

# IMPROVING LINGUISTIC PROGRESS IN STUDY ABROAD BY LINKING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND CULTURAL IMMERSION: USING THE CEFR AS A LEARNING TOOL IN CASA-SEVILLA

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## Abstract

Cultural and linguistic immersion in study abroad programs often ends up being limited to physical exposure to the culture and language. After evaluating our program (Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad CASA-Sevilla) through an action research process, we decided that linguistic and cultural immersion and learning should go together both inside and outside the classrooms. That meant changing the approach our instructors and professors used in their classes and the design and contents of extra-classroom activities. This change in didactic approach involved a radical change in the students' role in their own learning process. The students became protagonists of their own learning process, not passive witnesses to linguistic or cultural experiences. To support this, we adapted the CEFR<sup>1</sup> (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) proficiency scales to evaluate the student's linguistic skills. Each student assesses his/her own skills using the same scales and rubrics as the instructors. Once the student and instructors are aware of the student's main cultural and linguistic needs we design a structure of support classes and individual mentoring that can best help the student achieve his/her goals. This process involved turning the CEFR standards into a teaching tool in helping our students improve their five linguistic skills. Our framework also helps our instructors facilitate the students' linguistic and cultural learning in an orderly, stepwise manner. The success and effectiveness of our adaptation of the CEFR for linguistic goals encouraged us to begin the creation of a similar Common Framework for Intercultural Learning and to consolidate other dimensions of the program into a single, integrated active learning model.

Keywords: Linguistic progress, active learning, action research, linguistic progress, skills, intercultural competence, CEFR.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The CASA-Sevilla Study Abroad program<sup>2</sup> was founded in 2015, heir to a previous program initially established by the University of Michigan and Cornell University in 1984. The University of Pennsylvania joined the program in 1991. For three decades, our program was based on a combination of classes at the University of Sevilla, classes taught by the program's own faculty, homestays with local families, cultural activities, and an administrative and support center with faculty and staff that took care of the students' academic and everyday life needs. In 2014, when the University of Michigan left the program, we started a process of self-evaluation which helped us conclude that linguistic and cultural immersions was not working as efficiently as we had wished. The staff and faculty, led by Professor Davydd Greenwood, engaged in an action-research project [1] to evaluate the previous pedagogical and organizational design and suggest changes and improvements<sup>3</sup>.

The contents of this presentation are complemented by the papers given by Davydd Greenwood "Enhancing Intercultural Learning through Active Pedagogy, Program Integration, and Individualized Student Mentoring: the CASA-Sevilla Program". and Eva Infante "Increasing Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad through Active Pedagogy: The Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad (CASA)-Sevilla Pilot Program"

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp)

<sup>2</sup> CASA is a non-profit consortium of ten leading research universities formed in July 2014 for the purpose of organizing and delivering rigorous education abroad programs in collaboration with leading world universities. CASA member institutions are: Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Trinity College, Pennsylvania and Vanderbilt.

<sup>3</sup> This work has been documented in a co-authored monograph (in English and Spanish) that is available on request from Eva Infante Mora, Resident Director, CASA-Sevilla at [eva@sevilla.casa.education](mailto:eva@sevilla.casa.education).

## **2 EVALUATION OF LINGUISTIC PROGRESS IN OUR PREVIOUS PROGRAM**

Linguistic and cultural immersion are important aspects of most study abroad programs. Indeed, most students participating in them claim that speaking the language and integrating into the local culture are their main objectives as they enroll in such programs. This does not necessarily mean either the programs or the students actually place linguistic and cultural immersion at the real center of the experience of living and studying abroad as they have many other motives for being abroad. For many years, we were satisfied with our program's effectiveness regarding our students' linguistic and cultural progress. Most students were willing to learn and improve their linguistic and cultural competence and the program offered them effective tools and opportunities to achieve their goals. Nevertheless, we realized in recent years that the profiles and interests of our students were changing dramatically. The constant use of new technologies and social media networks in English, together with the students' incessant touring around Europe (in English), made the students' experience of living in Seville look more like tourism with the benefits of a bit of linguistic and cultural experience than like an actual linguistic and cultural immersion process. The results were disappointing.

Once it was agreed that the results were not the desired and expected ones, we tried to find which parts of our program could and should be modified to make it more efficient. We already knew something about the aspects beyond our program that had become obstacles for the students' linguistic progress. By means of the action-research process, we found the following internal aspects of our program that did not help the students' linguistic progress:

There was a separation between linguistic and cultural immersion and progress. Both appeared as desirable objectives for our students, but they did not link closely in our activities or, in the students' work and assignments. Moreover, our evaluation criteria did not measure linguistic and cultural progress during the semester effectively.

There were a lot of obstacles between the expressed intentions of students when joining the program and the reality of their everyday life in Seville. Actually, they spent little time speaking Spanish with native speakers. Most of them did a lot of travelling around Europe with American peers and most of their social gatherings and activities were held in English and they lived on the internet in English for many hours a day.

The program gave or offered students instruction, information, cultural activities and assessment, but they rarely felt responsible to be the protagonists of their learning process. They assumed their linguistic progress was a "logical" consequence of taking lessons and being passively exposed to the language in classes and everyday life. In addition, the students lacked strategies and tools for improving their linguistic skills. Neither the program nor their universities taught them how to learn or improve a language.

Our own program activities, classes and assessment criteria were organized around the idea of an average college student, regardless of individual needs, learning styles and interests.

Language instruction and guidance used to focus on the students' use of grammar structures and vocabulary, as well as on improving written expression during the orientation sessions. Insufficient attention and assessment was given to helping students improve the five basic skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing and interacting).

After an initial four-week period in which an orientation seminar (based on language and culture instruction) was conducted, there was not further assessment or monitoring of the students' linguistic progress during the semester.

## **3 THE CHANGES**

Identifying problems and drawbacks (and placing blaming for any failures) is easier than finding solutions and, more importantly, putting those solutions into practice. Most of the program faculty were used to a pedagogical approach based on teacher-centered instruction and so, most were not familiar with the new current tools (rubrics, assessment criteria, online mentoring, etc). Most students were and still are used to a passive approach to their learning process, based on their acquisition of knowledge and on a very disengaged exchange of homework and tasks with their instructors.

Furthermore, there were also important staff and budget limitations that forced us find feasible rather than ideal solutions<sup>4</sup>.

The most important change we applied is that cultural and linguistic progress interacts in the students' learning process. They interact in every activity in which students are engaged, in and out of the classroom. Cultural immersion requires being able to use intercultural competence. The students' homestays, cultural visits, work with community organizations are not mere complements to language instruction but good opportunities to face cultural and linguistic challenges. Students are given both problem-based assignments to foster individual research and active learning as well as tools and keys to face intercultural and linguistic obstacles and challenges.

Additionally, we changed our pedagogical approach. In our new program, the student is placed at the center of his/her own learning process. Linguistic progress is based on five basic skills<sup>5</sup>, which are involved in most activities, both in and out of the classroom. This involves new roles and objectives, both for instructors and students. The students are required to assume responsibility on their own progress. Faculty and staff not only teach and organize, but also become facilitators of the students' learning both when they plan and organize the contents of classes and activities and when they monitor and assess the students' progress.

Our next modification involved the treatment of assessment. On the one hand, summative assessment gives faculty valuable information about the student's progress at the end of the program by comparing it to a learning standard. However, it only focuses on the outcome of the learning process, and therefore it does not help the student improve his/her performance and progress during the program. On the other hand, formative assessment is expected to give students valuable insight to acknowledge his/her strengths and weaknesses as a language learner. It can also give faculty beneficial feedback to help each student improve his/her competence in the five linguistic skills. Our decision was to overlap both evaluation criteria by using formative assessment during the program and summative assessment at the end of it. In both, we use our adaptation of the CEFR.

The final change we have implemented concerns the employment of a linguistic support system. We are aware that most students are not accustomed to this new pedagogical approach when learning Spanish as a foreign language. They can be lost and confused about their language learning challenges and how to face them successfully. Therefore, our program designed a system of constant individual support and mentoring during the term. First, the students attend classes on language and intercultural learning during the first three weeks of the program. Once these classes finish, they are divided into small groups (4-5 students) based on linguistic competence and needs. Each group works with a language instructor who helps them improve in their five linguistic skills. This instructor becomes the student's mentor as far as his/her linguistic progress is concerned. Moreover, each student's work, reflections and progress is constantly monitored online by the staff and faculty by using the course platform "Blackboard"<sup>6</sup>.

## **4 LINGUISTIC PROGRESS IN THE CASA-SEVILLA PROGRAM**

We modified our pedagogical linguistic and cultural model from giving information and assessment to making the student the protagonist of his/her learning experience because significant linguistic progress does not take place without the students' involvement and commitment. Linguistic and cultural learning are actively involved in all the activities the students do in our program.

### **4.1 Initial evaluation of students' linguistic competence. Self-assessment**

In order to help each student improve in his/her linguistic competences, we need to know each student's strengths and weaknesses in each of the five skills as well as the student's own perception of them. For this purpose, we use an adaptation of the CEFR.

During the first week in Seville, the students are given tests on their linguistic competences: writing, for which the students are asked to explain, describe, give opinion, react, use vocabulary in context and complete sentences; reading, which is based on texts with cultural information about Spain and

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<sup>4</sup> Further explanation of the process can be found at: Eva Infante "Increasing Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad through Active Pedagogy: The Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad (CASA)-Sevilla Pilot Program"

<sup>5</sup> Speaking, listening, writing, reading and interacting.

<sup>6</sup> <https://blackboard.cornell.edu/webapps/login/>

Seville; and listening, for which they watch a video documentary about the history of Seville and answer questions on comprehension and personal reactions. They also have interviews with our faculty to assess their oral expression and interaction which we record on video. For the evaluation of competence in each of the five skills, we use rubrics based on the CEFR to assess each student's level.

During the second week in Seville, the students are given rubrics to self-assess their own proficiency. An example of a rubric to self-assess listening comprehension can be found below:

*Fig. 1 Rubric for self-assessment of listening comprehension.*

LISTENING COMPREHENSION	1	2	3	4
I can understand simple phrases about me, my family, people I know when they speak to me clearly and slowly.				
I can understand common words and phrases about personal information, likes, free time, studies. I can understand the relevant information in short messages and announcements.				
I can understand clear "standard" speech about everyday life, free time, school. I can understand the main ideas from radio or television programs when they talk about topics that I am familiar with or that I'm interested in when they speak clearly and slowly.				
I can understand longer pieces of speech and lectures about complex topics I know about. I can understand most of the information from TV programs and I can follow most of the story in films and TV shows.				
I can understand spoken language even when it is not clearly structured and when ideas and thoughts are not expressed in an explicit way. I can understand films and TV shows without much effort.				
I can understand any kind of spoken language, both live and in the media. I can understand a native speaker who speaks fast if I have some time to get used to the accent.				

EXPLAIN YOUR EXPERIENCES AND DIFFICULTIES WITH THIS SKILL:
DO YOU NEED EXTRA HELP TO IMPROVE THIS SKILL? EXPLAIN.

*Fig. 2. Contrast between the students' self -assessment of their linguistic competence and our faculty's evaluation of their competence.*

	COINCIDENCE BETWEEN THE STUDENTS' AND OUR FACULTY'S EVALUATION	PESSIMISTIC ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS	OPTIMISTIC ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS
LISTENING COMPREHENSION	42.84 %	42.84 %	14.32 %
READING COMPREHENSION	52.36 %	19.04 %	28.6 %
WRITTEN EXPRESSION	33.32 %	9.52 %	57.16 %
ORAL EXPRESSION	28.56 %	33.32 %	38.32 %
ORAL INTERACTION	42.84 %	42.84 %	14.32 %

## 4.2 Language classes

We are aware that our students need to be given instruction and tools to be able to change their approach to learning a foreign language. During the first three weeks in Seville, they attend language classes which focus on the following:

- Helping them cope with the linguistic challenges (readings, interviews, use of specific vocabulary, etc.) in their work in the three cultural modules: Understanding Art and Art History; Understanding History and the impact of the Past in the Present; and Understanding Society and Culture.
- Giving them and practicing strategies to improve the five linguistic skills.
- Showing them how and where to find materials that they can use in their learning process.
- Giving them tools and information to improve their intercultural competence, based on their everyday experiences (interpreting gestures, non-verbal communication, local cultural keys, etc.)
- Helping them get acquainted with the phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical features of Andalusian Spanish.

## 4.3 Linguistic Mentoring

After the initial evaluations (faculty assessment and self-assessment), the students are divided into small groups of 4-5 students based on their results (usually, from B1- to C1 in the CEFR scale). Each group is led by a linguistic mentor from our faculty. They meet in class twice a week (1 hour writing, 1 hour speaking) for eight weeks. The students are given four assignments related to local culture in which they must use the five linguistic skills. Mentors help the students prepare their assignments and assess their written (compositions, reports, stories, opinions...) and spoken productions (oral presentations and discussions on the topics) both in class and online via Blackboard.

To encourage students to assume responsibility, we try to help them be as independent as possible in their learning process. The mentors' corrections and comments are meant to give the students direction on how to improve their writing or speaking, not just correcting grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation mistakes. This close contact with the mentors is highly valued by our students in their final evaluations of the program. Finding immediate and individual help to solve linguistic problems and challenges fosters their progress in all skills. We consider this linguistic mentoring key to our students' success. It is especially noticeable in the students with lower levels of linguistic competence.

## 4.4 Midterm and final evaluation

Self-awareness of linguistic progress and difficulties is very important in our program. The students are given the self-assessment rubrics after two months. After this period, they have enough linguistic experience (university classes, life with the Spanish family, experiences with native speakers, etc.) to re-evaluate their linguistic skills. This gives our staff and faculty valuable information to know if the student is facing difficulties and needs help or orientation in certain skills or situations. It also helps the student re-formulate his/her linguistic goals and the strategies and tools he uses to achieve them.

At the end of the term, the students take tests on the five skills and self-assess their progress. Their results are compared with the results in their initial evaluation to assess their progress using the CFER scales. In our final evaluation of their linguistic progress we include assessment of the following aspects: the progress between their initial and final evaluation; their cultural and linguistic assignments and work with the mentors; their individual cultural research project; and their final portfolio. All of them offer valuable information about their linguistic progress throughout the term.

## 4.5 Difficulties

Most students are not used to our pedagogical approach, which places them at the center of the learning process and involves assuming the responsibility of their linguistic and cultural progress. For some students it takes time to adapt to the new system and its requirements. This was especially true in our first semester using the new system, many students were not fully aware of what was expected from them. In spite of this, the final results were far better than in previous terms using the prior pedagogical approach. We saw we were on the right track but we needed to make some adjustments in the classes, assessments, orientation, activities, monitoring, etc. to make our system more efficient.

Heritage learners -students who come from Spanish speaking families or environments whose Spanish is native or very advanced- pose another challenge for our program. We must evaluate each case of a heritage learner individually to assess how we can help the student improve in his/her linguistic and cultural skills. In most cases, the students are fluent enough in oral skills but they need help to improve their written expression. Also, some advanced students (B2+, C1) may feel comfortable with their oral and written skills in Spanish since they can communicate in Spanish without important problems. They sometimes do not feel challenged enough to improve their skills. In these cases, individual mentoring and the use of the CFER scales and descriptors are of great help to advise the students on how and what to improve.

## 5 OUR ADAPTATION AND USE OF THE CEFR SCALES AND DESCRIPTORS.

To obtain our goals, our program needed a framework to assess the students' linguistic skills. We needed a tool that both students and faculty could use easily. It had to be both flexible, to adapt to our needs, and accurate to give precise, continuous information about the students' progress. During the action research project that helped us make decisions about the new structure and contents of the program, we decided that the CEFR offered us a very useful framework that had proved effective in teaching foreign languages in Europe in the last decade. However, we found two major difficulties. Most of our faculty were not used to the scales, terms and rubrics of the CEFR. Besides, using the original tests, descriptors and evaluation criteria of the CEFR, which were aimed issuing certificates of language skills, was complex and time consuming for us. We needed a simplified version of the framework that could help both students and faculty evaluate linguistic skills.

We reduced the number and built easier to understand descriptions of the different levels of the five skills and laid out a choice of four possible answers; from 1 -Incapable of doing the tasks described- to 4 -Fully capable of doing the tasks-. The six descriptions of tasks correspond to the six levels (from A1 to C2). The result in each skill is a number that must reflect the student's command of the skill within a scale.

*Fig.3 Rubric for self-assessment of writing.*

WRITING	1	2	3	4
I can write short simple texts, like postcards, greetings, e-mails. I can fill in forms with personal details.				
I can write short notes and messages about my life, interests and needs. I can write a simple personal letter.				
I can write simple texts on familiar topics or about personal interests. I can describe people, places. I can explain experiences and opinions. I can narrate stories and events in the present and in the past.				
I can write detailed texts on a wide range of topics. I can write essays and reports, giving information and presenting opinion about a topic. I can write texts highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.				
I can write clear and well-structured texts. I can express my points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in letters, essays or reports.				
I can write clearly and smoothly and in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles. I can write like an educated native speaker.				

EXPLAIN YOUR EXPERIENCES AND DIFFICULTIES WITH THIS SKILL:
DO YOU NEED EXTRA HELP TO IMPROVE THIS SKILL? EXPLAIN.

Fig. 4 Scale for results in the skills. Self assessment.

24	C2
23	C1+
22	C1
21	B2+
20	B2
19	B1+
17-18	B1
15-16	B1-

The results of the students' self-assessment do not differ much from OUR faculty's evaluation of their skills by means of tests and interviews. Many students are pessimistic about their oral skills, especially about Listening Comprehension and Oral Interaction. The biggest difference is in their assessment of their written skills. 57.16 % of students are "too optimistic" about their writing. In their midterm self-assessment, they show a more accurate view of their skills and difficulties.

Fig. 5. Contrast between the students' self -assessment of their linguistic competence and our faculty's evaluation of their competence. Initial evaluation (Fall 2015, Spring 2016, Fall 2016).

	COINCIDENCE BETWEEN THE STUDENTS' AND OUR FACULTY'S EVALUATION	PESSIMISTIC ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS	OPTIMISTIC ASSESSMENT BY STUDENTS
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Fig. 6. Students' priorities for linguistic support by the program by skills.

SKILL	FIRST PRIORITY. PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
ORAL INTERACTION	32.39 %
ORAL EXPRESSION	26.76 %
WRITTEN EXPRESSION	21.12 %
READING COMPREHENSION	11.26 %
LISTENING COMPREHENSION	8.45 %

The use of our adaptation of the CEFR has proved highly effective for our program. It gives our faculty valuable information to adapt our activities, materials and the contents of our language classes to the students' needs and difficulties. It also provides useful information to help individual students overcome difficulties in the learning process. The students also are fully aware of their difficulties and progress throughout the term.

This effectiveness of the CEFR in the students' linguistic progress led us to design a new instrument; "The Common Framework for Intercultural Learning"<sup>7</sup>. This tool is meant to help staff and faculty monitor the students' progress in their intercultural competences, linking the strengths of the CEFR approach to the broader array of social and cultural competence.

<sup>7</sup> Described by Davydd Greenwood in the paper "Enhancing Intercultural Learning through Active Pedagogy, Program Integration, and Individualized Student Mentoring: the CASA-Sevilla Program".

## **6 A HOLISTIC VIEW OF LINGUISTIC PROGRESS. INTEGRATION OF ALL PROGRAM ELEMENTS INTO THE NEW PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH**

All aspects of our program are engaged with both the linguistic and cultural progress of our students. In our previous design, all our activities and assignments were intended to offer the students the opportunity to learn in and from them. However, the students were mere recipients of cultural information and cultural and linguistic experiences. They could easily waste the opportunity to learn by not getting actively involved. In the new structure of our program, we designed activities that required the student's active involvement before, during and after the activities.

### **6.1 Experiential learning and linguistic progress**

Direct contact with real cultural and linguistic situations and experiences is the core of our pedagogical approach. Using the information they learn in the classroom to research on cultural issues gives our students the possibility to interact with native speakers in real communication situations. This involves using linguistic and intercultural skills that pose challenges and difficulties which should result in linguistic and cultural learning. Our program tries to foster active learning in the following settings:

#### **6.1.1 Homestays**

Living, sharing time and experiences with a local family is one of the best opportunities for linguistic interaction and intercultural learning. Nevertheless, we realized that most students were not taking advantage of this golden opportunity. They were spending less and less quality time with the host family, usually limited to sharing meals in front of the TV. The families were becoming mere providers of meals and services, thus minimizing the impact of the homestay in the students' linguistic and cultural learning. In our new design, host families have been instructed to become part of the students' learning experience. Our assignments and research projects are meant to encourage the students to come out of their room and, most importantly, from the technological bubble where they could avoid facing the challenges and difficulties of direct contact with reality that must result in new learning. Host families are usually the first native speakers at hand to put into practice the research tools that students are given in their classes. Doing formal and informal interviews is an important part of these research tools, so linguistic interaction is guaranteed. Most situations in which the students must use their intercultural competence also take place in their interaction with the host family.

The students' final portfolio includes reflections on the impact of the homestay in their learning process. In the three semesters our revised program has been running, most students value their homestay as one of the most valuable experiences in their learning process.

#### **6.1.2 Community Organizations**

Our students spend two hours a week doing supervised work for local community organizations as part of their active learning project. They must use their linguistic skills to be able to cope with the work assigned (usually oral interaction with beneficiaries, co-workers and supervisors). They must also share their reflections on their work and how it affects their linguistic and cultural progress. They are also a golden opportunity for intercultural learning.

#### **6.1.3 Cultural visits and study tours**

Cultural immersion and tourism are completely different experiences. Cultural immersion requires the student's active involvement in the activity by means of assignments and tasks before, during and after the experience. Linguistic skills are involved in the whole process. Before the activity, they must elicit information from readings, lectures and videos. Students are encouraged to ask questions and participate during the visits in order to get as much information as possible. They will need this information for their reflections after the activity, which are monitored online by the staff and faculty. We try to offer students activities and visits in which cultural and linguistic interaction is required, assuming they can (should) visit other places of interest on their own.

### **6.2 Personal projects. The portfolio**

The student's own individual interests and preferences are an important part of the learning process if we want them to research and learn continuously during their immersion experience. These interests reflect in two important tools in our program: a research project and the portfolio.



### 6.2.1 *The individual personal research project*

All our students must choose a topic of their interest connected with their cultural experience in Seville. They must use research techniques to deepen their knowledge and understanding of an aspect of Spanish life and culture. All five linguistic skills are involved in this process. We encourage our students to choose topics connected with both his/her interests and with Spanish life nowadays. Interaction with native speakers is a mandatory part of their research. They must present a written outline of their project and give an oral presentation on the contents to the faculty and staff. Therefore, they get linguistic and cultural feedback to improve their projects.

### 6.2.2 *The Portfolio*

The students are required to present an E-Portfolio at the end of the term (in Wix format). They include their reflections on all the learning opportunities during the semester, as well as their personal research project. The texts in the portfolio are assessed by the language faculty and become part of the final summative evaluation of the student's work and progress.

## **6.3 The Learning Commitment. A list of personal goals, strategies and tools**

Students are used to be given courses syllabi that establish the objectives, assignments and evaluation criteria. This usually helps them stay focused to meet their objective: getting a good grade in the class. In the quest for the good grade, the student is supposed and expected to learn about the contents of the course. We consider the student's cultural and linguistic immersion in Spain and in Spanish his/her most important course during the semester. We ask the student to elaborate a list of cultural, personal and linguistic goals to be achieved during the semester of immersion. We also ask them to decide which strategies and tools they can use to succeed. It's a serious learning commitment, not with the university or with the program but made by the student with him/herself. These lists are reviewed by the program faculty and are revised jointly with the student during the semester to adapt to the student's reality.

This tool has proved very effective for the serious and consistent students. They become more independent in their linguistic and cultural learning process. It also offers the student a valuable tool for his learning projects in the future.

## **7 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

After three semesters, we can conclude that the new system has helped our students improve their results in the five linguistic skills.

The assessment system based on the CEFR scales has proved very effective in making the students aware of their linguistic strengths and weaknesses, thus helping them decide on their linguistic goals for the semester. It has also contributed to better the design and contents of language classes and individual mentoring.

Our language classes at the beginning of the semester give the students basic notions on language learning strategies, which definitely help the most committed students find ways to improving their skills. We've recently added activities based on the intercultural competence, which have helped students cope with communication obstacles and confusions.

Linguistic mentoring has been one of our most successful tools, especially for the students in the lower scales of proficiency in both written and oral expression. Many of these students have improved their competence from B1- to B2 thanks to their work with their mentors both in class and individually.

Giving linguistic feedback and support in all of the students' projects and activities (personal research project, group research activities, reflections on visits and cultural activities) has provided two major benefits for the students: On the one hand, students are constantly aware of their responsibility to do their best job possible. On the other hand, it gives them directions and tools to improve their oral and written productions.

The learning commitment has become a very effective tool to achieve linguistic progress for the most committed students. We still need to improve it, giving students more support on how to achieve their goals.

We are beginning to work on the intercultural competence as part of the students' immersion. We think the use of an Intercultural Framework in the next semesters will be of great help for both students and faculty.

Finally, it must be said that one of the most successful and efficient pedagogical innovations in our program is that our faculty and staff have become aware of the need to be constantly assessing its strengths and weaknesses in order to improve it every semester.

*Fig. 7. Percentage of students who improved their competence (CEFR scale), by skills. Fall 2015, Spring 2016, Fall 2016.*

SKILLS	IMPROVE	SAME
LISTENING COMPREHENSION	92.95 %	7.05 %
READING COMPREHENSION	73.23 %	40.85 %
WRITTEN EXPRESSION	88.73 %	26.77 %
ORAL EXPRESSION	91.54 %	8.46 %
ORAL INTERACTION	100 %	0 %

*Fig. 8. Contrast between initial and final evaluation of students' skills. Average grades (in a scale of 10). Fall 2015, Spring 2016, Fall 2016.*

SKILL	INITIAL	FINAL	PROGRESS
LISTENING COMPREHENSION	6.95/10	8.6/10	16.5 %
READING COMPREHENSION	7.61/10	8.47/10	8.6 %
WRITTEN EXPRESSION	7.15/10	8.79/10	16.4 %
ORAL EXPRESSION	7.25/10	8.9/10	16.5 %
ORAL INTERACTION	7.12/10	9.1/10	19.8 %

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