and writing skills, especially in using transitions from sentence to sentence, and helped build their self confidence.”

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from these communities, as they have the understanding that Spanish is not the individuals’ first language. However, a cultural misunderstanding is not forgiven as easily. Our students, like many students in any university, will work globally, so they need to understand the cultural layers within the language.”

Silvia also must tailor her teaching to accommodate variations in students’ language background and proficiency. In addition, engaging students, while helping them study effectively, is always on her mind. “We do our best to maximize and enhance every possibility for students to learn whatever it is that they need to learn.”

THE RESULTS

With iLrn, students can access their textbook online as well as other resources that guide them to success in the course. For instance, they can hear the correct pronunciation of a vocabulary term by simply clicking on it. When they complete an iLrn activity, they can submit their answers and immediately see their score as well as their correct and incorrect responses.

iLrn has activities that ask students to record their voices, which Silvia assigns in part to help students prepare for formal oral assessments. She listens to the recordings and offers feedback, all within iLrn.

Silvia’s students are more engaged in learning activities with iLrn. “iLrn offers many tools to assist them as they study and review for exams. They have pre-tests and post-tests that allow them to identify weaknesses. They have flashcards, and they have activities to complete outside of class,” she says. Students review grammar and vocabulary before they come to class, which allows class time to be more productive. “I still discuss the grammar, vocabulary, and cultural factors, but we can be more efficient with the time. We can put the language to use. It’s not a passive class where they are just taking notes or doing drills. It’s more about producing the target language,” she says.

“iLrn offers a variety of activities and versatile tools that allow me to tap into different language skills,” says Silvia. “I can focus on grammar points if I need to, but then later I can focus on oral skills, writing skills, or listening skills. iLrn allows instructors to do what they need to do to help their students succeed.”

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