



Does *Mi vida loca* Inspire Students to Learn Spanish?

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Abstract: Educators have long touted the use of video for language learning, and series such as *Destinos* or *Sol y viento* have been prepared for Spanish students. Students in Utica College's beginning college-level Spanish courses have enjoyed the BBC's new online interactive drama, *Mi vida loca*, but did the videos enhance their learning of Spanish? Data that attempt to answer that question will be presented.

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Introduction

Videos are considered powerful language-learning tools because of their ability to integrate sound and image (Rubin 1994). In theory, videos should be one of the most effective ways to learn a second language: they illustrate nonverbal communication as well as pragmatic exchanges, real-life observations of culture can be presented, and learners have control over the message. However, in spite of the number of beginning language study videos that have been marketed, there has been little proof that these productions enhance language learning (Salaberry 2001; Herron, York, Corrie, and Cole 2006). In fact, research has shown that the most effective use of video requires special strategies, combining pedagogical aids, such as captions and subtitles, with video (Vanderplank 2010) or using advance organizers to prepare students by

activating background schemata (Herron et al., 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999). Sometimes the same technique yields different results, depending on the video. For example, advance organizers have been shown to be successful for the *French in Action* series, but a similar experiment attempted with *Destinos* showed no significant comprehension enhancement with or without the advance organizers (Thomas 2007). Given this state of affairs, it seems that the language learning video is not a self-contained tool but must be used with a professor's guidance or as supplementary material in a textbook program.

In the long tradition of BBC language-learning programs, *Mi vida loca* was introduced in 2008. It is an Internet-based, interactive Spanish drama provided free and intended for independent study of Spanish. The viewer is the main character, who participates in an adventure through Madrid, Castille, and the Canary Islands, accompanied by brief commentary in English by the series' narrator, who explains vocabulary and grammatical structures as they are used by the other characters. Each of the 21 episodes lasts approximately 10 minutes and is followed by another video, *The Learning Section*, which consists of interactive games, exercises, and videos based on the material presented in the first video. The final component is a test that allows the participant to earn a certificate with a grade that represents his or her mastery of the course content. The program covers much of the material presented in a first semester university course in Spanish, and it provides an excellent review of vocabulary and everyday language use. I have written a study guide for each episode and assigned it as homework in my beginning and intermediate college-level Spanish classes since fall 2008.

The interactive nature of these BBC videos offers an innovative variation on the traditional language-learning soap opera. The direct viewer participation in the plot is a unique twist among the many language-learning videos. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, and

grammatical skills are presented in an interactive way, and in a context within which the learner participates in a drama unfolding in modern Spain. The participant viewer is introduced to Spanish and to Spain as a foreigner in the country, thereby offering a realistic context in which he or she experiences culture firsthand, but as a neophyte.

I initially assigned a few episodes of the series as homework in a first-semester Elementary Spanish I class. Encouraged by students' favorable reaction to the series, as compared to their negative reactions to the listening exercises and video program that accompany our textbook, I integrated more and more episodes into both the first-semester elementary course and the second-semester intermediate course. Students never complained about the *Mi vida loca* assignments. On the contrary, several asked me for the URLs so that they could watch the episodes not assigned as homework. They were inspired by the series, at least to see how it ended. Given their positive reactions, I wished to see whether there was any relationship between viewing these episodes and mastering specific language learning tasks. I was particularly interested in listening comprehension.

Methodology

In January 2011, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects to conduct the experiment in spring 2011 on two classes: the second- semester elementary course (Spanish 2) and the second-semester intermediate course (Spanish 4). Similar experiments were designed for the two classes, but because the courses and the levels of the enrolled students varied considerably, different homework and test questions needed to be designed.

Most students in the Spanish 2 class had already viewed the first six episodes of *Mi vida loca* in Spanish 1, so the group began with Episode 7. Two episodes were assigned as the

listening component for each one of the six homework assignments required in Spanish 2; by the end of the semester, students had finished Episode 18. The homework assignment consisted of watching the episode and answering a series of short-answer questions to check comprehension. In addition, some questions were purely listening or grammar exercises from the Learning Section. Homework was graded for accuracy. The first homework set assigned for Spanish 2 is shown in (1) below.

(1) Episodio 7. La oficina de turismo

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/ep07.shtml>

Learning Section: http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/ep07_pb.shtml

¿A dónde lleva al protagonista Merche?

- A) a la Plaza Mayor
- B) a la oficina de turismo
- C) a la Plaza de Oriente

Según el vídeo, ¿qué plaza está en el centro de Madrid?

- A) la Plaza Mayor
- B) la Plaza de España
- C) la Plaza de Oriente

La tarde es el período del día entre la hora de _____ y el _____.

¿Qué ve el/la protagonista sobre la mesa cuando vuelve a casa?

- A) entradas al museo
- B) dinero
- C) un horario de autobuses

Learning Section: Los comercios tradicionales cierran a mediodía: abren de _____ de la mañana a dos y _____ de la _____, y luego de _____ y media de la tarde a _____ y media de la _____. Cierran los domingos.

Episodio 8. Un billete de ida

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/ep08.shtml>

Learning Section:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/ep08_shtml

Merche va a la casa de su _____ que se llama _____.

¿Por qué se va Merche?

- A) Un hombre la persigue.
- B) Quiere visitar a su amiga.
- C) Quiere hacer turismo.

¿Dónde está Medina de Ríoseco?

- A) en la provincia de Valladolid
- B) en Madrid
- C) cerca de la Plaza de Oriente

PRACTICE. You will find the audio to complete the following in the learning section:

UN BILLETE DE AUTOBÚS

Tipo de billete: _____

Dársena: _____

Salida: 18: _____

Llegada: 21: _____

Precio: 14, _____ €

Subsequent examinations included excerpts from the videos assigned for homework, except the final examination, which had a reading comprehension question. No homework exercise was

repeated on the exams. A variety of question types involving listening comprehension were asked: dictation, interpretation of schedules, and answering personal information based on vocabulary and structures introduced in the video. The examination questions formulated on the first homework shown in (1) are shown in (2) below.

(2) **LISTENING** Listen to the recordings and fill in the blanks with the correct word or number.

1) MUSEO DEL PRADO – HORARIO

Abierto: _____ – domingo.

09:00 – ____: ____

Cerrado: _____

Entrada: _____ €

EL HORARIO: Listen to the departures announcement and write the correct times and platform numbers to match the destination.

18:25	62	18:15	34	52	18:00
HORA	DESTINO	ANDÉN			
17:45	León	_____			
_____	Palencia	41			
18:10	Valladolid	_____			
_____	Benavente	11			
_____	Toledo	_____			

As the questions in (2) indicate, success on the examination is a function of students' understanding of numbers in a real-world context, as they are used on schedules. Many of the topics presented in the *Mi vida loca* series mirrored those of the Spanish 2 course, such as vocabulary of weather, clothes, and travels, and grammatical topics such as *gustar* and the

present perfect tense. Thirteen students participated in the Spanish 2 group.

Because the Spanish 4 class was considerably more advanced, the series was used as a review/refreshers. Unlike the Spanish 2 students, students in Spanish 4 should have seen all the vocabulary and structures in earlier classes. The series content did not reflect the Spanish 4 course content. The experiment for Spanish 4 was similar, yet the entire series was divided into four homework assignments: Episodes 1–5, 6–10, 11–15, and 16–21. Students watched the episodes and answered short questions to demonstrate comprehension. Video segments were included on the exams to test auditory comprehension, and, in some cases, reading comprehension. Eleven students participated in the Spanish 4 group.

At the end of the semester, both groups completed a four-question survey to evaluate their opinions of the series. See Table 1. Microsoft Excel was used to perform Linear Regression and Student's t-test on the homework and corresponding test grades in order to discover any possible relationships. The scores analyzed in this study included only the portions of the homework and examinations that dealt specifically with *Mi vida loca*.

Table 1: Student Opinion Survey for *Mi vida loca*

Did you enjoy watching the *Mi vida loca* episodes this semester?

YES NO

Do you feel that they helped you learn Spanish or reinforced prior knowledge?

YES NO

Would you have liked the course to integrate the series more into the curriculum (for example, use *Mi vida loca* as the course textbook)?

YES NO

Would/will you spend your own time to watch the episodes not assigned for homework in order to see how the series ends?

YES NO

Results and Discussion

The results of the student opinion survey are tabulated in Table 2. This table gives the students' attitudes toward the series as well as their perceptions of its benefit to their learning of Spanish. The vast majority enjoyed watching the programs, a result that corroborates the positive comments that students offered in Spanish classes prior to initiating the experiment. In addition, both experimental groups felt that the series helped them learn or reinforce their Spanish language capabilities. While much of the series' content is quite similar to that of Spanish 2, the preterit and imperfect is not covered in *Mi vida loca*, yet narration in the past is the main theme of Spanish 2.

Table 2: Student Opinion Survey for *Mi vida loca*. % affirmative responses

	SPA2 n=12	SPA4 n=7
Did you enjoy watching the <i>Mi vida loca</i> episodes this semester?	92	86
Do you feel that they helped you learn Spanish or reinforced prior knowledge?	92	100
Would you have liked the course to integrate the series more into the curriculum?	58	43
Would/Will you spend your own time to watch the episodes not assigned for homework in order to see how the series ends?	67	71

Students saw that the series did not coincide well with the material presented in class, with only 58% who would have liked to integrate the series more into the course. The content of Spanish 4 is much more advanced than *Mi vida loca*, and it is a little surprising that the series captured their interest. Most likely, their interest was not related to the Spanish presented in the series, but rather to its storyline. Compared with Spanish 2, even fewer Spanish 4 students

wished to integrate the series more into the course curriculum, which would be impractical as the series does not even touch topics such as the subjunctive, the future, the conditional, etc. Nevertheless, *Mi vida loca* succeeded in at least capturing their interest as shown by the high percentage of students who responded that they would spend their own time to watch the episodes not assigned for homework.

Table 3 presents a summary of the average homework scores and exam scores for each of the five cells of the experiment. A cell is defined as the administration of a homework assignment and its corresponding examination. In each cell, the average homework and examination scores of all the students are given, along with the standard deviation (std dev) of the average. The standard deviation allows us to see how widely dispersed the individual student scores are from the mean: the larger the standard deviation, the wider the range of values dispersed around that average. A quick glance at the numbers in the table shows some very high standard deviations, some more than half of the average. This indicates huge differences among the students' scores.

Table 3: Summary of Homework and Examination Scores

Spanish 2 (n=13)	1	2	3	4	Final
homework average %	85	71	89	92	86
(std dev)	(19)	(35)	(22)	(18)	(30)
examination average %	80	86	88	60	41
(std dev)	(22)	(11)	(20)	(18)	(32)
r	.09	.26	.12	.06	.001
t-test probability	.56	.16	.93	.0002	.0002
Spanish 4 (n=11)					

homework average %	90	84	91		72
(std dev)	(7.5)	(29)	(12)		(38)
examination average %	95	65	85	82	58
(std dev)	(7.5)	(20)	(15)	(18)	(21)
r	.0096	0	.027	.09	.26
t-test probability	.091	.06	.31	.14	.17

In addition, the coefficient of determination, the r value, obtained by simple linear least squares regression, is presented for each cell. The coefficient of determination is a number that indicates the relationship between the scores on the homework and on the examinations: the closer the coefficient is to one, the closer the relationship. It is expected that the numbers studied in this investigation should yield coefficients close to one because such a result would suggest that the better a student does on the homework, the better prepared he or she is to do well on the examination. On the other hand, if the coefficient is close to zero, the two sets of scores are not related. If the data here give coefficients close to zero, such a result means that a student can perform equally well or poorly on the examination, regardless of whether he or she learned anything from the homework.

The Student's t-test probability is also given for each cell. The Student's t-test reflects how similar two groups of measurements are. The lower the Student's t-test probability, the more likely that the two groups of numbers have different means; values below .05 usually indicate that the averages of two sets of numbers are different. In the case studied here, the numbers are not really measuring the same item, that is, they do not represent the scores on the same questions in the homework and examination. However, the same content is being measured, that

is, the questions on the homework and examination in each cell originate from the same *Mi vida loca* episodes. In the case studied here, the Student's t-test compares the learning outcome on the homework with the examinations. In other words, did the students show the same mastery on the examinations as on the homework?

Although Spanish 2 had six homework assignments, each with two episodes, the scores on homework 5 are not included because that assignment was not accompanied by an examination. Exams 3 and 4 of Spanish 4 corresponded to the same homework assignment, namely homework 3. The questions on examinations 3 and 4 were different, but performance was similar. As Table 3 shows, in all but two cells the performance on the examination was lower than on the homework. As shown by the high standard deviations, the scores varied widely. In spite of individual student differences in performance, which will be discussed below, the Student's t-test indicates that the means within each experiment cell (homework and corresponding test) are equivalent, except for the last two cells in Spanish 2. While these t-tests do not compare means on identical sets of questions, they do compare means on question sets based on the same content, that is, the assigned homework episodes. In most cases, students showed the same mastery on the homework as on the examination. As mentioned, two of the means are significantly different: Spanish 2's fourth and final examination cells, as shown by the Student's t-test probabilities =.0002. The performance on those two examinations is significantly lower than on the homework.

This result might be explained by the fact that students completed their homework at an individual pace and could review passages on the video until assured of the best answer. The examination questions, although taken from the learning sections and covering content specifically emphasized in the main videos, were not assigned as homework. These questions

were not based on storyline comprehension, as were most of the homework questions, but rather on understanding schedule information and answering personal questions based on structures introduced in the video or a dictation. During the examination, listening and video segments were only played two or three times. The examination context itself could have also created anxiety, resulting in a weaker performance on the tests compared with on the homework. However, no statistically significant differences for the cells in Spanish 4 nor in the first three cells completed for the Spanish 2 class are observed, so something is unique to the last two cells in Spanish 2.

The two different mean scores can perhaps be better understood by the nature of the questions on the examination. The *Mi vida loca* question on Spanish 2's fourth examination focused on use of the verb *gustar* in a listening comprehension exercise. The verb *gustar* was presented at the end of Spanish 1 and the beginning of Spanish 2, approximately three months before the examination. It was not given as part of the content presented in class for the examination. The final examination question, although formulated as a reading comprehension exercise, focused on the present perfect tense, weather vocabulary, and a map of Spain. Even though the present perfect tense and weather vocabulary had been covered in class as part of the course material, those two themes were especially difficult for students perhaps because they were presented at the end of the semester. The difficulty of the final examination question was compounded by the fact that it required basic knowledge about the geography of Spain, which was drilled only in the *Mi vida loca* episodes. The same question was given on the Spanish 4 final, on which those students gave their worst performance of the entire semester, just as the Spanish 2 students had done. However, the results of the Spanish 4 students were not as poor as those of the Spanish 2 students, nor was the mean grade on the final different from the mean

grade on the corresponding homework assignment. Most likely, the Spanish 4 students' higher competency in the language saved them from the disaster that befell the Spanish 2 students.

The coefficients of determination (r) are all quite low, and one was exactly 0, indicating that there is no relationship between the examination and homework scores, that is, a student who earned a 100% as well as one who received a 0% on the homework could have received the same score on the examination, and in many cases did indeed do so. This is an unexpected result. The working hypothesis to this experiment was that exposure to *Mi vida loca* would enhance student learning of Spanish, but the measurements taken here do not show that enhancement.

The scientific way to test effectiveness is with a control and an experimental group. This investigator initially wished to include a control group, that is, students who would not see the videos, and an experimental group, that is, students who would see the videos and answer the corresponding homework questions. Both groups would answer the same questions on the examinations. However, because the videos used on the examinations were so closely tied to the situations, characters, and settings in the main videos, the use of a control group was abandoned for ethical reasons: Those students might have been at a significant disadvantage with respect to the experimental group, and such an experimental design might have resulted in poor test grades if the students had not had the opportunity to see the videos. The results, though, indicate that some students who performed exceptionally well on the homework did very poorly on the examination and vice versa. In fact, one student who did not even hand in the homework, and earned a zero, answered the test questions without error. This suggests that other factors besides watching the video and successfully answering homework questions are relevant, such as level of Spanish, prior background knowledge, and a better ear for listening.

Listening assessment by use of videos has not been well-investigated. Coniam (2001) concluded that listening comprehension should not be evaluated by video unless the video offers aids to comprehension not available in a soundtrack alone. Wagner (2007) found that test-takers watched video dialogue texts at a higher frequency than monologue videos. In the present study, the first four cells were examined by use of either video or sound file, and it is not clear whether the video offered any enhancement to comprehension or not. However, for both classes, the examination question that gave students the greatest difficulty was that of the final examination. That question had no recording, either sound or video; it was a reading comprehension question.

This experiment does not show that watching *Mi vida loca* resulted in acquisition of linguistic skills, in particular, enhanced listening comprehension skills. Perhaps the design of the instruments was not sensitive enough to capture any acquisition that did occur. Thus, it is risky to affirm that absolutely no language learning occurred. However, in general, the experiment does not clearly show that new technologies, especially video, result in pedagogical benefits in second language learning (Salaberry 2001; Herron et al 2006). So, should we abandon the use of video? Like textbooks, workbooks, flashcards, and other more traditional language-learning materials, videos are tools, and *Mi vida loca* is yet another tool, but it cannot compensate for lack of motivation or minimal effort on the part of students. Just as a textbook can be a powerful aid to learning, so can *Mi vida loca* if students become actively engaged in its use. *Mi vida loca* is indeed predicated upon independent learning and obligates the viewer to participate. However, the type of viewing that was demanded in this experiment was probably not of a sufficient intensity to result in language acquisition.

The series can be used in the classroom, although as with all forms of technology, there are potential obstacles. *Mi vida loca* is not available on DVD and the videos cannot be

downloaded to a hard disk. In order to view them properly, a fast Internet connection is necessary. Even so, at times during the day, it is impossible to open them, and the videos to be used on the examinations needed to be accessed hours before the exam in order to avoid possible blackouts during the exam period. This is one reason that the final exam question was changed to a reading comprehension exercise. Nevertheless, the series has quite a bit of flexibility to accommodate different uses. For example, many incidental conversations are included in the videos, but because of their advanced, native-like nature, they are not included in the explanations. In prior semesters, the intermediate Spanish homework exercises demonstrated students' mastery of that vocabulary or their lack thereof. Students could select English subtitles and pick out the translations of the words or expressions asked of them. The learning section also offers grammatical guides that can be downloaded and used in a classroom setting.

What is remarkable about *Mi vida loca* is the student enthusiasm it generates, as evidenced by the favorable percentages in Table 2. Even after the requirement of viewing all episodes in Spanish 4 and all but three episodes in Spanish 2, students were left with positive attitudes about *Mi vida loca*. In some way, the series inspired the students, at least for its entertainment value. Perhaps if the homework assignments had been more rigorous, or if the series content had been actively emphasized as part of the classroom lessons, more pedagogical benefits would have been realized.

Conclusion

Mi vida loca is yet another language-learning video. Its design exploits many of the characteristics that have long been cited as reasons that video should be an effective and superior language learning medium. The unique characteristic of *Mi vida loca* is its interactivity—not only can the viewer repeat vocabulary and grammar exercises as well as video scenes, but also is

the protagonist in the storyline. Based on this experiment, students did enjoy the videos and many said they would even spend their own time to watch them, which is at least evidence of their entertainment value. The results of this experiment, however, are not clear as to how much Spanish the series taught and what the video's role was in conveying that knowledge. Perhaps highly motivated and independent language learners can benefit from *Mi vida loca* more than students who study Spanish as a language requirement, in whose classes, although the series captures their interest, teachers must adapt and reinforce it in order to ensure language learning.

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