***Breaking the Language Barrier:***

***Teaching Introductory Philosophy to ESOL Students***

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**Abstract**

*Some students who possess the same cognitive skill set as their counterparts but who neither speak nor write English fluently have to contend with an unnecessary barrier to academic success. While an administrative top-down approach has been in progress for many years to address this issue, enhancement of student performance begins in the classroom. Thus, we argue that instructors ought to do more by implementing a more organic bottom-up approach. If it is possible for instructors to make class content available in other languages, such as Spanish, without thereby compromising something of comparable pedagogical value, then they ought to do so. In fact, we provide here Anselm’s Ontological Argument rendered in Spanish to show how, when it is translated, provides the non-native English speaker with greater accessibility to difficult material. Then, we consider the possible beneficial implications of doing so for university students.*

Keywords: scaffolded learning, Vygotsky, English as Second Language, Philosophy

In 2014, news media outlets in the United States reported that nearly 57,000 underage foreign nationals entered the country from Latin America, escaping growing unrest and violence in countries such as Mexico, Honduras, and Columbia. Children left their homeland and made the treacherous journey to the United States. The children were met by some people who sought their immediate deportation. Despite this, the Latino/a community continues to thrive and is the fastest growing immigrant population in the United States.[[3]](#footnote-4)

We can no longer overlook the facts. According to the Pew Research Centre, there were 53 million Hispanics in the United States in 2012, which is a 50% increase of the Hispanic population since 2000 and nearly six times the number of Hispanics since 1970. Current projections put the growth of the Hispanic community at 129 million by 2060, where its share of the total population of the United States will eclipse 31%. These cumulative statistics about the prospering Hispanic community are staggering.

When the Hispanic community was surveyed, it was discovered:

* Only 26% of Hispanics age 5 and older speak English at home exclusively. That share is 39% among the U.S. born and 4% among those who were not born in the U.S.
* Three-quarters of the Latino population age 5 and older say they speak a language other than English at home, whether or not they also speak English at home. Of that, 99.4% say the other language is Spanish.
* Among Hispanics who speak a language other than English at home, 56% report speaking English very well, while one-third of all Hispanics say they do not speak English very well.
* Some 70% of immigrant children between 5 and 17 say they speak only English or speak English very well. By comparison, just 32% of immigrant adults say they speak only English or speak English very well.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The increasing number of Hispanics emigrating to the United States has not gone unnoticed among Americans. While some Americans have been resistant to the demographic shift calling it an invasion of foreign nationals, others have welcomed the newcomers praising them for their resilience. Politicians, for example, have begun to campaign using posters, mailers, and billboards in both English and Spanish. Similarly, customer service help desks employ bilingual representatives who speak both English and Spanish. While institutions of higher education have not ignored the growing Hispanic community, all members of the university have not facilitated an inclusive environment for the newcomers.

Overall growth of the Hispanic community is not the only reason instructors should rethink their approach to improve cultural diversity in the classroom. For one, institutions of higher education have been attempting to implement change from the top-down by opening “English for Speakers of Other Languages” (“ESOL”) programs. These programs are run independently of the instruction going on in the classroom. While this effort ought to be applauded, we believe that it overlooks a more organic bottom-up approach where instructors implement measures to ensure that newcomers have access to receive high-quality instruction and education. Second, we would like to echo Paulo Freire's (1968) call for social justice in education. Just as we might lift formal economic barriers to receiving a university education by incentivising the student to obtain scholarships, fellowships, and financial aid, we too should work to lift other less formal and more practical linguistic barriers to student learning.

The aim of this paper is to argue that providing a more amenable learning environment for the Hispanic student and easing the frustration instructors may have with the immigrant population by translating class material from English to Spanish implements a scaffolded learning process that will yield greater student success, higher retention, and improved graduation rates among Hispanic students. First, we explore a test case, which comes from one of the author’s introductory philosophy courses. We summarise the instructor’s approach to the course. The introductory philosophy class can be taught in myriad ways, but courses that introduce material by topic makes it a good test case for translating material from English to Spanish. Second, we provide an example of a Spanish translation of an argument. Along the way, we discuss some of the less apparent difficulties encountered in translating from English to Spanish and some of the possible benefits of incorporating that translation in a classroom whose student-base is composed of non-native English speakers. We then address a criticism that claims offering translations of key arguments will prevent foreign students from assimilating to the predominant culture. We believe such criticism is—to say the least—deeply misguided.[[5]](#footnote-6)

**1. Some Preliminary Information about the Philosophy Classroom**

Arguments are the most common tools employed in the philosophy classroom. An argument is a set of sentences[[6]](#footnote-7) where one or more of these sentences, i.e., premises, support the truth of another sentence, i.e., the conclusion. A philosophical argument has one purpose: to prove that some conclusion follows from the evidence contained in its premise(s). If one cannot understand the content of the argument’s premises or conclusion, then one will have a difficult time succeeding in philosophy class.

Given the precision of philosophy’s use of language, anyone with an interest in philosophy and philosophical argumentation must be capable of appreciating the nuances and subtleties of language. If someone fails to have full command and comprehension of language, then the person may inadvertently overlook a critically important data point. Persons whose native language is not the one in which the argument is being presented are at a disadvantage because they are more likely to miss some of the non-obvious details a native speaker might readily acknowledge.

Particularly vulnerable are people who make up the diverse cultural diaspora that exists in U.S. universities, especially those institutions that tend to attract students from foreign countries whose native tongue is not English. Whether students come from West or East Asia, South or Central America, Central or Eastern Europe, their native language may be so different than American English that even ordinary conversation with them is so burdensome that parties to the conversation become equally frustrated by the other. The language barrier obstructs communication between people, and this is exacerbated when it comes to students learning a subject with which they may be unfamiliar, such as philosophy.

Therefore, we translated into Spanish some arguments commonly employed by Introductory Philosophy instructors. We did so with the intent of exploring the difficulties that non-native English speaking students might have to address in their own studies. We believed that translating class material into students’ native language permits greater access to it and would not only positively affect students’ performance on course requirements but also effect a transformation of instructors’ approach to culturally diverse undergraduate populations composed largely of those students whose first language is not English.

This paper does not report the results of a formal quantitative study surrounding the effectiveness of translations, a study we hope others might perform. The two objectives of our project include: (i) translating a notoriously difficult argument into Spanish and (ii) reporting anecdotes from focus groups to determine whether these translations seemed more accessible to the average reader. We have not completed a formal quantitative analysis of the translated arguments, but we have used the translations as a supplementary tool. If we are more cognisant of the subtleties of translation, then not only will faculty be more sensitive to cultural differences but students will have a greater appreciation of philosophy’s richness.

**2. Outline of the university and course**

The University of Texas at El Paso (affectionately known as “UTEP”) is a one-hundred year old state-funded university in the University of Texas System and is situated along the political border of the United States with Mexico. Because of its unique geographic position, the university attracts students, staff, and faculty from both nations and with diverse cultural backgrounds.

UTEP has been ranked seventh by *Washington Monthly* magazine for excellence in social mobility, and research and service. Among all universities in the United States, UTEP ranked #1 in the social mobility category.[[7]](#footnote-8) Providing courses accessible to students who may have had to confront innumerable hurdles to be admitted to college and to help them succeed is a part of the mission and vision of the university. Of those students enrolled in UTEP courses as of 2011, the university boasts that 77.5% of students are Hispanic, 5.8% of which are Mexican.[[8]](#footnote-9) Although the graduation rate of those students entering UTEP their freshman year is lower than its counterparts elsewhere in the state of Texas, UTEP is ranked second in all disciplines combined for awarding Bachelor's degrees to Hispanics.[[9]](#footnote-10) UTEP is ranked seventh of the top ten feeder schools for Hispanics seeking a doctorate in graduate or other professional school. Of the entering class of 2011-2012, 36% of freshmen were first generation college students. Contrast this with what is more widely known about the success rate of Hispanics. Only 13% of Hispanics twenty-five years or older have a college degree, and Hispanics have the lowest educational attainment of any American ethnic group.

More important than descriptive statistics is an explanation of potential language barriers UTEP students might face upon their enrolment in the institution. A great deal of discussion concerning bi- and multi-lingual students in the literature on pedagogy has already been had, but our discussion is meant to be different from theirs because the student body of UTEP is unique, differing from other student bodies in other culturally diverse U.S. universities not just by degree but by kind. Scholars, instructors, demographers, and statisticians typically distinguish between the distinct categories of Mexican-American, Mexican immigrant, and Mexican national. Mexican-Americans are those who are born in the U.S., with U.S. citizenship and are of Mexican descent. Mexican immigrants are those people who were born in Mexico but immigrated to the U.S. Finally, Mexican nationals are those people who were not only born in Mexico but who reside there as well. Since UTEP straddles the border with Mexico, these otherwise separable categories tend to blend together. It is not unheard of that a student born in the U.S. and a U.S. citizen lives in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico with his maternal grandparents; or, a student born in Mexico and a Mexican citizen lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico with his paternal grandparents who are U.S. citizens. There is no individuation criteria that apply in all cases for UTEP students.

Despite our inability to categorise UTEP students into clearly separable categories, we find one thread common to most UTEP students: the ability to speak and communicate in Spanish. For the remainder of this paper, when we refer to “native” speakers of a language, we mean that language the person has learned and employed from early childhood. People are generally more comfortable speaking a language they have employed since early childhood. Of those freshman surveyed in 2011-2012, 50% admitted that they felt comfortable speaking English, while 49% felt more comfortable speaking Spanish or “both” English and Spanish.[[10]](#footnote-11) While half of the students surveyed felt comfortable speaking English, half of the students polled believed Spanish plays an important enough role in their lives that they admitted being *more* comfortable speaking Spanish, even if it is paired with English.

Given that Spanish might be the predominant language spoken at home and the one with which a student might be most comfortable and familiar, we believe (at the very least) that instructors ought to be cognisant of potential problems a non-native English speaker (and writer) might encounter in a lower-level philosophy course.

UTEP has adopted a “validation” model of instruction to address the issues non-native English speakers could encounter during their university experience. The purpose of the validation model is to address cultural differences that might impede students from learning class material and to assist the instructor to become more sensitive to cultural beliefs and student aptitude.[[11]](#footnote-12) Student engagement outside the classroom seems to be positively encouraged because the model is most effective, particularly for populations of students who have been deemed “at risk,” when instructors reach out to engage with students in a non-classroom setting (cf. Rendón 1994). Since Hispanic students fit the high risk category, it goes nearly without saying that UTEP ought to provide faculty with the resources to help guide students through the university experience.

The Introduction to Philosophy course taught by Ulatowski addresses philosophical issues by topic. The course includes five different segments: the existence of God, the mind-body problem, the free will - determinism debate, ethics, and the theory of knowledge. Students are required to submit two papers, one three-page paper and one five-page paper, and to complete two examinations, a mid-term examination and a final examination. To ensure that the students are keeping up with the readings, students must complete a weekly quiz online using the Blackboard Class Management System. Assignments are graded on a graduated scale. Those assignments offered earlier in the semester count for less of the total grade than those assignments offered later in the semester, as students are expected to learn the skill of “doing” philosophy during the semester.

Graduate teaching assistants typically have working knowledge of academic English, but in some cases their native language is Spanish. Teaching assistants can communicate orally and in writing very well both in Spanish and in English. Because of this, the instructor may enlist the help of teaching assistants to ensure that the information contained in assignments and lectures are being conveyed appropriately to those members of the class whose English language skills are not as well-developed as might be expected of students entering university.

**3. Scaffolded Learning**

To include Spanish translations of important philosophic arguments in class is to adopt a pedagogical method known as “scaffolding.” While there is no textbook or one singular definition of “scaffolded learning,” the pedagogical method involves the instructor providing guidance to students through carefully crafted interactions and then, after a period of time, allowing students themselves to engage with the material autonomously. Rogoff tells us:

Scaffolding refers to supportive situations experts construct to help novices extend their current skill set and knowledge, becoming more competent in a particular domain of study. (Rogoff 1990)

Implementing the proper amount of scaffolding in order to optimise student learning has to ensure that as many students in the classroom as possible are on the same footing. Otherwise, these students would not be able to extend their skill set and knowledge beyond the point they currently occupy. When a significant proportion of students enrolled in class are not native speakers of English, instructors might calibrate their instructional approach to accommodate these students.

Elsewhere, one of us has contributed to a discussion of scaffolded learning and provided general guidelines for how one might apply it in a philosophy classroom. Colter and Ulatowski (2013, 2015, forthcoming) argue for a *Socratic Model of Scaffolded Learning*, including four phases and eight stages, where one of the phases is the “Preparatory” Phase. As a part of this phase, it is incumbent upon the instructor to ensure that lessons begin at a relatively rudimentary level, such that students admitted to the university are capable of comprehending the material. Over time, the instructor gradually introduces new and more complex material for the student to master.

Instructors should have an appreciation of the level at which each student operates when they enter the classroom for the first time. Such an assessment is not usually done formally, though instructors may use a pre-test or questionnaire to discover what students know and do not know. For classrooms where non-native speakers of English predominate, instructors might ask students to write a few sentences about themselves. The exercise will help the instructor judge students’ capacity to communicate in written English. In some cases, the formal assessment is unnecessary, especially for colleges and universities located in major U.S. cities that tend to attract foreign nationals and those located along the political border with Mexico and Canada. We might just assume that some students will be non-native English speakers.

Lev Vygotsky has convenient shorthand for distinguishing between levels of learners who have achieved a certain level of comprehension and those that require some form of guidance in order to reach a certain level of comprehension. According to Vygotsky, the *actual developmental level* is the level at which a learner operates unassisted. The *potential developmental level* is the level at which a learner could operate under the correct circumstances with the appropriate amount of coaching or teaching by a skilled instructor. An eloquent way of understanding the difference comes through when Vygotsky writes:

The actual developmental level characterises mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterises development prospectively. (Vygotsky 1978, 86f)

Students beginning at the actual developmental level expect to develop their skill set or knowledge over the course of a semester, quarter, or year in order to actualise their potential developmental level. The instructor acts as a guide in this endeavour, correcting the student where necessary, whether in a formal exercise or in informal discussion, or helping the student along without any correction.

Vygotsky calls the “zone” between the actual and potential level of development the “zone of proximal development,” and it has been adopted as an integral component of scaffolded learning by pedagogy experts. He writes:

When it was first shown that the capability of children with equal levels of mental development to learn under a teacher's guidance varied to a high degree, it became apparent that those children were not mentally the same age and that the subsequent course of their learning would obviously be different. This difference between twelve and eight, or between nine and eight, is what we call *the zone of proximal development*. *It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers*. (Vygotsky 1978, 86)

Vygotsky suggested that adult support allows children to operate in the *zone of proximal development*, the area between what a child can accomplish unaided and what the same child can accomplish with assistance. With adult assistance, children internalise knowledge of content, strategies, and thinking dispositions. This knowledge will guide intelligent behaviour in similar, future tasks. As the child grows in competence, there is a gradual withdrawal of support, and the child takes on more responsibility for completing the task.

Grounded by a comprehensive view in child development theory and especially the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky (1978) could be interpreted as a precursor of the concept of scaffolded learning which eventually was popularised by Jerome Bruner and his collaborators (Bruner 1979, 1987; Wood et al. 1976). In it, theorists emphasised that adult guidance could help children develop higher cognitive functioning. One such area where scaffolded learning seemed most prominent in child development was speech and language acquisition. Vygotsky writes:

The more complex the action required and the less direct the path toward solution, the more important does the role of speech in the whole process become. Sometimes speech becomes so important that without it, the child is definitely not capable of concluding the task. … These observations bring us to the conclusion that the child solves a practical problem not only with his eyes and hands, but also with the help of speech.

The child forms significantly greater potentials in words than the ape can realise in action. The child can free himself more easily from the vector that directs attention directly to the goal and he can carry out a series of complex additional actions using a comparatively long chain of auxiliary instrumental methods. He is capable of independently introducing objects that are not in the direct or in the peripheral visual field into the process of solving the problem. Creating certain designs with the help of words, the child develops substantially large circle of operations, using objects that are not at hand as tools, but he also seeks and prepares those that may become useful for solving the problem and plans further action. (Vygotsky 1930, 15f.)

The scaffolded strategy of child learning and development has three key tenets. First, it is the responsibility of the instructor to determine the difference between what each student can accomplish independently and what the student could accomplish with adequate guidance, namely some kind of position as an advanced beginner. Of course, what seems beyond the instructor’s purview is an accurate interpretation of exactly what the student’s potential is. And this leads us to the second critical pedagogical element. Instructors provide just enough support for students to participate in tasks that would be beyond their reach without their support. This is where scaffolded learning is most useful and pragmatically effective. Finally, instructors engage in a level of support somewhere between completing the task on their own and having students be mere spectators and students engaging directly in the task and the instructor being in full relief. Somewhere between these two extremes seems an appropriate place for instructors to engage in scaffolded learning (cf. Beed et al. 1991).

**4. Spanish translations of critical arguments**

This project originated in the general frustration students tended to share with Ulatowski following the opening section of an Introductory Philosophy class on the philosophy of religion and abstract reasoning. The anxiety induced among students was amplified when these students were non-native English speakers. When Ulatowski was a faculty member in the Philosophy department at UTEP, he worked with Carmen Adel, an honours student, to translate Anselm’s ontological argument into Spanish.[[12]](#footnote-13) This section reviews the Spanish translation of Anselm’s argument for God’s existence. Then, it reports some qualitative pilot data that we collected concerning the translation. We believe that the translated material helps the novice understand the argument, but ultimately conclude that further quantitative and qualitative analyses will be required before we draw anything other than a merely speculative conclusion about the benefits Spanish translations provide for students.

One might ask why we did not use one of the many available Spanish translations of an argument.[[13]](#footnote-14) We have to remember that these translations were done by scholars who already know and have an appreciation for the careful writing and thinking involved in philosophical argumentation. Novices, particularly those enrolled in an introductory philosophy course, do not have any experience or extensive background knowledge scholars do. If a relative newcomer to philosophy comes with a fresh set of eyes to the argument and sees problems other novices might encounter as they attempt to translate an argument from English to their native Spanish, then pedagogically speaking we would be able to diagnose any issues non-native speakers might have to face in their classwork.[[14]](#footnote-15)

The ontological argument for God’s existence is perhaps one of the most difficult to grasp for undergraduate students not only because the content of the argument is abstract but also because the structure of the argument is somewhat unique. On average, Ulatowski has evidence that students’ performance on formal assessments testing comprehension of Anselm’s argument is 25% to 30% lower than on formal assessments testing students’ comprehension of other arguments.[[15]](#footnote-16) Students have difficulty grappling with the conceptual elements of Anselm’s argument. A discussion of the difficulties in translating it to Spanish will exemplify the kind of issues a non-native English speaker might encounter in learning the argument. Similarly, our endeavouring to translate Anselm’s argument proved difficult because philosophical concepts, i.e., technical terms, did not convert easily from English to Spanish.

Here is Anselm’s argument in English, as it has been presented in class:

1. God exists in the understanding.
2. God is a possible being.
3. If something exists only in the understanding, then it could have been greater than it is.
4. Suppose God exits only in the understanding and not in reality.
5. God might have been greater than he actually is.
6. God is a being than which something greater is possible.
7. The being than which no greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible.
8. It must be false that God exists only in the understanding.
9. Therefore, God exists.

When we began this project, Adel raised the problem that students who are more comfortable with Spanish would likely translate from English *directly*. This means that students would not attempt to wrestle with the philosophical concepts, i.e., ‘something’s existing merely in the understanding’, before translating it into Spanish; rather, the student would translate the argument word-for-word. We believed this to be detrimental to the student’s learning the argument. Our starting point was to grapple with those concepts most difficult to translate directly, thereby exposing the parts of the argument that obstruct students from learning it.

To begin with, “the understanding” to which Anselm refers does not translate directly from English to Spanish. In its place, we used “el entendimiento” for “the understanding” to keep it as close as possible to the original phrasing, however, this phrase was interpreted more as *an understanding* (comprehending the concept of *x*) rather than *the understanding* (the mind). Anecdotal evidence collected by the authors of native Spanish language users seemed to reveal some confusion. Native Spanish language users were confused by thinking not about “the” understanding but “to understand.” Thus, native Spanish language users translated “God exists in the understanding” something like “We have an understanding of God” or “We understand God.” Since this is not the meaning of Anselm's phrasing, we had to translate the argument differently to avoid interpretive difficulties.[[16]](#footnote-17)

We changed the wording. Instead of writing “God exists in the understanding,” we used “God exists in the mind.” The two are closely related, even in English, and sometimes instructors choose to use the latter wording over the former because it conveys the idea that we are speaking of God's existence in one's mind. Doing so rendered a relatively straightforward translation: ‘Dios existe como idea en le mente.’

Second, premises four and five also proved somewhat elusive in translation. The terms “reality” and “actually” are too closely associated. “Reality” is “*la* realidad,” and “actually” is “*en* realidad.” Only the prefixes differentiate the two critically important terms of Anselm's argument. If people are not reading carefully, they will not understand the distinction between what is real versus what is actual in Anselm’s argument. Moreover, readers will not come to appreciate the contradictoriness of the argument’s premise. It is at this point in the argument that we should begin to see that the Fool’s position is untenable. So, we decided to alter the Spanish slightly such that it reads “God *might have been* greater than what he really is” (“Dios pudo haber sido más gradioso de lo *que* verdaderamente es”). This translation seems to alleviate the confusion of the direct translation without sacrificing the meaning of the sentence for some nonsensical version of its direct translation.

Finally, the last confusion that had to be clarified in the Spanish translation is “a being than which none greater is possible.” In its place we used a sentence that remained true to the English rendering. The translated sentence is “A being than which there is nothing greater.” Given that the two have synonymous content and likely will not result in confusion for the reader, we decided to go with the latter interpretation. So, here is the Spanish translation of Anselm’s Ontological Argument:

1. Dios existe como idea en la mente.
2. Dios es un ser posible.
3. Si algo existe solamente como idea en la mente, entonces pudo haber sido más grandioso de lo que verdaderamente es.
4. Supón que Dios existe solamente como idea en la mente y no en la realidad.
5. Dios pudo haber sido más grandioso de lo que verdaderamente es.
6. Dios es un ser de lo cual nada mejor es posible.
7. El ser de lo cual nada mejor es posible es un ser de lo cual algo mejor es posible.
8. Debe ser falso que Dios existe solamente en la mente.
9. Entonces, Dios existe.

While we could not complete a formal quantitative analysis of students’ comprehension of the above translation, we piloted the above argument on non-native English speakers and people who had not ever been enrolled in a Philosophy class. We did this in order to test whether the rendering in Spanish had the effect of better conveying the information contained within Anselm’s argument. We employed the above rendering and asked a few people what their interpretation of the above argument was. Here is one response we received:

*Cualquier cosa por el hecho de existir en nuestra mente existe en nuestra realidad personal, sin embargo, si existe en nuestra mente y eso que existe en nuestra mente puede existir en la realidad, en el mundo en el que vivimos, esto que existe en nuestra mente y que existe en la realidad es aún más grande porque no solo existe en nuestra mente, sino en la realidad.*

*Dios es lo más grande y nada es más grande que Dios.*

Anything, by the fact of existing in our mind, exists in our personal reality. However, if it exists in our mind and that which exists in our mind can exist in reality (in the world in which we live), then that which exists in our mind and which exists in reality is even greater because it not only exists in our mind, but also in the reality.

God is the greatest and nothing is greater than God.

The Spanish translation seems to convey exactly what instructors would like to convey to students about Anselm’s ontological argument. Notice that how the respondent has interpreted Anselm’s argument seems to have captured the point of premise three, a critical part of the argument. The person has said that that which exists in reality is “even greater” than something that exists only in our mind. We argue that a proper understanding of Anselm’s argument depends upon grasping that something that exists merely in the mind but that could have existed in reality could have been better than it is, namely it could have existed, and, for that reason, God could have been better than God is if God exists merely in the understanding.

Absent from the person’s interpretation are two points which seem critical for a complete understanding of Anselm's ontological argument. First, the interpretation fails to acknowledge that taking up the fool's position, the atheist's position, leads to a contradiction. This seems to be one of the most important aspects of Anselm's argument because it shows that atheism, the non-belief in God, is an untenable position. Anyone who accepts it accepts a contradiction and that is reason enough to abandon the Fool’s position. Since contradictions ought to be avoided, the only way to avoid it in this case is to believe in God's existence. More work will have to be done to convey to the reader the importance of this point.

Second, the students fail to appreciate the modal complexities of the argument, something that William Rowe takes great pains to explain (cf. 2007, 363-368). Despite that the person interpreting the argument overlooked two of its central features, we believe that the non-native English speaker has an improved comprehension of Anselm's argument. All of these data are preliminary and require follow-up, as well as a formal assessment in a controlled study. This is something that we might complete in the future. Nevertheless, we believe that the reason the person understood the argument depends upon the argument being presented in the person's native Spanish. When students are presented with material in a context with which they are familiar, they have more tools to call on in learning the material.

**5. Possible Benefits**

There are several upshots for incorporating translations of texts in the college classroom, and, in this section, we point out some of these positive consequences. We cannot ignore critical arguments against the inclusion of translated material, so, in the subsequent section, we turn to these criticisms. Despite the criticisms, we wholeheartedly believe that translations of difficult abstract material makes it easier for students to comprehend class material and has an overall positive effect on retaining students.

Scaffolded learning has markedly improved how children learn language (Bruner 1966, 1979, 1987; Vygotsky 1978, 1988), how high school students learn moral reasoning (Colter and Ulatowski 2013), and how philosophy students comprehend material, and read and write (Coe 2010; Colter and Ulatowski 2015; Concepción 2004, 2014). Given the success of this pedagogical approach, we believe that scaffolding the Philosophy classroom for those students whose native language is not English will improve the quality of their education, ultimately compelling them to continue forward in their studies. Students will not be alienated by highly technical academic English but attracted to it. When students have greater access to learning resources, they provide the student the opportunity to capitalise upon them and use them as a part of their studying practices. The use of argument translations in the classroom would not supplant the instructor’s lectures or lecture notes but supplement them, such that the student could call on the translations of philosophical arguments in studying for a formal exam or preparing a draft of a paper for submission.

Nothing, of course, will completely rid students of the fear or intimidation they feel when they begin studying philosophy for the first time but providing them with suitable translations of difficult material will likely make students slightly more comfortable. Our example of presenting a philosophical argument in translation is but one toy example that illustrates the power that translation might have on student learning in diverse classrooms with instructors who are keen on deploying inclusive pedagogies. When people are comfortable, they will not so easily give up even in the face of what at first might seem to be insurmountable problems and difficulties. The comfort students may feel in having material presented to them in their native language will permit them to address the concerns they have with the material on their own terms. Assignments will seem less cumbersome by enabling the student to organise the text into manageable chunks. When students have greater command over their learning outcomes, they become more confident and less likely to give up their studies. So, we believe that extending our idea from the translation of philosophic arguments to the translation of other elements of instruction, such as Powerpoint slideshows or lecture notes, might have a cumulative beneficial effect on student learning.

Early-university-career students most likely to enrol in an introductory philosophy course will be effected most by the inclusion of native language translations of philosophical arguments. They are also the most vulnerable population of students because they are the least likely to finish a degree. Whether it is the early-career student’s failure to be capable of living up to the challenge of university studies or their failure to balance schooling with life’s other demands, some events trigger the student to give up on their college career and studies. In the case of students whose native language is not English, that triggering event might be the feeling that they are unable to comprehend the material presented in the philosophical argument. If the argument is made available in their native language, then that might make it possible for philosophy departments to contribute to the university’s retention of good students whose English may not be as good as the skill set of a native speaker. Thus, retaining early-university-career students and graduating them on-time may become easier for universities that attract at risk populations, such as first-generation and non-native English speaking students.

We believe that too often perfectly good and very capable students are prevented from completing an undergraduate degree because the college classroom's highly stringent focus upon *academic* English leaves too many students to fend for themselves. To make the philosophical argument more accessible to those whose native language is not English just seems to us like the commonsense pedagogical move. Providing as many avenues of support outside the classroom is not nearly as important as providing additional lines of support inside the classroom. So, translating difficult arguments into the students’ native language will provide the student with a lifeline even the most astute tutor could not provide them in an office hour.

That instructors present the content of class in alternative formats has always been an effort praised by university administration. For the blind, textbook manufacturers publish material in braille, and, for the hearing impaired, video resources have been close-captioned. For the physically disabled, buildings have been required to make sure offices and classrooms are accessible. Our primary reason for ensuring that the blind, deaf, or physically or cognitively disabled have equal access to education is not based on genetic differences but on the fact that an otherwise capable person should not be prevented from succeeding when the cognitive or physical deficiency can be easily overcome with some minimal forms of intervention. Language presents just such a barrier to learning because not fully comprehending a language should not prevent an otherwise intelligent and capable student from succeeding in university. Therefore, just as we accommodate disabilities in the classroom, we should accommodate persons whose native language is not English, such as translations of texts in their native language.

We are not suggesting that the non-native English language user ought to be categorised as “disabled;” rather, what we contend is that they, like those students with documented disabilities, have to cope with a disadvantage. It is one that need not handicap them beyond what others without a similar disadvantage might have to address in their own classroom experience. On the contrary, professors and students can work together, much as we have in preparation of this manuscript, to ensure that the non-native speaker is provided with as much of an opportunity to succeed as her fellow student. Giving each and every student an equal starting point will lead to tremendous results, the least of which is increasing the student’s possibility for success.

Not only will students benefit from including translations but instructors will too. If all students have equal access to material, then they will have greater confidence in tackling formal assignments, instructors will have more time to address more sophisticated issues, and the success rate for students will likely increase. In our own anecdotal experience, non-native English speaking students who have been exposed to translations of arguments tend to be more comfortable interacting with the instructor. Translations render a mutually beneficial relationship.

Finally, the benefits of Adel’s own experience of translating Anselm’s argument into Spanish reveals yet another important benefit. She has deepened her understanding of the overall argument and, in particular, of the importance and effectiveness of the role the fool’s position plays in Anselm’s argument. Part of this translation project has made her further appreciate how differently words and phrases could be interpreted through translation. This is something she hadn’t addressed to such an extent for quite a few years when she was fumbling with American idioms.

**6. Criticisms**

There are a few criticisms we must address before accepting the scaffolded learning approach integrating translations of important arguments into the introductory philosophy classroom. First, a critic might argue that permitting students to use their own native language to engage the material would prevent them from fully assimilating because those students would fail to meet minimum admission requirements. Therefore, so the critic argues, we need not provide any accommodation for the student.[[17]](#footnote-18)

We must understand that the non-native English speaker has been unnecessarily handicapped by restricting class material to any one language. What we have in mind is the highly intelligent and fully capable student whose native language is not English, not persons who are not smart enough to attend university or persons incapable of doing work required of university classes. That a person does not have full command of a particular language should not speak against their intelligence. Likewise, it does not suggest that the person is incapable of assimilating to a particular culture since language is merely one component of many different components that make up a culture. Providing students with translations of important philosophical arguments in their native language would likely strengthen their resolve, boost their confidence, and coax them along in learning English.

A second criticism would have it that few publishers have texts of standard arguments used in introductory philosophy courses translated into other languages than English, so employing the strategy outlined in this paper would be overly burdensome on the instructor. If the instructor cannot find texts in a language other than English, then it is too demanding for the instructor to translate any of the class materials into another language. We believe that this criticism lacks substance. Instructors work with student accommodation offices to aid the blind by making texts and class notes, etc., available in braille. The same strategy should be employed when it comes to making texts and class notes available in foreign languages.

Finally, and this is not necessarily an objection to our view, one might be curious why it is we translated Anselm’s argument into Spanish without calling upon some of the fine translations of it into Spanish already in existence. Given the plethora of resources already available to the native Spanish speaking student, we reinvented the wheel.[[18]](#footnote-19)

There are plenty of academic and scholarly resources about Anselm’s argument for God’s existence available in Spanish, and we would be negligent if we failed to mention at least some of them. Our view of the importance of this project deviates from whether scholarly resources are available to instructors and students. We believe that instructors would facilitate learning among Spanish speaking students if they better appreciated the distinct ways in which they think, write, and communicate in their native language. This became apparent to us both as we worked through drafts and revisions of the original argument translation. We began to see patterns that would have been otherwise overlooked by instructors. Opportunities abound for instructors willing to engage with students whose language could present as itself a barrier to learning.

**7. Conclusion**

Not all students have the same skill set or knowledge when they enter university as a first-year student, and this fact is further exacerbated when we consider first-generation college entrants, and at least in some cases their immigrant background. While it goes without saying that some students received secondary education preparing them very well for college, others were enrolled in classes that failed to demand a level of work preparing them for college courses. Because of this disparity, we have to consider those not fluent in the English language an unnecessary handicap to student success. Ignoring them would be unconscionable. Following on Alfred Adler (1907, 1930), it is critical for instructors, and everyone involved in higher education, to bolster the self-confidence of underrepresented and at-risk groups, such as first-generation immigrants whose native language is not English. If it is possible for instructors to make class content available in languages other than English, such as Spanish, then they ought to do so. In fact, as we have shown here with Anselm’s Ontological Argument translated into Spanish, the non-native English speaker will have greater accessibility to difficult class material, perhaps making all the difference for the student’s success not only in her university studies but also in the career path she chooses following her formal studies.[[19]](#footnote-20)

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3. The ethnonyms “Latino/a” and “Hispanic” are not synonymous and ought not be used interchangeably, and we acknowledge that there is a tremendous amount of controversy surrounding their usage. For this paper, we employ the following distinction. While “Latino/a” refers to anyone of Latin American origin, including those countries where inhabitants typically and predominantly do not speak Spanish, like Brazil, “Hispanic” refers to persons of Spanish-speaking origin or ancestry. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The data come from one source. Pew Hispanic Research Centre: Data and Resources, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/data-and-resources/>, accessed 31 May 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Our paper will remain silent on the debate over scaffolded learning’s connection with *dialogism*, the view that students learn best through dialogue with their peers, when it comes to the distinction between a student’s first and second language. Readers interested in the debate should consult Daniels (2001), Forman and Cazden (1994), Wells (1996, 1999, 2002), or Wells and Claxton (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For the rest of this paper, we set aside the technical differences between sentences, propositions, assertions, statements, claims, or posits. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. UTEP 2013/2014 Facts, http://universitycommunications.utep.edu/facts/index.html, accessed 28 May 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. A referee asked whether the 5.8% are Mexican nationals or Mexican-Americans with U.S. citizenship. Surprisingly, we could not uncover any significant breakdown of information pertaining to whether students self-identify as Mexican nationals or Mexican-Americans. We have already noted that UTEP is located along the political border between the United States and Mexico. We should also note that many UTEP students commute in daily from Ciudad Juárez. So, the possibility that undergraduates enrolled at UTEP are Mexican nationals without U.S. citizenship is quite high. We thank the referee for raising this important point. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Irasema Coronado, Mark Lusk, Stella Quinones, & Griselda Villalobos, “Culturally Sensitive Teaching Strategies for Hispanic Students,” <http://cetal.utep.edu/docs/Sun_Conf_Cultural_Attributes%20v22012.pdf>, accessed 6 August 2015. Cf. Donna E. Ekal, Sandra Rollins Hurley & Richard Padilla, “Validation Theory and Student Success: The UTEP way.” *Enrollment Management Journal.* (2011) 5.2: 138-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. We would like to note that we have not endeavoured to translate original source material, such as Anselm’s *Proslogion* or *Monologium*, primarily because there is a fine Spanish translation of Anselm’s philosophical corpus already available (Anselm 1952, 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. In fact, a referee asked this very question of us. We believe that adding a response to this question in the main text of our submission was imperative, and we are grateful to the referee for pointing out this oversight. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. This is a point that Adel raised as we were moving forward with the project. She believed that taking the time to translate arguments with novices would provide me (and hopefully other instructors, too) with some insight of how inexperienced students read and attempt to comprehend the philosophical arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ulatowski has taught “Introduction to Philosophy” at seven different universities (across the United States and abroad in New Zealand) over thirty times, and at UTEP the outcome on formal assessments of Anselm’s argument were significantly lower than on formal assessments testing students’ comprehension of other philosophical arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. One should not think that we translated the argument into colloquial Spanish; rather, we tried to remain faithful to the way the argument is rendered in academic English. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. There is a similar argument of which this first criticism is reminiscent. Think of how social conservatives respond to welfare programs for those who are poor, especially ones that distribute wealth to the least well off in society. Typically, social conservatives argue that providing those people in poverty with financial assistance only makes them more dependent upon government intervention, thus beginning an endless cycle of dependence upon government subsidies to sustain oneself and one’s family. Just as the impoverished person does not learn to become fiscally responsible through government handouts, so too would it be the case for non-native English speakers. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. We are grateful for a referee pointing out this curious issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. We are very grateful for valuable feedback from two external referees, as well as Rob Colter, Susanna Goodin, Franz-Peter Griesmaier, Marc Moffett, and Jeff Lockwood. Moreover, we would like to recognise the unflinching support our UTEP colleagues have shown toward us as we completed this project: Caroline Arruda, Stephen Best, Kim Diaz, Luciana Garbayo, Aleksander Pjevalica, Amy Reed-Sandoval, Jules Simon, and Dean Patricia Witherspoon. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)