



Argentina through History and Culture: Expanding Access to Spanish Language Learning

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Abstract

In response to a growing reluctance among U.S. college students to enroll in foreign language courses, the Department of Modern & Classical Languages & Literatures at Saint Peter's University developed a series of content-based courses designed to attract students who might otherwise avoid foreign language study. One of the most successful of these offerings is a course on the history and culture of Argentina, which has consistently generated strong enrollment and sustained student interest. This presentation examines the development and impact of the course as a gateway to language and cultural learning. Through an interdisciplinary exploration of Argentina's history, society, and cultural production, students engage with topics ranging from immigration and nation-building to political change, human rights movements, literature, film, music, sports, and popular culture. Students are regularly exposed to Spanish-language texts, audiovisual materials, and cultural artifacts, allowing them to encounter the language in authentic cultural contexts. A central component of the course is a semester-long research project culminating in a class presentation. For their project, students may investigate a topic not covered in class, conduct deeper research on a subject introduced during the semester, or create an interview with a historical or contemporary Argentine figure. These projects encourage independent inquiry, research skills, critical thinking, public speaking, and creative engagement with Argentine history and culture. The course demonstrates how culturally focused content can address declining interest in foreign language study while fostering cultural literacy and meaningful exposure to Spanish. By presenting language as inseparable from history, culture, and lived experience, the course encourages students to pursue further study of Spanish and the broader Spanish-speaking world.

Keywords: Argentina; Spanish-Language Learning; Culture-Based Instruction; Intercultural Competence; Student Engagement.

1. Introduction

Foreign language education in the United States is facing a significant enrollment challenge. For decades, colleges and universities have promoted language study as an important component of the liberal arts education, emphasizing communication, intercultural competence, global awareness, and access to other cultures. Interest in foreign language study, however, has arguably declined considerably. According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), enrollment in languages other than English at U.S. colleges and universities declined by 16.6 percent between fall 2016 and fall 2021 [1]. The decline occurred across many languages and institutions and represents a substantial challenge for departments and programs that depend on student enrollment to sustain their course offerings.

This trend raises an important question for institutions of higher education: How can colleges encourage students to engage with languages and cultures at a time when traditional foreign-language enrollment is declining? One possible answer is to reconsider the point at which students are introduced to language study. Rather than expecting students to become interested in foreign language first, universities can offer intellectually compelling courses in which language and culture are embedded within broader subjects that already attract students.

Courses focusing on the history and culture(s) of individual countries provide one promising model. The Department of Modern & Classical Languages & Literatures (MCLL) at Saint Peter's University (Jersey City, NJ) developed a series of content-based courses designed to attract students who might otherwise avoid foreign language study. One of the most successful offerings in the course on the history and culture of



Argentina, which has consistently generated strong enrollment and sustained student interest. This undergraduate course examines Argentina through geography, dialectology, immigration history, gastronomy, music, sports, politics, history, culture, and socioeconomic issues. These subjects allow students to explore Argentina as a complex society rather than a collection of cultural stereotypes. At the same time, the course introduces students to Spanish as a living language used to communicate about all these interrelated areas in everyday life.

The enrollment record of the Argentina course provides evidence of continued student interest. With a maximum enrollment of 32 students, the course enrolled 30 students in 2019 (the first year it was offered), 30 students again in 2020, 26 students in 2023, and 26 students in the spring 2026 semester. There are 25 students already enrolled in the fall 2026 semester; this marks the first time that the course has been offered in two consecutive semesters. Across these offerings, the course has averaged 27.2 students, or approximately 85 percent of its capacity. Although enrollment data alone cannot establish why students choose a course, the consistency of the enrollment is notable within a national environment of declining language participation.

Furthermore, the Argentina course is not an isolated example. Other interdisciplinary history and culture courses focusing on Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, and the Philippines, have also demonstrated strong interest and stable enrollment. The success of these courses suggests that student interest may extend beyond any one country or cultural topic. Instead, it may reflect a broader interest in courses that combine history, culture, language, politics, and contemporary issues.

This paper argues that interdisciplinary history and culture courses can serve as an important gateway to language learning. Such courses should not replace traditional language sequences, which remain essential for developing proficiency. These courses can, however, complement those typical language courses by attracting students who may not initially consider themselves language learners. By focusing on compelling content and allowing students to encounter language within meaningful cultural contexts, universities in the U.S. can create additional pathways into language study at a time when traditional enrollment models are under increasing pressure.

2. The Changing Landscape of U.S. Foreign-Language Instruction

The decline in foreign-language enrollment is part of a larger transformation taking place in American higher education. Students increasingly face pressure to complete degree requirements efficiently, particularly as tuition costs rise and students become more focused on the perceived relationship between coursework and career preparation. Courses outside of a student's major must compete for limited space in increasingly structured, and more specialized, curricula. Core curriculum components in many traditional liberal arts universities, including my own university, have seen a reduction in foreign language requirements; these cutbacks have resulted in the obvious detriment to the study of foreign languages.

While language study provides significant intellectual and practical benefits, too often students may perceive a traditional language course primarily as a requirement rather than an opportunity for academic exploration or intellectual growth. This perception can be especially problematic for students who have little previous exposure to another language or culture. As Stein-Smith points out, "Other than heritage-language speakers, it is estimated that only between one in eight and one in four Americans have the foreign language skills necessary to hold a conversation in a language other than English;" this explains why only 8 percent of American undergraduates are enrolled in a foreign language course [2].

The MLA's enrollment data demonstrate the scope of the challenge. Between 2016 and 2021, enrollment in languages other than English declined by 16.6 percent. Spanish remained the most commonly studied language, but Spanish enrollment also declined during that period [3]. The national trend that simply relying on the traditional model of sequential language courses may not be sufficient to maintain student interest. The challenge is not a lack of student interest in international issues. Students continue to demonstrate interest in immigration, social justice, global politics, international business, popular culture, food, music and sports. The problem may be the manner in which language study is positioned within the curriculum.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) emphasizes that language education contributes to global competence by helping students to investigate the world, recognize different



perspectives, communicate across cultures, and apply knowledge from multiple disciplines [4]. Language education is, therefore, not simply about memorizing vocabulary or mastering grammatical structures. It can provide students with a means of understanding people, societies, and perspectives different from their own.

An interdisciplinary approach builds upon this broader understanding of language education. Content-Based Instruction (CBI), for example, integrates language learning with meaningful academic content. As Krashen argues, students acquire language when they are exposed to comprehensible input [5]. The understanding here is that ‘people learn a second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an end in itself’ [6]. Research on content-based instruction has demonstrated the potential relationship between important content, student motivation, and language learning [7]. Oliva Parera and Núñez Delgado argue that connecting language learning to discipline-specific content can promote student motivation and engagement [8].

The implications are important. Instead of asking students to develop an interest in Spanish before they engage with Spanish-speaking cultures, educators can provide students with significant reasons to encounter Spanish. The language becomes a tool for accessing information rather than simply the object of study.

3. Argentina as an Interdisciplinary Case Study

Argentina provides an especially rich environment for an interdisciplinary course because its history and contemporary culture encompass a wide range of topics. Geography, immigration, language, politics, economics, gastronomy, music, sports and popular culture are deeply interconnected.

The country's geography provides a natural starting point. Argentina encompasses a vast territory extending from the subtropical north to Patagonia in the south. The Andes, the Pampas, Buenos Aires, Patagonia, agricultural regions, and urban centers represent dramatically different geographic and cultural environments. Geography influences patterns of migration, economic activity, food production, regional identity, and political development. Geography can also introduce students to linguistic variation. Argentine Spanish is not identical to Spanish spoken in Mexico, Spain, the Caribbean, or other parts of Latin America. The variety associated with Buenos Aires and the Rio de la Plata region, commonly known as *Rioplatense* Spanish (which also includes Uruguay) contains distinctive features that can immediately demonstrate to students that Spanish is a diverse global language.

This interdisciplinary approach allows students to understand language as a product of history and geography rather than as an abstract system. It also helps students recognize that linguistic variation is normal. The existence of different forms of Spanish challenges the notion by the non-linguistic general public that there is a single “correct” Spanish and provides an opportunity to discuss language, identity, social relationships, and regional culture.

4. Dialectology

Dialectology represents one of the clearest connections between the Argentina course and language learning. Argentine Spanish provides students with an opportunity to study linguistic variation in a cultural context. Students are exposed not only to the more famous *Rioplatense* (the city of Buenos Aires, along with the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, La Pampa, Neuquén, Rio Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz, and Tierra del Fuego), but also to the other linguistic variations (five in total) of the Spanish spoken in Argentina. Students learn about *Guaranítico*, of the area encompassing the littoral provinces of Misiones, Entre Rios, and Corrientes in the northeast; the *Norteño* variety of many northern provinces (Chaco, Formosa, Santiago del Estero, Tucuman, Jujuy, Catamarca, Salta, and La Rioja); the central *Cordobés* (Cordoba province and parts of San Luis province); and the western *Cuyano* (the provinces of Mendoza, San Juan, and San Luis).

One of the most recognizable characteristics of Argentine Spanish is the widespread use of *voseo*, in which *vos* is used as a second-person singular (familiar) form in contexts where other varieties of Spanish might use *tú* (although Santiagueño uses proverbial *tú* forms). The course includes lessons on the history of the *voseo* (beginning with the use of *vos* in Latin along with the subsequent earlier usage of *vos* in Spain). Other characteristics of all dialectal or linguistic varieties of Argentine Spanish, such as pronunciation and



regional vocabulary, are also examined in this course. Moreover, students study the grammar and lexical varieties of Argentine Spanish, especially those related to Rioplatense, as they carry significant weight in the understanding of general Argentine culture [9].

For students learning Spanish, this material can be particularly valuable. Rather than simply being told that Spanish varies from country to country, students can see and hear the differences themselves. In class, they can compare Argentine Spanish with the Spanish they may have encountered in textbooks, previous classes, media, or other Spanish-speaking countries. Depending on the proficiency level of the class (which may differ from semester to semester), students can make comparisons between the Spanish spoken in Argentina and that of the countries or regions of their families' backgrounds.

Dialectology also provides a direct connection between language and identity. Forms of address, pronunciation, and vocabulary communicate information about regional and social identity. Students can therefore begin to comprehend that language is not merely a neutral system for transmitting information; it is also an expression of belonging and community. This is an important component of language learning because students who understand variation are more likely to approach other varieties of Spanish with curiosity rather than confusion. They learn that differences do not necessarily represent errors. Instead, they reflect the history and social development of particular communities. The study of Argentine dialectology therefore supports the broader goal of the course: students are not simply learning about Argentina while occasionally encountering Spanish. They are learning how language itself reflects Argentine history, geography, and cultural identity.

5. Immigration, Food, and Cultural Identity

Immigration provides another central connection among history, language, food, and national identity. Argentina experienced extensive European immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly from Italy and Spain. These migrations significantly influenced Argentine society and contributed to changing understandings of national identity. DeLaney (2014) examines immigration, identity, and nationalism in Argentina and demonstrates how large-scale European immigration helped shape conceptions of what it means to be Argentine [10]. Immigration affected not only population demographics but also language, culture, politics, and ideas about who could be considered Argentine.

The linguistic consequences of immigration are especially useful in a language-learning course. Italian immigration, for example, contributed to language contact phenomena associated with *Cocoliche*, an early pidgin of Italian and Spanish, and *Lunfardo*, the argot of Buenos Aires. While *Cocoliche* was more predominant in the first generation of Italian immigrants, *Lunfardo*, though also heavily influenced by Italian dialects, incorporated vocabulary and expressions from other languages as well. Furthermore, it found its greatest expression in tango lyrics. Students in the course study the etymological origins and morphological changes that shape much of the lexicon of Rioplatense, and in doing so, they not only examine how languages interact when communities come into contact with one another, but also how migration can leave lasting traces in the vocabulary and everyday speech.

Food provides another accessible entry point into these issues. Argentine gastronomic traditions reflect geography, immigration, agriculture, history, and social practices. Students learn about the *asado* (Argentine grilled meats and grilling tradition), empanadas, mate, and other culinary traditions as cultural practices rather than simply as foods that form part of the national diet. Research supports the connection between food and cultural identity. Recent scholarship has examined the *asado* as a significant component of Argentine cultural identity and national representation [11].

Food is particularly effective pedagogically because students already possess their own relationships with food. Discussions of Argentine cuisine can therefore lead naturally to comparisons with students' families, communities, and cultural experiences. Students in the course examine questions such as: How do immigrant communities change national cuisine? How does food become a symbol of national identity? Who determines which foods are considered "traditional"? How do economic and geographic factors influence what people eat? These questions transform food from an entertaining classroom topic into an academic subject that connects history, sociology, geography, immigration, economics, and language. Food also provides opportunities for authentic Spanish-language materials. Students can work with menus, recipes, interviews, cooking programs, advertisements, and food-related media. Some students who have



chosen to do their semester projects on a particular food or culinary tradition have even prepared food for the class. In this context, Spanish becomes the language through which students go beyond just learning about the food but also becoming more engaged in the learning process.

6. Music, Sports, and Popular Culture

Music provides another powerful entry point into Argentine culture. Tango is perhaps the most internationally recognizable Argentine musical tradition, but the country's musical culture extends well beyond tango to include folk traditions, *rock nacional*, and contemporary popular music. Students in the course examine tango not only as music and dance but also as an historical and cultural phenomenon. Luker (2016) demonstrates how tango has been connected to social, political, economic, and cultural developments in Buenos Aires [12]. Its changing status over time provides an opportunity to consider questions of class, identity, cultural legitimacy, and globalization. Music is also an effective language-learning resource because it provides authentic Spanish-language material. Students in this course analyze lyrics for vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, pronunciation, metaphor, and social commentary. The songs studied in class introduce students to historical periods and social issues in ways that conventional textbook materials cannot always accomplish.

Sports in another area that has proven to be beneficial to studying Argentine culture. In Argentina, sports occupy a fundamental pillar in society. The most popular sport is soccer/football, known as *fútbol*, is not simply a recreational activity, it is more akin to a religion. *Fútbol* is deeply connected to national identity, community, class, politics, economics, and popular culture. Orton (2023) examines football and national identity in twentieth century Argentina, tracing its development from its introduction by British immigration through its incorporation into Argentine society at large [13]. Football, and by extension all sports in Argentina, provide an opportunity for students to connect immigration, history, national identity, class, gender, and culture. Sports also provide the benefit to students of immediate access to the Spanish language. Students are shown sports broadcasts, newspaper articles, interviews, documentaries, fan discussions, social media, and commentary. A student, for instance, who may have little interest in memorizing vocabulary may nevertheless be highly motivated to understand an interview with an Argentine athlete or follow Spanish-language coverage of a major international sporting event.

Finally, music and sports illustrate a broader principle of the course: popular culture can be academically rigorous while also providing highly accessible pathways into language learning. This certainly has been the case with the Argentina course, based on several student evaluations pointing to the value of these topics.

7. Politics, History, and Socioeconomic Issues

The course also examines periods of Argentina's political and socioeconomic history, providing students with the ability to engage with complex issues that extend well beyond cultural tourism. Given how extensive the topic of politics can be, the course nonetheless considers the post-colonial political foundations of the Argentine republic, the agricultural-industrial development of the late nineteenth century, the trade relationship with the Great Britain, and the socio-cultural impact of immigration policies.

Argentina's modern history includes the development of Peronism, political polarization, military dictatorship, the return to democracy, human-rights activism, and continuing debates about the country's economic and political future. The period of military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, for example, is an important study case. Students have examined state terrorism, political violence, human rights, memory, and the efforts of organizations such as the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. While it has not always been possible to cover these topics in class due to time constraints, they successfully have been the focus of student presentations at the end of the semester.

Politics also enables students to acquire authentic language input through the analysis of speeches, interviews, and both traditional and social media coverage. While not a component of the course, depending on the level of proficiency, students could do mock debate exercises in course based on the current political or social issues facing Argentina. Socioeconomic issues provide another dimension. Argentina's experiences with inflation, economic instability, poverty, inequality, employment, and education allow students to compare Argentine society with their own experiences in the United States. These discussions



can also help students develop critical media literacy in Spanish. Students can compare how the same political or economic event is described by different resources and consider how perspective influences interpretation. The objective is not to tell students what political position to adopt but to provide them with the language and analytical tools necessary to understand different perspectives.

8. The History and Culture Model as a Gateway to Spanish Language Learning

The achievement of the Argentina course is further supported by the success of other history and culture courses offered by the MCLL Department at Saint Peter's University. The course has been comprised of L2 learners. Given that there may be disparity among the students' language aptitude, assignments are tailored according to their proficiency. The enrollment record of the Argentina course provides useful evidence of sustained interest. The course is generally capped at 32 students. Its reported enrollment history is as follows:

Table 1. Reported Enrollment of SP-365: History and Culture of Argentina Course (Spring 2019 – Present)

Semester / Year	Enrollment	Percentage of Capacity
Spring 2019	30	93.8%
Spring 2020	30	93.8%
Spring 2023	26	81.3%
Spring 2026	25	78.1%
Fall 2026	25	78.1%

The average enrollment across these five offerings is 27.2 students, representing approximately 85 percent of capacity. These numbers, however, should be interpreted carefully. They do not prove that students enroll specifically because of the course's interdisciplinary structure. The Spring 2026 semester actually included 32 students until mid-semester point, but 7 students withdrew toward the end of the semester due to several factors including attendance and low (or non) scores on assessments. Nevertheless, the consistency of overall enrollment (between 25 to 30 students) is significant, especially considering the broader decline in language enrollment.

The Argentina course is not the only interdisciplinary course offered by the MCLL department. In fact, there are courses focusing on Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, and the Philippines that have also demonstrated strong student enrollment. This broader pattern is significant because it suggests that student interest may not depend solely on Argentina's particular cultural appeal. Instead, students appear to respond to the opportunity to explore a particular society through an interdisciplinary framework. The course on Mexico engages students through its history, indigenous cultures, immigration, politics, food, art, and contemporary relations with the United States. The course on Puerto Rico explores colonialism, U.S. political status, migration, language, identity, and music. The course on Cuba addresses revolution, migration, music, race, and U.S.-Cuban relations. The Philippines course is particularly useful as part of this broader comparison because it demonstrates that the model does not have to be restricted to Spanish-speaking countries. Philippine history and culture allow students to explore Spanish colonial influence, English-language policy, indigenous languages, and migration issues. This demonstrates the larger principle that language and culture can be studied together even when the linguistic relationship is historically complex.

The fact that the other courses have maintained strong enrollment provides additional context. Together, these courses suggest that students may be responding to a broader curriculum model. Future assessment could provide stronger evidence. Students could be surveyed at the beginning and end of the semester to determine why they enrolled, whether their interest in Spanish changed, whether they became more interested, for example, in study abroad, and whether they planned to take additional language courses. The MCLL department could also track whether students who take these history and culture courses subsequently enroll in Spanish courses. If a meaningful number do so, the courses could be understood not only as successful elective but also as recruitment mechanisms for language programs.

The central pedagogical value of these courses is their potential to serve as gateways into formal language study. Traditional language instruction generally begins with the assumption that students have



decided they want to learn a language. The student enrolls, for example, in an introductory Spanish course, develops foundational vocabulary and grammar, and progresses through increasingly advanced courses. The interdisciplinary model offers another pathway: Student interest → cultural topic → country/region → authentic content → language exposure → increased interest in language study. This sequence can be especially valuable for students who may not be interested in learning a foreign language.

These history and culture courses should not be viewed as substitute for formal Spanish instruction. Students who want to develop high levels of proficiency still need systematic instruction in speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. The interdisciplinary course can complement the language curriculum by creating a broader pool of students who may eventually choose to pursue further language study.

9. Implications for Higher Education

The success of these courses has implications for how universities structure and promote language education. First, institutions should consider expanding the number of interdisciplinary courses that connect language and culture to substantive academic subjects. Second, language departments should consider collaboration with other disciplines. An Argentina course naturally connects Spanish with history, political science, sociology, anthropology, geography, economics, music, and international affairs. Such collaborations can demonstrate that language education contributes to the intellectual mission of the entire university. Third, these courses can broaden the population of students exposed to language and culture. Students who would never enroll in Spanish because of a perceived lack of relevance may be willing to take a course on Argentine politics, Mexican history, Cuban society, or Puerto Rican culture. Fourth, the courses can support study-abroad programs. A student who develops an interest in Argentina through a classroom course may subsequently consider studying in Buenos Aires or another part of the country. The same principle can apply to other destinations. Finally, the approach can help universities redefine what language education means. Language is not simply a technical skill, albeit an important one. It is a means of accessing history, understanding perspectives, interpreting culture, and communicating with people whose experiences may differ from one's own. In an increasingly interconnected world, these skills remain valuable even when students do not plan to become professional linguists, translators, or language teachers.

10. Conclusion

The decline in foreign-language enrollment in U.S. higher education presents a serious challenge, but it also provides an opportunity to rethink how students are introduced to languages and cultures. An interdisciplinary course on the history and culture of Argentina offers one promising model. By combining geography, dialectology, immigration, food, music, sports, politics, history, culture, and socioeconomic issues, the course presents Argentina as a complex society while providing numerous opportunities for students to encounter Spanish in meaningful contexts.

The course SP-365: History and Culture of Argentina offered by the MCLL Department, provides evidence of sustained demand. This course exists within a broader pattern. Courses focusing on Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, and the Philippines have also demonstrated strong enrollment. Taken together, these courses suggest that students may be responding not simply to individual countries but to an interdisciplinary model that allows them to explore a myriad of interconnected topics.

The implications for language education are noteworthy. Traditional language courses remain essential for students who want to develop proficiency; however, universities should not assume that students must first become interested in a language before they become interested in the people and cultures associated with it. The reverse can also occur. A student may enter a classroom because of sports, food, music, immigration, or another cultural interest and discover that Spanish affords deeper access to the subject. In this sense, interdisciplinary history and culture courses can serve as gateways to language learning.

At a time when universities, particularly in the United States, are confronting declining enrollment in foreign-language courses, the question may therefore not simply be how to convince students to study Spanish, but how to create more opportunities for students to discover why Spanish is worth studying. Interdisciplinary courses on Argentina, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, and The Philippines, and other



regions offer one possible answer. They demonstrate that language learning can begin with curiosity about a place, a people, an historical event, a song, a meal, a political debate, or a sporting tradition. Once that curiosity develops, language becomes more than a requirement; it becomes a means to understanding the world.

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