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Bringing OBE-PBL to Life in the Multilingual Spanish Classroom: A Qualitative Reflection on Our Curriculum Reform Journey

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Abstract: This paper qualitatively traces a three-year Spanish curriculum shift from grammar focus to an OBE-PBL blended model. Driven by employer feedback and student disengagement, three graduate capabilities, campus tour, email negotiation, cultural brochure, were set and teaching was reverse-engineered around public projects. Teacher talk gave way to facilitation; accuracy yielded to communicative effect. Persistent tensions include coverage anxiety and grading norms, while value is evidenced by voluntary attendance and alumni uptake. Administrative flexibility, collegial support and trust in exit outcomes sustain the reform more than technological novelty.

Keywords: OBE-PBL; Spanish higher education; Outcome-based education; Project-based learning; Qualitative reform

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1. Introduction

For several years the Spanish program followed a syllabus whose implicit logic was both clear and constraining: grammatical forms were introduced in sequence, rehearsed through controlled exercises, and finally assessed in discrete-item tests. The arrangement produced respectable grade distributions, yet it also generated a growing sense of disconnection. Visitors from partner institutions, employers at the annual language fair, and administrative staff who process Erasmus paperwork all reported the same phenomenon: students who had obtained high marks were often reluctant to initiate or sustain spontaneous exchanges when the context departed from the textbook script. Inside the classroom the pattern was equally visible. Learners attended, took notes, photographed the slides, and left. When asked in corridor conversations how they perceived the course, many replied that Spanish felt like "another box to tick" on the way to the degree. Grammatical accuracy had been cultivated; communicative confidence had not.

The university's broader digital transformation strategy intensified rather than resolved the tension. Investment in learning-management systems, mobile-friendly interfaces and data-driven dashboards was announced with legitimate pride, but the technological surplus merely underlined the pedagogic deficit. A sleek platform cannot, by itself, convert declarative knowledge into interactive capacity. Staff-room discussions began to center on a single question: if the institution is willing to equip us with collaborative software, high-speed wireless access and multimedia repositories, why

does the classroom still sound like a recitation of rules that were codified decades ago? The unease was not provoked by technology; it was exposed by it.

Two additional pressures shaped the context. First, labor-market stakeholders repeatedly stated that they needed graduates who could solve immediate, unpredictable problems in the target language: guiding a Spanish-speaking visitor whose flight had been cancelled, renegotiating a service contract by email, or explaining local regulations to an anxious parent at the international office. Second, students themselves, especially those who had returned from Erasmus placements, asked why the course had not prepared them for the contingency and improvisation that characterize real-language use. Their reflections suggested that the syllabus was training them to display knowledge about Spanish rather than to do things with Spanish. The distinction is subtle but decisive, and it underpins the reconceptualization reported in this paper.

Faced with these signals, the teaching team decided to intervene, not by acquiring new hardware, but by re-examining the curricular logic itself. The decision was principled and pragmatic: principled, because the gap between stated graduate attributes and actual learning processes had become intellectually indefensible; pragmatic, because the university already possessed the minimal digital infrastructure necessary for a blended format. What was missing was a coherent pedagogic framework that placed purposeful, public-facing language use at the center of every weekly cycle.

Outcome-Based Education provided the first coordinate. If the program could agree on three exit capabilities, for example, guiding a bilingual campus tour, resolving an administrative problem by email, and producing a cultural guide, then each classroom moment could be judged by its contribution to those capabilities. Project-Based Learning supplied the second coordinate, because it organizes learning around the creation of artefacts or events that are presented to an audience beyond the teacher. The combination suggested a blended rhythm: concise face-to-face input followed by sustained online collaboration, iterative drafting, and a public showcase. No statistical validation was envisaged; the aim was simply to document, in a disciplined qualitative manner, what such a realignment would look, sound and feel like after three academic years.

The present paper therefore offers a descriptive account of the transition. It avoids numerical claims, preferring instead to record recurring situations, typical utterances, and the evolving stance of both teachers and learners. The narrative is intended as a mirror for other program that sense a comparable mismatch but are uncertain about the first practical step. By making the graduate outcome rather than the grammatical item the organizing principle, we moved from a syllabus that celebrated coverage to a workshop that valued encounter, negotiation and revision. Whether the new shape is sustainable, and whether it can survive different institutional temperaments, remains to be seen; what is already observable is that the language now circulates in the room long after the bell has sounded.

2. From unease to decision: The intellectual genesis of an OBE-PBL realignment

Stagnation rarely announces itself with dramatic failure; it seeps in through the quiet repetition of routines that once seemed efficient. For several academic cycles the Spanish strand had achieved respectable grade distributions, yet the equilibrium was fragile. Lectures began on the half-hour with a concise exposition of a grammatical subsystem, proceeded through annotated examples, and concluded with lock-step exercises designed to elicit the target form. Students complied, submitted, and departed. To the external examiner the transcript appeared healthy; to the internal observer the pulse was weakening. Attendance sheets recorded presence, but not sustained intellectual involvement; rubrics celebrated accuracy, yet employers continued to report hesitation when graduates faced unscripted exchanges. The unease was compounded by digital artefacts that magnified the contrast: institutional dashboards celebrated “innovation” while the lived classroom experience remained stubbornly sequential, teacher-centered, and rule-bound. What had once passed for methodological clarity now revealed itself as a defensive enclosure within which both teacher and learner could feel safe, but from which neither could glimpse the contingent reality of language use beyond the campus gates.

The first public symptom of stagnation surfaced during the annual language fair. A regional logistics firm recounted

a routine incident: a Spanish-speaking client arrived to collect merchandise, the appointed graduate interpreter withdrew into silence when the conversation moved from scheduled collection times to an unexpected documentation query, and the transaction had to be re-routed through a bilingual secretary who had never studied Spanish formally. The anecdote was delivered without malice, yet its implications were corrosive. The employer was not criticizing linguistic inaccuracy; he was identifying an absence of strategic composure under conditions of uncertainty. Similar messages arrived from partner institutions, alumni offices, and even academic colleagues who supervised Erasmus placements. The refrain was consistent: our graduates could describe the language, but they could not reliably accomplish tasks with it. Inside the department the mirror was held up during curriculum-review sessions. When asked to list the competencies that a finalist should be able to demonstrate, staff produced inventories of chapters covered, tenses explained, and essay titles set. No one spontaneously mentioned the ability to host a visitor, to re-negotiate a deadline, or to summarize a local regulation for a non-Spanish-speaking peer. The syllabus was measuring its own internal sequence rather than any verifiable external utility.

Student voices, when solicited, confirmed the diagnosis. In anonymous written feedback they praised the clarity of handouts and the punctuality of marking, but in corridor conversations they reduced the course to a credentialing ritual. “Spanish is another box to tick,” became a common refrain. The phrase was not uttered in hostility; it was an accurate description of a structure in which grammatical proof replaced purposeful performance. The digital layer added irony rather than remedy. University slogans celebrated “future-ready graduates” and “technology-enhanced learning”, yet the virtual space replicated the face-to-face asymmetry: weekly folders uploaded by the instructor, downloaded by the students, and seldom revisited [1]. Forums remained empty unless participation points were attached; chat groups filled with administrative queries about deadlines rather than debates about meaning. Technology had increased the speed of transmission without altering the direction of authority.

It was against this background that a collective re-reading of educational traditions began. Outcome-Based Education (OBE) provided an initial coordinate [2]. If the program could agree on a small set of verifiable abilities that a graduate ought to possess, then every pedagogical decision could be judged by its contribution to those abilities. Project-Based Learning (PBL) supplied the second coordinate, because it organizes learning around the creation of artefacts or events that are presented to an audience beyond the teacher. The convergence of OBE and PBL suggested a disciplinary logic in which language is not a curriculum topic to be covered but a resource to be deployed. Grammar would still be taught, yet its relevance would be contingent upon the communicative problem at hand. Assessment would still occur, yet its primary referent would be the quality of the outcome achieved rather than the accuracy of the linguistic display isolated from context.

The department undertook a deliberate process of distillation. Employer interviews, alumni reflections, and faculty debates were sifted for recurring situations in which Spanish might reasonably be expected to function on campus and in the neighboring community. Three capabilities emerged with consistent clarity: first, the ability to host a bilingual visitor for approximately thirty minutes, providing orientation information and responding to spontaneous queries; second, the capacity to resolve a straightforward administrative problem by email (for example, a change in accommodation, a delayed document, or a rescheduled appointment) without reverting to English; third, the production of a short cultural guide (roughly one thousand words) that could be handed to incoming exchange students or local institutions. Each outcome demanded different genres, registers and interactional moves; each was verifiable by an external interlocutor who possessed no professional obligation to the department. Once the triad was accepted, the remaining task was to reorganize time, resources and evaluation so that every student repeatedly rehearsed, revised and ultimately performed these capabilities in public settings [3]. What had begun as a diffuse unease had crystallized into a focused decision: the program would be engineered backwards from the moment in which a graduate stand before a Spanish-speaking interlocutor and is expected to act competently, courteously and without recourse to English. The grammar cathedral would give way to an OBE-PBL workshop in which coverage was subordinated to encounter, and accuracy to agency.

3. Re-designing the semester through OBE-PBL logic

Once the graduate capabilities had been ratified, host a bilingual visitor, resolve an administrative problem by email, and produce a short cultural guide, the syllabus had to be re-engineered so that every week contributed demonstrably to those outcomes. The decision to adopt an OBE-PBL structure was less a cosmetic adjustment than a systemic inversion [4]. Instead of selecting grammatical items and then inserting communicative tasks as illustration, we began with the final performance and traced a reverse path to the first-class meeting. Each term was therefore built around one public-facing project whose completion would be visible to an external audience and whose linguistic, strategic and cultural demands would encapsulate the targeted capability [5]. The remainder of the curriculum was subsequently pruned or re-ordered so that no activity existed merely for its own sake; grammar explanations, lexical inventories and phonetic drills were retained only insofar as they could be justified as resources for the impending project.

The first step in the backward design was to specify the exact nature of the public moment. For the "bilingual visitor" outcome, the culminating event became a ninety-minute campus tour delivered to a mixed group of Spanish-speaking guests from a partner institution. The tour had to include historical background, safety instructions, and spontaneous responses to questions about student services. Because the visitors' schedule was fixed months in advance, the date of the final performance was immovable; all prior deadlines were plotted from that anchor point. The same logic governed the other two terms: the email exchange outcome was verified by an authentic message thread with a Latin-American administrative office that confirmed internship placements, while the cultural guide outcome concluded with a printed brochure handed to incoming Erasmus students during orientation week [6]. In each case the external recipient's expectations were non-negotiable, thereby preventing the project from collapsing into a classroom simulation whose criteria could be relaxed at the last moment.

With the terminus established, the weekly rhythm was constructed as a recurring five-phase cycle rather than as a sequence of topical units. Phase One, lasting twenty to thirty minutes, offered concise conceptual input directly relevant to the impending task: formulaic routines for welcoming guests, genre conventions of institutional emails, or lexico-grammatical resources for describing architectural space. Phase Two moved immediately to collaborative planning; students drafted itineraries, allocated roles, or outlined brochure sections while the instructor circulated as a consultant rather than a source of right answers. Phase Three, conducted largely outside formal contact hours, involved field work: measuring distances for the tour, interviewing librarians about opening hours, or photographing sites for the brochure. Phase Four consisted of rehearsal or iterative drafting in the online environment, where asynchronous peer commentary was mandatory before any material could be submitted to the teacher. Phase Five was the live showing: the tour, the email thread, or the printed brochure, always in the presence of an external stakeholder whose signature or verbal acceptance constituted the minimal condition for success. The cycle then recommenced at a higher level of complexity, ensuring that linguistic accuracy and strategic sophistication were revisited rather than assumed to be cumulative.

The blended architecture that supported this cycle was deliberately minimalist [7]. The existing learning-management system hosted a single folder for each cohort, subdivided into five chronological slots corresponding to the phases described above. No additional plug-ins, analytics packages or proprietary authoring tools were introduced. A common chat group functioned as the informal spine of the process: students posted queries about lexical choice, shared photographs of signage that puzzled them, and coordinated rehearsal times. The instructor's presence in the chat was reduced to daily scheduled windows so that authoritative answers did not drown out peer negotiation. Face-to-face sessions were reserved for high-stakes rehearsal and for collective troubleshooting when a group encountered an impasse. The ratio of physical to virtual contact therefore shifted from the traditional two-hours-in-class-plus-one-hour-at-home to an alternating pattern in which the locus of activity was determined by the nature of the task rather than by the timetable grid.

Pruning the syllabus proved more contentious than installing the cycle. Established topics such as the historical present, the morphology of the past-perfect subjunctive, or the phonetics of inter-vocalic /d/ were retained only when a direct line could be drawn to the forthcoming project. If the campus tour script did not require the past-perfect subjunctive, the item was postponed to a later term whose project might activate it. Conversely, routine formulae for polite refusal,

previously relegated to a supplementary handout, were promoted to center stage because the external visitor was known to ask about closing times and capacity limits. The principle of "just-in-time grammar" replaced the principle of "just-in-case grammar," thereby collapsing the traditional distinction between language and skills modules [8]. Vocabulary lists were generated by students themselves as they walked the campus, inspected the internship agreement, or interviewed the Erasmus coordinator. Lexical gaps were posted in the chat group overnight, and negotiated solutions were consolidated in class the following morning. The teacher's role shifted from authoritative dispenser of rules to strategic editor who ratifies or reformulates student-generated material in relation to the project's communicative constraints.

Assessment was re-aligned with equal rigor. Because the final product was public, failure carried an external cost that no teacher could mitigate retroactively. Intermediate deadlines therefore acquired genuine weight. A draft itinerary that misidentified the library closing time was returned for correction before the tour took place; an email message containing an ambiguous date was revised until the partner institution confirmed understanding. Marks were awarded only when the external stakeholder's acceptance had been documented. Rubrics were co-constructed in class by analyzing authentic samples of campus tours, institutional emails and tourist brochures, identifying recurrent moves, and translating those moves into criteria that students themselves would apply during peer review [9]. The process made explicit the department's definition of quality: clarity, accuracy and appropriateness were judged by their capacity to secure the desired response from a non-captive audience.

By the end of the first implementation cycle the new architecture had stabilized without recourse to additional expenditure or proprietary systems. The learning-management system contained five sequential folders, the chat group archived over two thousand messages, and the external recipients had signed the necessary acceptance forms. More importantly, the ratio of student talk to teacher talk had inverted: whole-group segments rarely exceeded fifteen minutes, while collaborative planning and asynchronous drafting accounted for the bulk of contact time. Grammar was still taught, but it emerged from the draft-revision loop rather than from a pre-emptive lecture. The semester had been re-designed, not merely supplemented, by the imperatives of OBE-PBL logic.

4. What changed in practice under OBE-PBL

The most visible shift occurred at the lectern. Under the former grammar-centred regime the teacher's role had been clearly scripted: introduce the rule, illustrate it, invite mimicry, correct deviations, and assign further exercises. Within the new OBE-PBL architecture this sequence lost its primacy [10]. Faced with a cohort preparing to receive Spanish-speaking visitors in eight weeks, the instructor could no longer afford to deliver a monologue on the historical present and trust that transfer would occur later. Instead, the first-class meeting was devoted to modelling the stance of a guide: how to greet a party at the gate, how to manage overlapping questions, how to signal a change of direction while walking backwards. Explanation was replaced by demonstration; accuracy was judged by the immediate intelligibility of the message rather than by conformity to an abstract paradigm. Subsequent sessions were organized around strategic questioning rather than declarative telling. The teacher intervened to elicit contingency plans" What will you say if the lift is out of order?" or to time the rehearsal so that peer feedback could be incorporated before the next iteration. Authority remained intact, but its expression moved from the transmission of rules to the orchestration of cycles of draft, feedback and revision.

Students experienced an equally pronounced recalibration. In earlier semesters many had adopted a defensive strategy: commit the correct form to memory, reproduce it when summoned, and avoid improvisation that might expose uncertainty. The public nature of the upcoming tour removed that safety net. A visitor who asks for the nearest ATM does not award points for verbal agility; he simply wants intelligible directions. Consequently, learners began to treat language as a negotiable commodity rather than a fixed inventory. Rehearsals were punctuated by requests for confirmation: "Sería mejor decir 'suba' o 'sube' si el ascensor está estropeado?" Peer responses were immediate and functional rather than normatively prescriptive. The shift from rehearsing correctness to negotiating meaning was most evident during the field-work phase, when small groups roamed the campus with voice recorders, collecting authentic questions from

maintenance staff and security officers [11]. These recordings were transcribed and compared with the draft scripts, leading to spontaneous lexical expansion and syntactic simplification. The textbook, once the default authority, became a reference tool consulted only when interpersonal negotiation reached an impasse.

The altered division of labor did not eliminate difficulty; it relocated it. Time pressure emerged first. The immovable date of the external visit meant that intermediate products, including route maps, lexical glossaries, safety disclaimers, had to be finalized earlier than in a traditional syllabus, where the lecturer could simply extend the deadline if the cohort lagged behind. Collaborative work raised issues of fairness. When five students produced a single brochure, the allocation of individual marks risked rewarding free riders or, conversely, penalizing competent contributors who happened to be paired with weaker peers [12]. Unequal digital access compounded the problem: not every learner owned a device capable of editing shared documents during peak hours, and some relied on prepaid data bundles that expired before the final online rehearsal. These challenges were not marginal; they threatened the credibility of the OBE-PBL cycle by exposing hidden variables that the grammar-centered model had kept invisible.

Coping strategies evolved through iterative reflection rather than through top-down policy. The simplest yet most effective adjustment was to advance the project launch by two weeks, effectively inserting a buffer that absorbed technical delays without compromising the external deadline. Rubrics were co-constructed in class through analysis of authentic samples: students examined an official city brochure, identified moves such as “historical background,” “practical information,” and “safety advisory,” and translated these into weighted criteria [13]. Because the same students would later apply the rubric to their peers, the exercise possessed genuine stakes and reduced the perception of arbitrariness. To mitigate digital inequality, offline submission corners were re-instated: a physical folder in the departmental office accepted hard-copy drafts that were scanned by administrative staff and uploaded to the shared repository within twenty-four hours. The solution re-introduced paper, but it guaranteed that no learner was excluded from the iterative feedback loop on grounds of connectivity [14].

Perhaps the most profound change was affective. In previous cohorts, anxiety had peaked the night before the final examination; in the re-designed sequence, tension was distributed across the semester, but it was accompanied by a measurable increase in self-reported agency. Students spoke of “owning the script,” of feeling “responsible for every word,” and, most tellingly, of being “curious about what the visitor would actually ask.” Curiosity, once the privilege of the motivated few, became a structural feature of a course in which the outcome was unknown in its detail until the live moment. The teacher, meanwhile, reported a paradoxical relief: the abdication of omniscience, no longer needing to predict every lexical query, was replaced by the satisfaction of watching learners rehearse solutions that the instructor had not foreseen. The OBE-PBL alignment had not eliminated the asymmetry of expertise; it had transformed it into a shared problem-solving enterprise whose temporary resolution was guaranteed by the calendar, but whose definitive shape emerged only in the presence of an interlocutor who mattered [15].

5. Ongoing tensions and early signals of worth in OBE-PBL implementation

The re-design has not dissolved institutional gravity; it has merely shifted its point of application [16]. Coverage anxiety still surfaces at mid-semester, when the calendar reveals that several textbook chapters remain untouched and that the subjunctive mood has been encountered only fleetingly in a brochure draft. The unease is no longer voiced as “we are behind schedule”; it is articulated as “will they still recognize the subjunctive when they meet it next year?” a question that exposes how deeply the grammar-centered sequence is woven into professional identity. Institutional marking norms constitute a second residue. The registrar’s system demands a single numerical grade for each student every four weeks. An OBE-PBL cycle produces a trail of external acceptances, peer-feedback logs and revised artefacts, but the algorithm still expects a percentage. The translation is possible, yet it feels like a retro-fitting rather than a natural expression of what has been learnt. A third, unexpectedly stubborn, dilemma is physical. Rooms built for forty-five listeners generate unbearable acoustic overlap once eight groups rehearse a tour simultaneously. The resulting cacophony drives some students back into

whispered English, not because they lack Spanish, but because they cannot hear themselves think.

Against these lingering frictions, qualitative signals of worth have begun to accumulate. Attendance at optional drop-in sessions has risen from a handful to over half the cohort, and the conversations are now student-initiated rather than teacher-announced. Alumni emails arrive without solicitation: a graduate now working in logistics forwards a thank-you note from a Peruvian client, adding simply, "I used the campus tour script as my template." The Student Union has twice invited the cohort to embed their cultural brochures in the official orientation pack, an act of uptake that no rubric could have guaranteed. Most telling, perhaps, is the changed tone of end-of-term oral defense [17]. Previously the viva gravitated toward meta-linguistic commentary ("I chose the preterit because…"); today the same ritual opens with the question, "What did your visitor actually say, and how did you respond?", a shift that places communicative effect ahead of grammatical justification.

Sustaining the OBE-PBL orientation appears to depend on three contextual conditions. Administrative flexibility is essential: the program leader must continue to approve calendar shifts when external visits move, and to tolerate mid-semester gaps in coverage without invoking audit anxiety. Collegial support provides the second pillar; without a critical mass of staff willing to trade chapter security for project uncertainty, individual teachers revert to the grammar sequence the moment cohort performance wavers [18]. The third condition is continuous conversation with students. Capabilities are not internalized in a single cycle; they need to be named, rehearsed, and reflected upon in subsequent projects so that the link between exit outcome and weekly effort remains explicit rather than tacit.

6. Conclusion

The migration from a grammar cathedral to an OBE-PBL project workshop has rendered the classroom noisier, less predictable, and manifestly more alive. Continuity does not require heroic innovation; it demands steady trust in the exit outcome, a disciplined willingness to relinquish teacher centrality, and a modest but reliable digital spine that archives drafts without fetishizing analytics. Future plans are intentionally low-key: invite colleagues from other languages to pool projects, subject the graduate capability list to annual peer review, and record emerging stories rather than aggregate metrics. If these conditions are met, the syllabus will keep unfolding backwards from the moment a graduate stand before a Spanish-speaking interlocutor and is expected to act competently, courteously, and without retreat into English.

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