



Identity, possible selves, and imagined communities in Spanish language classroom tasks

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Abstract

This study reports on the use of classroom tasks that rely on the notions of ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991) in both Spanish-as-a-foreign-language and Spanish-as-a-heritage-language classrooms. The tasks provided opportunities for students in these classrooms to share stories, real and imagined, focusing on topics such as family, education, and professional goals in order to connect past and present experiences with future aspirations. In addition, the tasks encouraged students to place themselves in imagined communities in which they interpreted and broadened their sense of identity. Results from each task are analyzed and discussed, with a focus on examining and comparing how foreign language and heritage language students reflect on their past and current identities and envision possible selves.

Keywords: *Learner Identity, Future Selves, Spanish Instructional Tasks*

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Introduction

The concept of identity has become key to enhance our understanding of second language (L2) learning and how identity issues are connected to L2 development and use (Norton, 2013). Learning an additional language as well as deciding when and how to use one’s languages are considered acts of identity (Cenoz, 2013; Higgins, 2011; Norton, 2013). Research in identity formation has shown that this process is most dynamic around the ages of 18 and 22 (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001), so we can assume that in university-level language classes, where many students fall within such age range, issues of identity are likely to be in students’ minds (Frisén & Erikson, 2020). They are not only exploring who they are, but also actively constructing who they want to become. They reconstruct their identities as language learners and users in part by interacting with teachers and peers, as well as by connecting to communities of speakers, real or imagined.

In this study, we investigated students’ sense of current and future identities in Spanish-as-a-foreign-language (SFL) and Spanish-as-a-heritage-language (SHL) classrooms as a result of their participation in tasks drawing on the notions of ‘possible selves’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and ‘imagined communities’ (Norton, 2013, drawing on Anderson, 1991). The study seeks to uncover how learners in each classroom context conceptualize who they are, who they wish to become, and how they position themselves within both real and imagined communities. The tasks provided opportunities for students to share and explore stories that thread themes such as family histories, educational experiences, and professional aspirations. In essence, the tasks dealt with what Ryan and Irie (2014) described as the story of the self, one that influences “how we interpret our past, how we see ourselves now, and the paths we envision for our future”

(p. 109). To do this, students were asked to imagine and create stories and texts that are partly based on actual experiences and contexts, but which also challenged them to go beyond these tangible spaces. By placing themselves in imagined communities, students were encouraged to exploit the power of their imagination to envision a range of identities and possible worlds (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Current sociocultural perspectives conceptualize identity as shifting, dynamic, multiple, and socially constructed. Rather than being a stable trait that individuals possess, identity is understood as emerging from experiences and interactions. From this standpoint, identity can be constructed, negotiated, performed, or assigned (Miller, 2009; Norton, 2010, Varghese et al., 2005). Norton (2013) defined identity as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 4). The concept of self is central to one’s identity, reflecting personal positioning, goals, and roles as well as one’s relation to the world. A person’s self emerges from past experiences, manifests itself in the present, and is connected to the future. Furthermore, by linking present actions to future goals and aspirations, individuals can start constructing versions of their possible selves (Al-Murtadha, 2023; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

Markus and Nurius (1986) defined possible selves as people’s conceptions of who they might become, hope to become, and fear becoming. Oyserman and Horowitz (2022) went further, positing that these conceptions can be characterized as either positive or negative and could also vary in terms of perceptions of attainability. Within language learning, the notion of possible selves has particular relevance as it can influence learner motivation and performance (Ryan & Irie, 2014). The concept of a desired self, for instance, can be found in models of motivation such as Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System framework, which involves an ‘ideal self,’ the type of person learners would like to become; an ‘ought-to self,’ the type of person that is to meet expectations and avoid possible negative outcomes; and the learning experience, which relates to situated motives in the learning environment. According to this model, motivation is enhanced when learners can identify with their ideal self and when the gap between current and possible selves is reduced.

Closely related to the idea of possible selves is the role of imagination in identity formation. Wenger (1998) described imagination as the process through which individuals extend their sense of self beyond their immediate realities to envision new possibilities for themselves and their worlds. This process allows learners to project themselves into desired practices and to consider the steps necessary to achieve their goals (Choi, 2018; Galloway & Meston, 2022). One way in which lessons can be infused with imaginative activities is by exploiting the concept of ‘imagined communities’ (Norton, 2013).

Kanno and Norton (2003) defined imagined communities as social groups that learners may not have direct or immediate access to, but to which they feel connected through imagination. They argued that by exploring their potential affiliations with these communities -envisioning themselves as future participants- learners can construct and refine their possible selves. Moreover, they considered that imagined communities can have a similar or even stronger influence than that of the real communities in which learners participate daily. Through such engagement, learners take on imagined identities that inform their sense of self, their motivation, and their investment in language learning. Kanno and Norton (2003) thus contended that identity must be understood not only in relation to learners’ participation in real-world contexts, but also in connection with their investment in imagined or potential worlds.

Given these interconnections, investigating imagined identities can provide insights into how different types of learners navigate between present realities and their desired futures, how they integrate past experiences into emerging-self concepts, and how educational contexts can facilitate this identity work. It can be expected that, for foreign language learners, possible selves are often oriented toward future affiliations with communities that exist beyond their immediate environments. In contrast, heritage language learners frequently have personal, familial, or community-based connections to the language,

which situate their possible selves within both real and imagined contexts simultaneously. For them, identity work is likely to involve reconciling personal histories and social perceptions of belonging (Carreira & Kagan, 2018).

Background

Research focusing on concepts of identity, possible selves, or imagined communities in relation to second/foreign language learning has been expanding since around the turn of the century (Norton, 2013). However, most of this work has been conducted in English language learning contexts. On the other hand, even in the field of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL), which often leads research efforts on L2 pedagogy, work is still considered scarce (Luong & Tran, 2021). In addition, relatively few studies have been conducted in actual classrooms (Choi, 2018) and, when they do, they rarely involve teachers as researchers. More studies comparing different language learners and their evolving identities are needed to deepen our understanding of how individuals move between their present realities and imagined futures, how they construct coherence between their current and possible selves, and how different classroom contexts may facilitate identity work. The study reported here aims to contribute to these goals.

In terms of the existing literature, a number of the studies on possible selves have been conducted under the framework of Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). Mackay (2019) and Machin (2023), for example, have shown the benefits of encouraging students to explore their possible or future selves as language users by means of visualization activities. In Mackay's study, EFL university students in Barcelona, Spain, were given visualization techniques and strategy training to develop their ideal L2 self, while in Machin's study, conducted in Catalonia, Spain, a group of first-year teachers enrolled in an EFL course envisioned both their actual and ideal L2 selves through compositions and group-composed scripts. These visualization interventions allowed participants to imagine themselves as confident and fluent speakers of the target language while instructors guided them to reflect on their reasons for learning the language and, more importantly, to develop a plan of action to realize their visions. This, in turn, boosted their motivation and interest in classroom activities.

Another way of exploring future selves is by focusing on imagined identities by asking students to describe themselves in a desired profession, as illustrated by Ahn's study (2021) conducted in two Korean universities, also with EFL undergraduate students. Similarly, Nakamura (2019) explored the relationship between future self-images and domains such as education, leisure, or a desired career or job in a case study of two Australian university students of Japanese. Both researchers underscored the importance of offering opportunities for students to connect to imagined spaces associated with their target language so that they can locate themselves as successful participants in such spaces. This requires investing class time not only guiding students to explore their possible selves but also encouraging them to visualize themselves in communities relevant to their goals and desires (Yim, 2016).

Unfortunately, many classroom practices continue to lack opportunities for learners to connect language use with meaningful social contexts. For instance, Brown (2023) conducted a large-scale analysis of over 5,000 teacher-created instructional materials (e.g., lesson plans, presentation slides, videos) within the Japan Exchange and Teaching EFL program and concluded that most materials did not connect students to imagined communities associated with the target language. Based on these findings, Brown advocated for integrating connections to imagined communities into classroom instruction, suggesting that such an approach can enhance learner motivation, increase the relevance of instruction, diversify classroom experiences, and foster the sociolinguistic aspects of language development.

Furthermore, scholars have argued that making connections between possible selves and imagined identities and communities is equally or even more important for heritage language learners. Valdés (2000), in an oft-cited definition, characterized these speakers as "individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken [...] who may speak or merely understand the heritage language and [who are] to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language" (p.1). More recently, Polinsky (2018), in a

more encompassing definition, defined heritage speakers as “simultaneous or sequential (successive) bilinguals whose weaker language corresponds to the minority language of their society and whose stronger language is the dominant language of that society” (p. 9). These speakers, she added, represent a highly heterogeneous group: some may be relatively balanced bilinguals, others may be classified as productive or receptive bilinguals, and some may even be indistinguishable from native speakers. Similarly, their sense of identity and cultural connection to the language may be varied (Leeman, 2015). In general, it can be said that most heritage speakers, even when they are able to maintain some type of family, ethnic, or emotional connections to their home language, often lack sufficient opportunities to fully develop not only their linguistic and academic skills (e.g., through early schooling) but also their identity as speakers of the heritage language. Therefore, heritage language learners have specific language and identity needs which, besides improving their communicative competence, include exploring their cultural roots and family histories and reflecting on their ethnolinguistic identity, as well as expanding their professional futures (Carreira & Kagan, 2018; Val & Vinogradova, 2010).

Issues of identity have been central in discussions of heritage language maintenance and development, although it is only recently that empirical investigations in classroom contexts are emerging (Leeman, 2015). Kim (2017), for instance, investigated identity issues in relation to motivation and investment to learn the heritage language among adolescent Korean learners in the US Midwest. Kim reported that the students’ reasons and motivations for learning Korean and the construction of their immediate or imagined identities were influenced by how they viewed and participated in the family home, their mainstream American school, and their heritage language school. Each context provided different opportunities to construct their learner identities, e.g., to claim membership in their ethnic community or resist English hegemony and mainstream identities.

Research on heritage learners and their possible selves is still scarce. However, two recent examples illustrate their potential for identity construction. Huang and Chan (2024) explored heritage language learning motivation among high school learners of Indigenous Taiwanese. Their analysis of learners’ future motivational selves highlighted the importance of a heritage self that is characterized by emotional elements (e.g., affection, attachment) and that reflects learners’ connection to their heritage language and their level of concern about its future. The authors concluded that learners who feel more connected to their heritage and have more vivid images of their future selves tend to have higher engagement levels and thus recommend using visualizations of the future-oriented ideal self to enrich their educational experience.

In addition, Serafini and Roca-Ramirez (2024), focusing on critical experiences included in self-narratives, explored how university-level heritage students of Spanish in the US interact, position themselves and others, and envision possibilities for enacting agency in various contexts. The researchers adopted the view that retrospection about the past is strongly tied to prospection about the future and that this process of reflection and reframing is empowering. They showed how critical experiences (at home and schools, in the community and workplace) play a crucial role in the formation of past and future selves. In terms of pedagogical implications, Serafini and Roca-Ramirez considered that giving students the opportunity to reflect on their past could help them better understand their personal trajectories and thus recommended including such opportunities for self-reflection in both heritage and L2-oriented language curricula.

With this in mind, we report here on a qualitative study conducted in Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) and Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHL) classrooms in which the lead researcher (first author) collaborated with two instructors (second and third authors) to explore how foreign language and heritage language learners reflect on their past and present identities, connect these to their imagined or future selves, and align them with their professional goals and aspirations. By comparing specific ways in which foreign and heritage language learners reflect on their identities, this study can inform pedagogical practices that more effectively support learners in constructing meaningful, empowering identities within the context of a language classroom.

The Study

The main objective of the study was to examine and compare ways in which foreign language and heritage language learners of Spanish discuss and reflect on their sense of identity as a result of their participation in two instructional tasks drawing on the notions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and imagined communities (Norton, 2013). Instructors implemented these tasks as part of regular instruction in students' respective classrooms with the goal of helping them expand their range of identities and possible worlds. The research questions for the study are:

1. How do foreign language and heritage language learners construct their sense of identity and represent their present and possible future selves through written reflections on family, education, and professional aspirations?
2. How do these learners connect their reflections on identity and possible selves to imagined communities?

By focusing on learners' reflections on identity, possible selves, and imagined communities, the study aimed to illuminate ways in which identity formation operates differently across SFL and SHL contexts and how learners in these classroom contexts conceptualize their sense of self and their feelings of belonging in relation to real and imagined communities.

The study adopts a classroom-oriented research methodology, which includes the investigation of the dynamics of classroom interactions and corresponding learning outcomes, as well as a collaborative research arrangement between a researcher and practicing teachers (Chaudron, 2000). In this case, the outcome of identity-focused instructional tasks conducted as part of the students' regular instruction was qualitatively analyzed, centering specifically on their written reflections during post-task phases in which students connected their past, current, and future selves, and discussed them in relation to how they envisioned imagined identities and communities. The researcher (first author) led the investigation and the classroom teachers (second and third author) implemented the tasks, collected the data, and participated in the analysis.

Instructional Context and Participants

The courses in which the tasks were implemented were part of the curriculum of the lower-division Spanish language program in a large public university (approximately 30,000 students) located in the US Southwest. At the time the study was conducted, its student population was 35% Hispanic/Latino, 34% White, 8% Asian, 6% Filipino, 4% African American, and the remaining 13% comprised other groups (e.g., Pacific Islander, multiple ethnicities). The study was conducted in two SFL and two SHL intermediate-level classes that met 4 hours per week. In the SFL classes, taught by the third author of this paper, the goal was to develop students' language proficiency using a communicative, task-based language approach. There were 52 students distributed in the two classes, 51 native English speakers and 1 international student (L1=Mandarin). Most students (96%) were between 18 and 21 years old, 31 females and 21 males. The SHL classes, taught by the second author of this paper, aimed to help heritage language students develop their overall Spanish language competency and linguistic self-esteem while focusing on issues related to bilingualism and biculturalism. There were 67 students distributed in the two classes, most students (95%) were between 18 and 21 years old, 48 females and 19 males. 92% of the students were of Mexican descent and 8% of Central American descent.

The tasks used for the study are described in detail in [Appendix A](#). They were designed by the collaborative team (the researcher and the two classroom teachers) and revised after their first implementation in the semester prior to the study. For the SFL courses, the task focusing on immigrant families (task 1) occurred at the end of a unit that included topics such as family, friends, and daily life activities. For the SHL courses, it occurred as part of a unit dealing with topics such as immigration struggles, identity conflicts, and discrimination. The task focusing on an ideal future job (task 2) was included in the SFL courses as part of a unit with topics such as economy, housing, and jobs. For the SHL courses, it was part of a unit on women

and minorities in science and discrimination in the workplace.

Data Collection

Each of the two study tasks included phases in which students interacted orally with peers (see [Appendix A](#) for task descriptions). Their conversations were recorded, either by implementing the activities in a computer lab where students used DiaConnect, a computer program that allowed them to audio record themselves, or by conducting their conversations via Zoom, using its video recording option. Which modality to use depended on the size and schedule of each class and how each instructor planned her lessons. The resulting recordings were submitted by students through the course management system for instructor review and feedback. The instructors' feedback was both positive (praising and encouraging students' ability to create engaging stories or participate effectively in conversations) and corrective (pinpointing language errors or recommending alternative ways of communicating specific ideas). Prior to implementing the tasks, students had been asked to sign an electronic consent form giving permission to use their recordings and written reflections as research data. It was explained that instructors would not have access to the list of study participants until after grades had been posted. 88% of the SFL students and 85% of the SHL students gave their consent. However, not all of these students completed the tasks and submitted reflections. The number of reflections included for analysis are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. *Number of reflection texts and word counts per task and classroom context*

Courses	Tasks	Reflections (# of texts)	Word total	Word range	Word average
SFL	1. Family	45	8276	80-389	184
	2. Ideal job	38	4307	45-184	113
SHL	1. Family	51	11455	110-376	225
	2. Ideal job	39	4642	63-181	119

Data Analysis

Student reflections written in the post-task phase of each task constituted the main data for the study. However, two sample excerpts from the task phase are presented at the beginning of the 'results' section below to illustrate the type of conversations in which students engaged during task phases (see [Appendix A](#) for a description of each phase). In both SFL and SHL classes, task 1 reflections were written in Spanish in response to the following prompt (also in Spanish, English translation provided here): (1) What is something that characterizes a typical immigrant family in the US? and (2) How has your own family history influenced the person you are now and the person you would like to become in the future? Our analysis for this study focuses on the second question. For task 2, the prompt asked both SFL and SHL students to reflect, also in writing, by responding to the following questions (translated to English from Spanish): (1) What type of person would you like to be in the future? (2) What can you do now to become such a person in the future?

As shown in [Table 1](#), task 1 generated lengthier reflections than task 2, in part because, in the former, students often started comparing typical immigrant experiences with their own before reflecting on how their actual families have influenced their current and future sense of self. Also, we can see that SFL students' reflections were somewhat shorter than those written by SHL students in relation to task 1, but not as much in relation to task 2.

The research team analyzed reflections by identifying students' comments referring specifically to their current selves versus their envisioned future selves. Researchers coded comments in which students discussed how their families affected who they are at present and what steps they can take to become the person they would like to be in the future. The authors analyzed the data qualitatively by reading and re-reading reflections and coding references to current selves versus future selves, as well as comments relevant to imagined identities and communities. From the iterative process of reading for emerging themes and categorizing students' reflective comments, as well as discussions among the researchers and the classroom teachers, the following codes were generated: (a) family or community influence on self, (b) desired job/career, (c) personal goals (not job-related), and (d) future ideal self. For task 2, one more code was added to the list: (e) academic objectives (short- and long-term).

Two members of the research team, the lead researcher (first author) and one of the instructors (second or third author) coded each reflection and calculated the levels of agreement. For the SFL reflections, the average percentage agreement between raters was 77% (task 1) and 88% (task 2). For the SHL reflections, the average percentage agreement was 83% (task 1) and 90% (task 2). Differences in coding were resolved by further discussion among each pair of raters to arrive at a consensus.

Results

As mentioned above, the analysis conducted centered on students' written reflections since it was in these compositions that students had an opportunity to try to connect their past, current, and future selves, and discuss them in relation to how they envisioned imagined identities and communities. However, we present first two excerpts from student oral interactions to help interpret the written reflections, as the former illustrate how students' conversations encouraged them to explore their identities in connection to both real and possible worlds. After this, we present and discuss the analysis of the students' written reflections. A rough translation to English of each speaker's turns in Spanish is offered. All names are pseudonyms.

Excerpt 1 comes from task 1 and involves two female SHL students discussing what it means to be a Latino immigrant in the US.

Excerpt 1 (Task 1 – Immigrant families in the US)

Diana: y cómo te sientes orita? como ... de que ... estás aquí ... uhm y cómo miras tu cultura?

Carla: pues me siento or- orgullosa de estar aquí en Estados Unidos y ser pues mexicana porque sí tengo parte de cultura que puedo regresar yo ... y estoy orgullosa de ... ser diferente de los demás porque soy mexicana ... a veces me siento perdida porque crecí en Estados Unidos y no crecí en Jalisco como ellos ... me siento como gringa a veces de repente

Diana: sí

Carla: y no o sea que no crecí para allá y no soy de allá entonces no sé las costumbres de allá

[Diana: and how do you feel now? like ... about ... you being here ... uhm and how do you see your culture?

Carla: well I feel pr- proud about being here in the United States and be like Mexican because I have a part of the culture I can give back ... and I am proud of ... being different from others because I am Mexican ... sometimes I feel lost because I grew up in the United States not in Jalisco like them ... I feel like gringa sometimes all of a sudden

Diana: yes

Carla: and I don't like I didn't grow up there and I am not from there then I don't know the traditions from there]

In excerpt 1, we see two SHL students discussing one aspect common to many immigrant families in the US: cultural identity and the tensions that can emerge between the heritage and the dominant culture. We can see that despite being proud of her roots, Carla still feels different from other Mexicans since she was not born in Mexico and thus sometimes feels more like a "gringa," a term used by Mexicans to refer to

white Americans. The task thus provided a space for this student to reflect not only on what constitutes a typical immigrant family but also her own sense of self. Excerpt 2 comes from task 2 and involves two female SFL students participating in a simulated job interview.

Excerpt 2 (Task 2 – My ideal future job)

Joanna: cuáles son sus habilidades?

Lisa: uhm ... uh ... soy muy responsable amable uh puntual y trabajo muy uh bien con otros

Joanna: bueno! es importante! uhm cuál son sus debilidades?

Lisa: uhm ... yo no pienso que ... yo tengo ... debilidades

Joanna: me gusta! dónde estudió? a San Diego State University?

Lisa: Sí y uhm tengo un dac-doctorado uhm de Yale University en antropología

[Joanna: *what are your abilities?*

Lisa: *uhm ... uh ... I am very responsible, kind, punctual and I work very uh well with others*

Joanna: *good! It is important! uhm what are your weaknesses?*

Lisa: *uhm ... I don't think that ... I have ... weaknesses*

Joanna: *I like it! where did you study? at San Diego State University?*

Lisa: *yes and uhm I have a doc-doctorate from Yale University in Anthropology]*

In excerpt 2, the SFL students can be seen playing the roles of job seeker and recruitment agent. Not only do we observe them asking questions relevant to the task (e.g., abilities, educational background) but also adopting appropriate language forms to interact in such a formal situation (e.g., formal ‘usted’ forms rather than more informal ‘tú’ forms), which illustrate their commitment to create an authentic dialogue using the linguistic resources they have learned. Task 2 provided a space for students to imagine themselves as future professionals, while the reflections they generated at the end of the task asked them to think about what they would need to do to reach that point.

In the next sections, we report on our findings after examining how SFL and SHL students constructed their sense of identity and represented their current and future selves in their written reflections. We highlight similarities and differences found in the data as well as the various ways in which students made connections between their possible selves and imagined communities. In addition, we present and discuss excerpts from some of students’ written reflections. We selected these excerpts because we considered them to be representative of general patterns. A rough translation to English follows the excerpts (presented as originally written, in Spanish, by the students).

Family Influence on Current and Possible Selves

One of the patterns observed in task 1 is that the majority of SFL students (95%) referred to the positive personal qualities and values that characterize them at present as something they learned from their parents and other family members. They used adjectives such as compassionate, capable, hard-working, kind, etc., to describe these familial figures and often wrote about how they have come to value the opportunities they have had, including their university studies, thanks to their family’s support. Many (47%) also linked these to the personal attributes they hope to develop in the future, i.e., their ideal self, e.g., “En el futuro yo quiero ser segura en mi misma” (In the future I want to be self-confident). Some students (33%) also added comments on their career aspirations, e.g., “yo quiero ser muy exitoso y tener un trabajo interesante.” (I want to be successful and have an interesting job) and, in some cases, their depictions included a combination of these, as shown in excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

Mis padres me enseñaron a ser amable con otras personas, cariñosa y maduro.

Ellos me enseñaron a trabajar para que quiero. Cuando hablo a personas, ellos

me esperan ser sinceros. Ahora yo soy tranquilo, soy amable a las gente. [...] En el futuro quiero

ser exitosa y trabajar en un gran negocio. Quiero vivir y trabajar en España. (SFL-06-F)

[My parents taught me to be kind to other people, loving and mature. They taught me to work for what I want. When I talk to people, they expect me to be sincere. Now I am calm, I am kind to people [...] In the future I want to be successful and work in a big company. I want to live and work in Spain.]

As the student in excerpt 3 did, practically all SFL students described their future selves in such positive terms, envisioning their future selves and lives as successful and fulfilled, e.g., “en el futuro yo quiero ser rico pero todavía simpático y contento” (in the future I want to be rich but still likeable and happy). In addition, some students (33%) were very specific in terms of the career they wanted to pursue or the type of job they hoped to get in the future, as shown in excerpt 4,

Excerpt 4

Mis padres me enseñaron a trabajar mucho y estar seguro. Mi abuelos me enseñaron a soñar grande. Por mi papa y mi abuelo, yo quiero trabajar por el Marine Corps de los United States. (SFL-09-M)

[My parents taught me to work a lot and be confident. My grandparents taught me to dream big. For my father and my grandfather, I want to work for the Marine Corps of the United States]

Only two students referred to challenges experienced within their families in the past, and how these influenced their present selves, as shown in excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5

Yo y mi familia tenía tiempos malos porque el precio de las casas en Estados Unidos. Cuando vivíamos en los apartamentos, nosotros comimos muy poquito para no gastar mucho dinero. Mi padre me influyó mucho porque él se trabajaba mucho para tener una casa para nosotros. Él influyó a mí para garantizar mi educación [...] también, me ayuda para tener un trabajo o para manejar a un carro. (SFL-20-M)

[I and my family had bad times because of the price of housing in the United States. When we lived in apartments, we ate little in order not to spend much money. My father greatly influenced me because he worked a lot to have a house for us. He influenced me to get my education ... he also helped me to get a job and drive a car]

The student in excerpt 5 was one of the few SFL students who did not include a possible future self in his reflection, focusing instead on the here and now: getting an education, having a job, driving a car.

Students in SHL courses also made frequent references to how their families shaped the person they are in the present. Similar to the SFL students, they also described how their families influenced their current personal qualities and values. However, a large percentage (90%) focused more specifically on how their family members (mostly their parents) inspired them through their hard work and by overcoming difficulties, obstacles, and challenges. These students often expressed their desire to make their families proud by working hard to achieve their goals, by adopting a “never give up” attitude, or by giving something back to the family. On the other hand, a few of them (14%) also reflected on how this could represent not only a responsibility but also added pressure, e.g., “a veces me siento presionada para asegurarse de que sus sacrificios han merecido la pena” (sometimes I feel pressured to make sure their sacrifices have been worthwhile). Excerpt 6 illustrates the family influence, the recognition of its struggles, and the importance of appreciating the help and support received, while also expressing feeling under pressure.

Excerpt 6

La historia de mi propia familia ha influido como trato a la gente ajena pero especialmente ha influido mi aspiración de ser una abogada de inmigración. Mis papás han pasado por mucho y han sacrificado mucho que aunque se los agradezco es mucha presión para asegurarme que sea alguien en esta vida y regresarles todo lo que han hecho por mí. Ser espectadora de las injusticias que han

pasado mis papas me ayudó a tener el sueño de algún día ser abogada de immigration. Quiero defender los derechos de los inmigrantes, conseguir su sueño de ser ciudadanos, y ser la voz que ellos sienten que no tienen. (SHL-01-F)

[The history of my family has influenced me in how I treat other people but especially has influenced my aspiration to be an immigration lawyer. My parents have gone through a lot and have sacrificed much and even though I thank them it is a lot of pressure to make sure I become somebody in this life and give them back for everything they have done for me. Being witness to all the injustices endured by my parents helped me to dream of one day becoming an immigration lawyer. I want to defend the rights of immigrants, to get their dream of becoming citizens, and be the voice they feel they don't have]

In excerpt 6 we notice also how this student's aspirations extend to helping others in an imagined – but familiar – community she would like to serve as a future lawyer, that of immigrants in the US. Other SHL students (16%) expressed similar sentiments, e.g., “el esfuerzo de mi madre me ha inspirado a trabajar duro para ser una profesional exitosa y retribuir a mi comunidad” (my mother's efforts have inspired me to work hard to become a successful professional and give back to my community). Another noticeable aspect was that some SHL students (22%) mentioned specifically the importance of maintaining the family language and culture in the future, as shown in excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7

... quiero estudiar en la universidad para poder tener oportunidades que mis padres y abuelos no tenían, y en el futuro, poder cuidar a ellos. Quiero poder completar esta meta y también no perder la cultura que crecí con cuando estaba chica, y poder seguir hablando español. (SHL-28-F)

[...I want to study at the university to be able to have opportunities that my parents and grandparents didn't have, and in the future be able to take care of them. I want to be able to achieve this goal and also not to lose the culture that I grew up with when I was little and be able to continue speaking Spanish]

Another SHL student mentioned that, even though she resisted speaking Spanish when she was a child, she now appreciates how much her mother insisted on it, as speaking the language has now “abierto tantas puertas” (opened so many doors) in her life.

Finally, it is important to mention that there were many SHL students (69%) who did not offer a specific vision of their possible selves, even though this was part of the prompt. Instead, they tended to emphasize that their current situation could not have been possible without the support and hard work of their parents and that this had made possible a range of bright possibilities for the future, without specifying exactly what that vision entailed, e.g., “no podría tener tantas oportunidades como las que tengo ahorita o la ambición que puedo tener debido a eso” (I couldn't have so many opportunities like the ones I have now or the ambition I can have because of it). This does not necessarily mean that these students lacked a vision of their possible selves, as they certainly envisioned one in task 2 (see below), but that they tended to focus on their current selves.

Envisioning a Future Professional Self

Regarding students' reflections on what they needed to do to fulfill the vision of their future ideal professional self, almost all SFL students (92%) mentioned the need to concentrate in their current studies and obtain their degree to make such imagined self possible, and more than half (61%) also mentioned their intention to continue on to graduates studies, with six students (16%) stating that they wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. In addition, half of the students also mentioned seeking internships as a way to better prepare for their future career. Excerpt 8 shows an example of these moves.

Excerpt 8

Para lograr ser la persona que describo en mi resume, primero tengo que graduarme el próximo

semestre [...] Después, voy a empezar mi maestría de inmediato. Espero hacer mi maestría en Europa para aprender más y tener nuevas experiencias. Durante la maestría, quiero encontrar un trabajo o una pasantía en un laboratorio que sea pagada. Cuando termine mi maestría, voy a estudiar un doctorado en una buena universidad en los Estados Unidos. Después de terminar el doctorado, quiero ser una psicóloga con licencia. (SFL-19-F)

[To become the person I describe in my resume, first I have to graduate next semester [...] Then, I'm going to start my Master's immediately. I hope to do my Master's in Europe to learn more and have new experiences. During my Master's I want to find a job or a paid internship in a lab. When I finish my Master's, I'm going to study a doctorate in a good university in the United States. After finishing the doctorate, I want to be a licensed psychologist]

As can be seen, the student in excerpt 8 has a very clear idea of what she needs to do to fulfill her professional ideal self. Indeed, many students (62%) were specific about what career, profession, or job they aspired to have, while the remaining students imagined a possible professional self in less certain terms, as shown in excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9

... En 10 años quiero tener casas y empresas. No sé cuál será mi próximo paso, pero primero necesito graduarme de la universidad. (SFL-23-M)

[In 10 years I want to have houses and companies. I don't know what will be my next step, but first I need to graduate from university]

In addition to outlining the steps to take, short and long-term goals, and imagining a possible professional self, some students (28%) also mentioned the type of person they would like to become. For example, a student indicated she wanted to learn “como tener una mente abierta” (how to have an open mind) and be more adaptable to be able to “responder a situaciones que no he planado” (respond to situations I have not planned for). In general, the SFL reflections tended to be positive, goal-oriented, and focused on how one accomplishment would lead to the next, even though the vision of a future professional self was not always clearly defined.

In relation to the SHL students, it was observed that a great majority (97%) also shared what they needed to do to achieve their imagined professional selves in terms of completing their studies as well as obtaining additional degrees (mostly Master's) and work-relevant experiences (e.g. internships). Many students (56%) also mentioned the personal attributes and qualities they saw important to develop as part of their imagined future self, as shown in excerpt 10

Excerpt 10

En 10 años, me visualizo como un líder creativo, dirigiendo una marca exitosa que combina diseño, creación de contenido y producción musical. Para trabajar hacia esta vision dedicaré tiempo a aprender nuevas habilidades, [...] estableceré metas claras y alcanzables, dividiendo mis objetivos en pasos más pequeños para mantenerme enfocado y motivado [y] desarrollaré una rutina diaria que equilibre el trabajo, el aprendizaje y la creatividad. [...] Estas acciones me permitirán construir una base sólida para convertirme en la persona que quiero ser en el futuro. (SHL-5-M)

[In 10 years, I visualize myself as a creative leader, managing a successful brand that combines design, content creation and music production. To work towards this vision I will dedicate time to learn new skills [...] I will establish clear and reachable goals, dividing my objectives in small steps to stay focused and motivated (and) I will develop a daily routine that balances work, learning, and creativity [...] These actions will allow me to build a solid foundation to become the person I want to be in the future]

The student in excerpt 10 painted a clear picture of the qualities he envisioned for himself as a future professional: creative, realistic, well-focused, and motivated. Other students offered similar depictions, for

example: being “más abierta con personas” (more open with people), “muy bueno trabajando con otros y comunicándome” (very good working and communicating with others), “flexible and constante y nunca rendirme” (flexible and constant and never give up).

In addition to describing expectations regarding academic achievements and work experience, as well as envisioning attributes and qualities characterizing their future selves, a few SHL students (13%) also emphasized the importance of taking time to care for themselves, physically and emotionally, to become their imagined selves, as can be observed in excerpt 11.

Excerpt 11

Es importante que mantenga una mentalidad de aprendizaje y resiliencia, aceptando los desafíos como oportunidades de crecimiento. Sé que mi desempeño profesional depende mucho de mi salud en general, por eso espero ser disciplinado e ir al gimnasio todos los días. Ser voluntario y disfrutar el viaje me acercará a esa versión futura de mí mismo. (SHL-04-M)

[It is important that I maintain a mindset of learning and resilience, accepting the challenges as opportunities for growth. I know that my professional performance depends greatly on my health in general, then I hope to be disciplined and go to the gym every day. Being persistent and enjoying the journey will get me closer to that future version of myself]

Finally, we share one instance (excerpt 12) of an SHL student who, in addition to reflecting on what she needed to do to become her imagined self, highlighted the importance of the process of reflection itself and how engaging in reflection, continuously and purposefully, is crucial to make her ideal self possible.

Excerpt 12

... voy a empezar cada semana a dedicar un tiempo para reflexionar en mi futuro. En un mundo donde siempre hay algo para hacer y tan acelerado es importante para mi futuro tomar tiempo para relajarse pero también analizar cómo puedo mejorar y que tanto ha progresado.(SHL16-F)

[... I am going to begin each week dedicating time to reflect in my future. In a world where there is always something to do and so fast-moving it is important for my future to take time to relax but also to analyze how I can improve and how much I have progressed]

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the data shows that the tasks implemented in SFL and SHL classrooms helped students reflect on who they are at present, what role their families played in this and, more importantly, encouraged them to think about who they want to become in the future, i.e., to envision a possible self within imagined communities (Ryan & Irie, 2014; Yim, 2016). Both SFL and SHL students also reflected on the steps they needed to take to make such a vision of their future selves possible (Al-Murtadha, 2023; Galloway & Meston, 2022). However, there were also some differences in how these were manifested. For instance, SFL students focused more on how their families have shaped their character, while SHL students wrote more about making their families proud of their accomplishments and being able to give back to both their families and their communities. These constructions of their current and future selves reflect, in turn, students' understanding of their relationship with their family and ways in which they project themselves into the future (Choi, 2018; Norton, 2013).

We also noted that foreign language learners seemed more likely to envision a possible self in terms of highly attainable goals that were, mostly, under their personal control (Oyserman & Horowitz, 2022), reflecting a strong sense of agency, a result also noted in Mackay (2019). In contrast, the heritage learners tended to describe their future possible selves as a way to reconcile personal and family histories and expectations, as well as in emotional terms involving a sense of responsibility and belonging, similar to those reported by Huang and Chan (2024).

In relation to task 2, both types of students could envision a path leading to their future professional selves, although only SFL students specifically mentioned doctoral studies as part of this. On the other hand, SHL students were more likely than SFL students to focus on the professional attributes and values they wanted to foster and develop as well as to reflect on the importance of taking time to take care of their physical and mental health.

By threading topics such as education, work experience, and professional goals, the tasks used in the study helped to encourage students to (re-)interpret their past and use it to define a vision for a possible future (Al-Murtadha, 2023; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). More importantly, by focusing on the notions of possible selves and imagined communities, students had an opportunity to reflect on their sense of selves and their relationship with others, including relevant imagined communities (Nakamura, 2019). This can enhance the learning experience by opening new possible worlds (Kanno & Norton, 2013) and implementing relevant and more intrinsically motivating instructional activities (Machin, 2023). Furthermore, by dedicating time to reflect in writing about their possible selves, their goals and aspirations, and how their family and personal histories relate to these, students can be guided in developing a sense of purpose and a sense of agency that can contribute to the construction of a positive identity, as learners and as individuals (Serafini & Roca-Ramirez, 2024).

We believe that by leveraging the role of the imagination in our Spanish language classes and by challenging students to go beyond tangible spaces, they not only can explore their current and future identities but also expand their understanding of what is possible. In addition, we believe that activities like the ones reported here can motivate students to engage in purposeful reflection about who they are, where they come from, and who they want to become, that is, an opportunity to invest in their present to reach their future ideal selves.

On the other hand, we cannot make any claims as to how the tasks may have impacted, in a measurable manner, students' sense of self or may have influenced, specifically, their future identities. In addition, we are aware that when classroom teachers participate in the analyses of their own students' data, there may be an element of subjectivity involved. However, we feel that their participation as research collaborators contributed to making research findings more relevant and significant to their classrooms and, in turn, their instructional practices can become more closely connected to research interests and goals. Despite these limitations, based on the way students interacted and the written reflections they generated, we are confident that tasks eliciting consideration of possible selves broaden the scope of language learning and language use in the classroom in motivating and meaningful ways.

In sum, the results of the study indicate that the tasks used, one focusing on family histories and another asking students to envision a future ideal job, provided opportunities for students to explore and reflect on their possible selves through the power of their imagination. The instructional tasks and their implementation reflect the realities of the classroom and how students respond and engage with them. We believe such tasks can effectively direct students' attention to their possible and desired selves while connecting them with imagined communities of professional practice. We hope that our study can inspire other instructors to infuse their classes with the power of their students' imagination while focusing on supporting their processes of identity formation.

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Appendix A. Description of Tasks

Task 1 – Immigrant Families in the US

The first of the two tasks centered on immigrant families in the United States. As a country whose history has been shaped in no small way by waves of immigration and associated policies, attitudes, and beliefs, most students in the US have had experiences with this area of life, whether directly or indirectly. In this task, students worked collaboratively to create and retell the story of an imaginary but typical immigrant family. SFL students focused on a family whose ancestors (parents, grandparents) came from another country (in any region of the world) to the US. The SHL students did the same although their task was slightly modified, referring specifically to a typical Latino family in the US. Based on their own experiences, students were asked to think about the reasons why people decide to emigrate, and the challenges involved in this. In addition, students compared the story of their imaginary family with their own family history and reflected on how the past has influenced who they are in the present.

This task was organized in three phases. (1) First, students worked in pairs to create the story of a typical immigrant family in the US. Instructors posed guiding questions (e.g., reasons to leave the country of origin, family members, jobs or schools attended, languages spoken at home, challenges). Students took notes to facilitate telling the story to another peer. (2) After the first oral interaction and still working in pairs, but with a different student, each participant told the story just created. As they listened to each other's story, students were encouraged to ask questions and take notes. (3) Once the stories have been shared orally, students were asked to reflect in writing on how their own family history compared to the imagined stories shared and ways their family history has shaped the person they are at present, and who they want to be in the future.

Task 2 – My Ideal Future Job

In this task, students practiced their language skills in relation to a more formal topic, i.e., their professional goals. They interacted with their peers to describe a person's education and work experience, as well as talked about personal qualities, job expectations, and paths to professional careers. In addition, students reflected on actions they would need to take, in the present, to achieve what they envisioned for themselves in the future. They were asked to imagine themselves as professionals and envision the communities to which they would like to belong, as well as reflect on how their past and present relate to such an imagined future.

This task was organized in four phases. (1) First, each student was asked to visualize what their professional profile would look like 10 years after graduating from college, including educational accomplishments and professional experiences, and to write a brief description of these. (2) Once students created their imagined professional identities, they worked in pairs to create a set of questions that a recruiting company might ask people seeking a job (e.g., educational background, job experience, salary expectations). (3) Next, each student was paired with a new classmate to participate in a role play: one student took the role of the recruiting company representative and used the questions formulated in phase 2 to interact with a job seeker, who used the profile created in phase 1 to answer the interview questions. After this, each student was paired with yet another student, switching roles in the new conversation. (4) Finally, students created a resume for their imagined future identities and were asked to reflect in writing about what they learned about who they are and who they would like to become in the future.

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