

THE  
ELSA CORTINA  
PROJECT

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
THREE CURRICULAR UNITS  
FOR SPANISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

DR. CYNTHIA SLAGTER & DR. MARCIE J. PYPER

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## TEACHING MORAL AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

C. Slagter and M. J. Pyper  
Calvin College

Although teaching and learning verbs and vocabulary has sometimes been considered “value-free,” the beliefs and morality that underlie a teaching approach strongly inform what is taught and how it is taught in foreign language (FL) classrooms. The National Standards in Foreign Language Project (1999) promotes the study of foreign language in this seemingly innocuous statement saying,

To study another language and culture is to gain an especially rich preparation for the future. It is difficult to imagine a job, a profession, a career, or a leisure activity in the twenty-first century which will not be enhanced by the ability to communicate efficiently and sensitively with others. (p. 12)

While we acknowledge these as potential benefits from foreign language learning, one should be cautious about the unstated values underlying this assertion. This type of justification for foreign language learning has been characterized by Smith and Carvill (2000) as profit (i.e., FL as a tool in the marketplace), pleasure (i.e., FL for leisure and tourism), and power (i.e., FL as an advantage in career advancement). Each of these justifications objectifies the foreign language *other*. In their proposal for a wider vision beyond profit, pleasure, and power, Smith and Carvill suggest a new paradigm for foreign language learning under the rubric of *hospitality*:

The callings to be a gracious host and a sensitive stranger point us beyond profit, pleasure, and power, while not canceling them out. If business interactions and tourist visits are carried out within an ethical context at whose heart are a concern for the well-being of the other and a desire to leave behind a blessing, then the other is no longer simply a rival or an object. If learning the other’s language and gaining breadth of cultural knowledge are oriented toward being able to hear the other’s stories, and giving the other space to be human, then our efforts are grounded in a purpose beyond self-enrichment. If we obey the call to seek our neighbor’s good, we will use power to build up the other rather than dominate him—or to enhance our own self-empowerment. ...[Indeed, this new orientation of being a] blessing as a stranger and to practice hospitality could place the familiar justifications for foreign language education in a new and more life-giving light and could provide a challenging corrective to our tendency to place learning about others in the service of self. (p. 122)

Unfortunately, current foreign language textbooks reveal an allegiance to the profit, pleasure, power model. Take, for instance, the treatment of clothing vocabulary in the following sampling of current textbooks in French, German, Dutch and Spanish:

- Beginning French text (*Mais oui!*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2000): shows clothing within a context of fashion advice for nightclubs, shopping, and rap concerts;
- Beginning German text (*Kontakte*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2004): includes role-play activities centered on shopping;
- Beginning Dutch text (*Taal vital*, 2000): emphasizes style and the latest fashions;
- Beginning Spanish text (*Encuentros*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2001): presents clothing in a shopping context which includes malls, markets, and small shops, with a nod to culture at the end through a look at regional handicrafts.

It is interesting to note that the language function emphasized in the Spanish text clothing unit is *complaining*.

Clearly, the principal goal of these lessons is to teach vocabulary and related expressions, but what underlying message is being sent? In what context is the vocabulary lesson presented? Notice that in each case the lesson is set in a context that seems rather self-indulgent: a store or shopping experience in which characters are engaged in commercial transactions or a focus on fashion and physical appearance. The implied message is that learning a foreign language facilitates market interactions and access to the “good life.” Even the culturally contextualized example of shopping in the typical small shop or market presents foreign language skills as a tool for one’s own competitive advantage. The unstated justifications of profit, pleasure, and power permeate these ostensibly neutral lessons.

As these examples have indicated, although curricular materials abound, contemporary textbooks rarely address issues of spirituality, morality, and values. The foreign language classroom *can* be a place in which students learn more than discrete vocabulary and sentence structure. It can be a locus of discovery of common humanity and a place where human dignity is recognized and respected.

Biographical narrative holds together what is often separated in language classrooms—basic language functions and the experience of spiritual and moral challenges integrated into a life context. By studying the life of a real person, students gain an understanding of that person as part of a larger community and a larger historical context. They learn empathy as they share this person’s trials and triumphs and grapple with moral and spiritual issues while listening to and using the target language. Thus, vocabulary and grammar lessons previously grounded in motivations of profit, pleasure, and power, can be refocused to allow students to experience foreign language study as a means of growing in empathy.

The subject for our biographic narrative is Dr. Elsa Cortina, an emerita professor of Spanish at Calvin College who came to the U.S. as a Cuban refugee after the Cuban revolution, along with her husband and child. In Cuba, the Cortinas were comfortably middle/upper middle class; Carlos was a lawyer and Elsa was a teacher and the director of her own private school. In addition, Carlos had been a classmate and friend of Fidel Castro. However, by the time Castro came into power, Carlos was an outspoken opponent of the dictator and his regime. Not surprisingly, by 1961 it was evident that Carlos, Elsa, and their young daughter would have to leave Cuba. The story of the

escape from Cuba, the subsequent hardships in Miami, their life-changing encounter with Christian Reformed relief workers leading to Carlos becoming a CRC pastor and Elsa a professor at Calvin College, forms the basis of this project.

The project began with a series of video recorded interviews with Dr. Elsa Cortina in which she narrated the story of her life: her childhood in Camaguey as the youngest in a large family; her university days in Havana; her progressive disillusionment with the Castro government and her subsequent decision to leave for Miami; and the difficult adjustment to life in the United States. Her narrative is sprinkled throughout with delightful and informative anecdotes about Cuban traditions and customs.

In one especially poignant scene Dr. Cortina recounts the preparations she and her family had to make for leaving Cuba in 1961. At one point she lists the items of clothing that each man, woman, and child were allowed to take out of Cuba. The vocabulary items she mentions are much the same as those used in our prior textbook examples, but now, of course, framed within an entirely different context. This provided the framework for our first unit.

Similarly, Dr. Cortina talks about death and burial customs in Cuba, but frames it in terms of her own faith. This segment, along with a short clip from a recent Spanish film, photos from a cemetery in Mérida, Mexico, and obituaries from a Honduran paper, inspired our second unit.

While both clothing and death are topics commonly addressed in world language textbooks, the theme of our third unit is unique. Sacrifice is not a trendy topic, yet it is one that will awaken a response in our students. By focusing more intentionally on the immigrant experience, this unit speaks to issues that are relevant to communities all over North America.

Shifting the paradigm of a commonly taught foreign language unit can encourage students to move beyond the superficial material concerns and consumer mentality so prevalent in American society. The use of biographical narrative allows for a richer context for foreign language learning while promoting values of empathy and a more profound understanding of human dignity.

Through the activities and the materials that follow, students will be encouraged to adopt a counter-cultural, critical stance toward the prevailing culture from a faith-based perspective. As we anticipate continued work developing curricular materials based on this narrative, it is our hope that these materials will spark discussion, foment ideas, and provide important feedback that will result in offering our students a deeper and more meaningful experience in their foreign language learning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## COMMUNICATION

If you have comments, questions, or suggestions regarding this project, please contact:

[mpyper@calvin.edu](mailto:mpyper@calvin.edu) or [cslagter@calvin.edu](mailto:cslagter@calvin.edu)

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## Elsa Cortina: Biography

Elsa Cortina was born in Camagüey, Cuba, the youngest of eight children. Her father, Angel Mandri Torres, a jeweler, died when Elsa was only eleven years old. Elsa remembers that her four older brothers stepped in to take care of her and watch over her. In fact, she calls them her “four policemen.” The Mandri home was always full of loving family. The sons and daughters all remained with their mother until they married; some even continued to live there after they married. Elsa attended grade school and high school in Camagüey, and went to the University of Havana to study pedagogy. While in college Elsa continued to date a young man she had met in Camagüey, Carlos Manuel Cortina. After a seven year engagement—enough time for Carlos to complete his legal studies and establish his own law office—Elsa and Carlos married in 1953. Carlos and Elsa’s circle of university friends included a number of politically active young people—including Fidel Castro! At that time, Carlos and Fidel were such close friends that they often would stay overnight at one another’s homes.

However, over time Fidel Castro’s politics changed and the two men grew more and more distant. By the time Castro came into power in 1959, Carlos Cortina had become well known for his own anti-Castro political oratory on the radio. Things for the Cortina family became increasingly difficult. Elsa had established and was running a private elementary school in Havana. One day in 1961 Elsa arrived at her school to find two soldiers waiting at the door. They requested the key and told her that it had been taken over by the state. A few days later they presented her with an inventory of the school and informed her that someday she would be reimbursed by the Revolution. Elsa comments wryly that she and her fellow exiles are still waiting for that reimbursement.

This precipitated Elsa and Carlos’ decision go to the United States. At that time it was still possible for Cubans to leave the island legally, but they had to fulfill a number of requirements. All of their possessions were inventoried and had to be left behind. At the police station they had to get permission to purchase airline tickets. When they arrived, the lieutenant told them that they could have the tickets if they signed over their car to him. They agreed. About a month later they were allowed to leave with just the clothes on their back.

Life in Miami was very hard. The American government provided the refugees with \$100/month and army surplus food. When their daughter became ill Carlos and Elsa went to a free clinic, The Good Samaritan Center, where they met a Christian doctor and a pastor who invited them to his church. Soon Carlos became quite active in the church and it was there that he got his first paying job in the United States, organizing the summer Bible school. That summer he approached Elsa with the idea of him becoming a pastor; by the end of September the Cortina family was in Grand Rapids so that Carlos could attend Calvin Seminary.

In Grand Rapids the family slowly began to put down roots. To help support the family while Carlos studied, Elsa began to work in the kitchen of Blodgett Hospital. When Carlos graduated, he became pastor of the Grand Rapids Spanish Christian Reformed Church, where he worked until his death of cancer in 1973. Elsa was contracted to work first at East Grand Rapids High School and then at Calvin College where she was one of the original members of the Spanish Department. While there she founded the Semester in Spain program in Denia, a program in which she continued to be involved long after her official retirement from Calvin in 1988. Elsa now lives in Miami, Florida, close to her sister and many nephews and nieces.

## **Elsa Cortina: *Testimonio***

El primero de enero de 1959 cambió el ritmo de nuestras vidas. En ese momento yo me llamaba Elsa Mandri, y había pasado ya mis treinta años entre Camagüey, donde nací y La Habana donde vivía en este aciago día.

En Camagüey estudié los años de la Escuela Primaria y el Bachillerato. De niña fui criada en la fe católica romana y durante el bachillerato llegué a ser miembro de la “Juventud Católica.”

Me fui para La Habana a estudiar Pedagogía y allí sentí las dudas que quizás puso Dios en mi corazón para los cambios posteriores de mi vida. Empecé a dudar de enseñanzas que había aprendido de niña como: confesarme delante un sacerdote, pedirle a los santos lo que debía pedirle a Dios y considerar el Papa un ser humano infalible. Dejé de asistir a misa pero, sin embargo, me casé por la iglesia católica romana porque así era la tradición cubana.

Llegué a Miami con mi esposo Carlos Manuel Cortina y mi hija Elsa, un día del mes de noviembre de 1961, ocho años después. Allí perdí el nombre de mi padre y desde entonces me identifiqué con el de Elsa Cortina.

Abandonamos Cuba por cuestiones políticas. Por supuesto, ¿quién desconoce que en ese día aciago al que me referí anteriormente fue la llegada de Fidel Castro al poder?

Pocos días después de llegar a Miami, mi hija se puso muy enferma. No teníamos dinero, ni siquiera para comprar un termómetro. Dos días después, desesperada, llamé a un familiar en Hialeah y me trajo el termómetro que me dejó ver la realidad: tenía 104° de fiebre.

Una señora que no había conocido hasta ese momento me habló de un Centro Médico: “El Buen Samaritano.” Un doctor vino a mi “casa”, ¿podría llamarla así? Era un cuarto y un pequeño baño donde la dueña había guardado por mucho tiempo muebles viejos. El doctor nos dijo que la pequeña Elsa tenía sarampión. De esta manera Dios permitió que nos pusiéramos en contacto con la CRC.

El día de Navidad ya pudimos ir al lugar donde se reunían algunos cubanos (Escuela Elemental de Shenandoah en Miami) con el Rev. Clarence Nyenhuis y así poder demostrarle nuestro agradecimiento.

Pero el Señor tenía planes para nosotros. Carlos Manuel quiso seguir asistiendo, no sólo a la iglesia, sino también a unas clases bíblicas que se impartían en el Centro Médico los miércoles por la noche.

A insistencia de mi esposo, un domingo asistí al culto con él y mi hija. Cantamos muchos himnos, entre ellos, “En mis angustias me ayuda Jesús.” Ese fue el momento de paz espiritual y consuelo que no había sentido desde que salí de Cuba.

El Señor a través del Espíritu Santo había tocado mi corazón y desde entonces hasta ahora, toda mi fe está puesta en Cristo como mi Salvador. No importa cuántas dificultades han llegado a mi vida, yo me siento fuerte y segura que Dios me protege, me acompaña siempre.

Elsa Cortina  
Miami, Florida  
June 6, 2005