What’s Next? Heritage Language Learners Shape New Paths in Spanish Teaching

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RESPONSE

Spanish Heritage Language Learners: Let’s Not Avoid Metalinguistic Knowledge

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Hispania 100.5 (2017): 271–78

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Abstract: The US Census projects that the Hispanic community in the United States will reach 128.8 million by 2060, and this growth requires a better understanding of Spanish as a heritage language (SHL). This essay examines three future areas of development within SHL instruction. First, more communication between communities of research and practice is necessary to improve classroom instruction. Second, novel SHL teaching materials ought to promote a “pedagogy of multiliteracies” approach. Lastly, we provide a discussion that moves beyond differentiated language instruction by considering SHL at all instructional levels and implementing a “heritage studies” curriculum.

Keywords: classroom instruction/instrucción en el aula, heritage studies/estudios de herencia, pedagogy of multiliteracies/pedagogía de multialfabetizaciones, research and practice/investigación y práctica, Spanish as a heritage language/español como lengua de herencia

The last 25 years have been a period of increasing Hispanic1 immigration into the United States. According to recent reports, the number of Hispanics in the United States now amount to 55 million (without taking into account undocumented immigrants who reside within our borders). Moreover, it is estimated that this number will rise to 128.8 million by 2060 (US Census Report 2014). With this dramatic growth comes the responsibility to achieve a better understanding of the underpinnings associated with the Latino experience in the United States and their contributions to its linguistic and cultural fabric.

Starting with the immigrants themselves, they often struggle to assimilate into a society that does not speak their language nor shares their cultural traditions (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2009). Their offspring have an easier time adjusting to the mainstream culture, but often feel uncertain about their identity, struggling between the home- and host-cultures (Carreira and Beeman 2014). Due to becoming acculturated to mainstream US culture, they oftentimes are left with meager knowledge of their family history and ancestry. Language-wise, they soon develop full-linguistic competency in English while maintaining, to different degrees and levels of attainment, their home language. Given the nature of the home language and the socioeconomic asymmetrical conditions in which it is found in the face of the societal language, the minority language has come to be referred to as heritage language (HL). Those who speak a HL are therefore heritage speakers (HS). Due to space restrictions, we are forced to oversimplify complex issues related to heritage language acquisition, and its development and...
use (see Beaudrie and Fairclough 2012; Montrul 2016; Pascual y Cabo 2016). Suffice it to say
that despite being exposed to the HL from birth and in a naturalistic environment, the linguistic
competence of HS generally differs from that of monolingual speakers of the same language in
significant ways. Such outcomes have been theorized to emerge due to differences in the quantity
and quality of input they are exposed to, to the degree of engagement (or lack thereof) in using
the HL, and to limited educational opportunities in the HL (Montrul 2008).

As a result of these unique linguistic outcomes, HS oftentimes are subjected to and inter-
nalize deficit discourses about their HL. As such, it is not uncommon for them to display low
linguistic self-esteem (Carreira and Beeman 2014). Yet, other times, in recognizing the great
value associated with reconnecting with their heritage, many HS decide to enroll in Spanish
classes during their college career (Beaudrie 2012). These now HL learners share the classroom
space with traditional second language (L2) learners and with instructors that may or may not
be adequately trained to deal with this specific student profile (Beaudrie, Ducar, and Potowski
2014). The outcome of this experience is not always beneficial for either party involved since
their respective needs or interests are hardly ever met (Bowles and Montrul 2014). Additionally,
given the biased emphasis of most Spanish courses across the United States that promote
a foreign standard variety, the Spanish language classroom becomes a dreaded space in which
their inadequacies (prescriptively speaking) are consistently pointed out and penalized (Clark
and Coryell 2009).

To address these issues, many advances have been made in a number of subfields including
language acquisition, identity, education, literacy, pedagogy, and policy among others (e.g.,
Beaudrie and Fairclough 2012; Carreira and Beeman 2014; Colombi and Roca 2003; Correa
Driven by such advances, courses and programs specifically designed with the HL learner in
mind have emerged throughout the country (Beaudrie 2012). These programs provide learners
with increasing opportunities to use and to be exposed to their HL; to challenge dominant social
hierarchies; to model and construct positive linguistic and cultural identities; and to serve as a
site for HL literacy-development.

Considering the current and future demographic changes, it is likely that HL learners will
shape the Spanish teaching profession. Motivated by our desire to improve current practices,
we provide a discussion that will hopefully engage multiple perspectives in the (re)shaping of
the Spanish teaching profession. The remaining portion of this visionary essay addresses what
will be most likely the future lines of development within Spanish HL instruction. Changes are
proposed in three areas: 1) the communication between communities of research and practice;
2) the adaptation of a “pedagogy of multiliteracies” to develop novel teaching materials; and 3)
the implementation of a “heritage studies” curriculum that goes beyond language development
at all levels.

First, to address the exponential growth of Spanish HL learners in secondary/post-secondary
school settings (Carreira and Potowski 2010), and to help practitioners address the language
development needs of these learners, a number of resources have been developed: textbooks,
teacher-training workshops, theme-specific conferences, etc. Furthermore, scholarship address-
ing pedagogical concerns and advances in teaching Spanish as a HL is on the rise (e.g., Beaudrie,
Ducar, and Potowski 2014; Durán-Cerda 2008; Llombart-Huesca 2012; Parra 2013). Given the
urgency and challenges that practitioners face in their classrooms, these resources have served
as useful tools to design curricula for HL learners.

However, despite the increased availability of such resources, thus far, very little is known
about the effectiveness of these methods on HL learners’ learning outcomes. In fact, only a few
studies (Blake and Zyzik 2003; Bowles 2011; Bowles, Adams, and Toth 2014; Bowles and Montrul
2008; Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short 2009) have tested how pedagogical interventions
affect language performance and development among heritage learners. What these studies
suggest so far is that HL learners seem to respond differently to pedagogical interventions in
comparison to their L2 peers. For instance, during HL-L2 task-based interactions, HL learners offer more assistance to their L2 peers, especially in the area of vocabulary (Blake and Zyzik 2003; Bowles et al. 2014); however, for written tasks, HL learners depend more on their L2 partners regarding issues of orthography/accent placement (Bowles 2011). Additionally, while HL learners benefit from explicit instruction, their improvement is not as large as for L2 learners (Potowski et al. 2009). These findings, though, remain inconclusive, as more research is needed to ascertain the optimal conditions under which HL learners can make the most significant progress. Considering this, we foresee an increase in empirical studies that will shed light on the interactions between pedagogical variables and prior language experience of HL bilinguals with the goal, when possible, of informing best teaching practices.

While conducting further research on language performance and development of HL learners is crucial, a need exists for communication between communities of research and practice to bridge empirical findings and classroom teaching. As reliable results from (quasi)experimental studies accumulate, these findings need to be accessible to practitioners, who then must decide which findings are relevant to their teaching practice. In fact, based on research findings, we propose that practitioners conduct collaborative action research projects (Mills 2014) as one alternative to determine whether they obtain similar outcomes in their classrooms. In turn, through publication or existing conference venues, practitioners can report their findings, and address the successes and challenges in applying research findings in their teaching. This can encourage insightful dialogues between practitioners and researchers, which can also guide new inquires related to classroom-based practices that address HL development.

A second area concerns the development of pedagogical materials that address the promotion of “multiliteracies” in the HL. Scholars and practitioners have long been interested in HL learners’ development of literacy skills as a key component of HL programs (Valdés 1978). Nancy H. Hornberger and Shuhan C. Wang (2008) expand the notion of biliteracy to comprise not only classroom-based literacies, but also those pertaining to HL learners’ experiences in their homes by considering a number of practices, stakeholders, and spaces. Along these lines, we advocate for novel teaching materials that take into account a “pedagogy of multiliteracies” that sets forth the development of literacies through a “multilingual and multimodal” lens, as espoused by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2009). Cope and Kalantzis argue that “multilingual” should not only refer to different (minority) languages per se, but also to how speakers address discourse differences in one language, and are able to construct and negotiate meaning in a number of spaces. “Multimodal” is seen as the need for language expression in different modes (e.g., visual or audio) to function in a society that is generating an array of multimodal texts through which communication occurs, which is, largely in part, due to advances in technology and digital media. Finally, a “pedagogy of multiliteracies” would recommend that practitioners assess the goals and needs of HL learners to gather information on the types of literacies they would like to acquire and develop.

In short, a need exists for the creation of novel pedagogical materials that provide HL learners with opportunities to develop the necessary literacy skills to function in the twenty-first century. But, to create these pedagogical materials, it will be necessary to continue assessing the learning and professional goals of HL learners as to how they will use their literacy skills in the HL (Carreira and Kagan 2011). Thus, the outcomes of these assessments should guide the creation of relevant pedagogical materials that promote appropriate literacy skills that tackle the burgeoning needs HL learners will face in using the HL in and beyond the classroom. These goals may include writing an argumentative essay for a Spanish literature class; translating medical documents for non-English speakers in their communities; recording professional podcasts to provide instructions for renting a car; and, creating user-friendly Spanish websites to promote banking services. A promising method for deriving relevant pedagogical materials is through task-based approaches that incorporate a needs-analysis of learners’ communicative needs (e.g., Serafini and Torres 2015) that leads to the creation of problem-solving communicative tasks that
can vary in requiring learners to interact with a number of text modes, genre and digital media while forming new or strengthening existing form-meaning connections in the HL.

Lastly, our goal is to move beyond separate curriculum and instruction that serves the varying linguistic needs of HL and L2 learners by considering HL development issues at all curricular levels; and a curriculum that engages all learners (HL and L2) with the construct of heritage in its broadest sense. While this current initiative of differentiating HL instruction and curriculum has been a major step forward in addressing the needs of HL learners, this approach has also been restrictive in nature and suffers from some of the same limitations observed in previous approaches to language teaching. The main goal of traditional L2 Spanish instruction has been for students to acquire a variety of Spanish spoken outside of the United States, without considering the current linguistic realities of US Spanish-speaking communities; and thus, sending the message that US Spanish is not worth learning. By having L2 learners work on a “standard” variety of Spanish while HSs work separately on their HL, we are not only sending contradictory messages regarding the overall value of US Spanish, we are also guilty of continuing to advocate for a behavior that stigmatizes a language variety spoken by millions.

Therefore, influenced by a growing population of HL learners, all students will benefit from learning about US Latino communities. HL learners will reap benefits from reconnecting with their cultural and linguistic heritage. L2 learners, on the other hand, can use their gained knowledge of heritage to develop well-informed personal and professional interactions with US Latino communities. Thus, a “heritage studies” curriculum will be relevant for HL learners and L2 learners, since in addition to the language component, it also focuses on Latino history and culture of a particular US region.

Scholars and teachers will need to examine “heritage” beyond language development. A heritage studies curriculum with an emphasis on language, Latino history and culture focusing on region can bring together three different fields. While the HL acquisition field has been dominated by work from fields as bilingualism, sociolinguistics, and second language acquisition, scholarship in heritage studies is drawn from fields of not just cultural studies, but also museum studies, history, tourism studies, sociology, and anthropology. Because these fields share the common term “heritage,” a productive dialogue among them enriches the Spanish curriculum. Heritage studies courses in a Spanish department will vary depending on instructors, location, and students’ communicative needs. Nonetheless, this variability does not lessen the import of heritage studies courses; in fact, it stands at the very basis of the heterogeneity that characterizes the HL field.

Based on this rationale, we advocate for the development of flexible linguistically, historically, and culturally appropriate courses that bridge theoretical perspectives from Spanish language classes, heritage studies, and Spanish HL studies with the goal of inspiring the learning about the heritage and use of Spanish of a particular US region with a global scope. Heritage studies courses can bridge the basic meaning of heritage in Spanish programs in which the word heritage eschews oppression, the underprivileged, and any stigmatizing function when referring to an individual speaker, community, or the field itself. Heritage studies courses understand the adjective heritage to mean that the speaker inherently possesses a specific linguistic and cultural patrimony, a powerful resource that is more often than not ignored.

Like traditional Spanish classes that focus on a foreign standard dialect with prestige associated to its history and culture, so would the heritage studies approach, as it will focus on teaching that the US region has a valuable language, history, and culture. Students engaging with heritage studies will develop a broad and variable idea of heritage that will foster cultural connectedness through offering the learner a vision of place in the broader community and at large. In the same way that teachers use the context of the study abroad program to inspire language learning, they can also motivate students to learn Spanish by focusing on the heritage of the Spanish-speaking community of a particular region. Because this cultural and linguistic resource is already at reach
in many areas, the inclusion of a community-based/service-learning component is desirable for everyone involved. Engaging with local Spanish-speakers in meaningful interactions would provide students with additional motivation and investment in language learning. This would in turn lead to student gains in linguistic skills and more positive attitudes toward the language and culture (Lowther Pereira 2015).

This novel curriculum can also make use of material that students may learn in other classes since it should be designed to not just examine a specific region in the United States, but also examine the larger context. For example, because this curriculum focuses on heritage with a special emphasis on region, it makes students aware of other regions where Spanish is a majority language that serves as the compass in regions of other minority languages such as Quechua in Ecuador or Galician in Spain. In this sense, it offers the frame of a larger geopolitical context between a region in the United States and Spanish as spoken in other global regions.

This approach will contribute to a vibrant and evolving meaning of “heritage” that is beneficial for both Spanish language instruction and heritage studies. Therefore, this curricular model is not just an ancillary curricular appendage, but rather an indispensable addition to Spanish programs. During the next fifty years, it will not be the creation of a Spanish curriculum and a discrete heritage studies course that will be beneficial for institutions of higher education, but the conjunction of both into an integral curriculum that will promote an enriched learning experience and will pave a future theoretical and pragmatic path for a vital program of Spanish HL and heritage studies for everyone involved.

NOTES

1 Herein, the terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably and with no difference in meaning. Their use refers to people whose country of origin or ancestry makes up the Spanish-speaking countries of North, Central, and South America.

WORKS CITED


Response to “What’s Next? Heritage Language Learners Shape New Paths in Spanish Teaching”

Spanish Heritage Language Learners: Let’s Not Avoid Metalinguistic Knowledge

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Keywords: metalinguistic awareness/conciencia metalingüística, metalinguistic knowledge/conocimiento metalingüístico, professions/profesiones, Spanish as a heritage language/español como lengua de herencia, translation/traducción

Perhaps the most important contribution Torres, Pascual y Cabo, and Beusterien’s (2017) study makes is proposing to expand the principles that guide heritage language (HL) programs to the entire Spanish BA through a “heritage studies” curriculum, instead of having discreet HL programs operating separately within an L2-oriented program. An underlying crucial claim of Torres et al.’s (2017) essay is the need to address the needs of heritage language learners (HLLs) beyond lower division language courses, which have been the target of pedagogical and curricular proposals in the HL literature. As the authors note, “HL programs provide learners with increasing opportunities to use and be exposed to their HL; to challenge dominant social hierarchies; to model and construct positive linguistic and cultural identities; and to serve as a site for HL literacy” (272). For HLLs who take a Spanish course as a general education requirement or to reconnect with their language and heritage, developing linguistic confidence and cultural self-esteem through language engagement and revision of relevant sociolinguistic concepts should be prioritized. A renewed linguistic confidence is a positive outcome in itself, but for some students, it might be the beginning of a language-related career. Programs that address HLLs’ professional and literacy goals must have a strong linguistic component that enhances students’ metalinguistic awareness and knowledge. And this is an issue that cannot be circumvented.

The authors suggest bringing scholarship from cultural, museum and tourism studies, history, sociology, and anthropology to widen a HL acquisition field mostly dominated by the fields of bilingualism, second language acquisition (SLA), and sociolinguistics. However, without denying the contributions of these proposed fields, much remains to be done in the linguistic research arena. It has been argued that because of their implicit and naturalistic development, HLLs possess very little metalinguistic knowledge and do not benefit from explicit instructional methodologies. However, a paradox in the HL literature is that rejecting metalinguistic knowledge on the basis that HLLs are not FL/L2 learners assumes an SLA-oriented view of metalinguistic knowledge. Although the most significant body of work on metalinguistic knowledge has traditionally been seen in SLA, as a possible mediator of implicit knowledge, metalinguistic awareness has been widely studied in L1 research, especially its effects on spelling, reading, and vocabulary expansion. It is this L1-oriented research that we need to bring to the HL research. For example, spelling seems to be an “uncomfortable” topic, practically absent from HL research. However, poor spelling adversely affects HLLs’ chances to be hired for a job that uses Spanish professionally (e.g., in translation, media, or marketing) (Carreira
Research in spelling development is necessary to inform the teaching profession, since HL instructors do not know how to address spelling issues (Beaudrie 2012). For other aspects of writing, while the role of metalinguistic awareness is a matter of much debate, it has been shown to be beneficial in dialect and register contrastive analysis. Superior metalinguistic knowledge is also a must for many language-related professions. For example, many HLLs with a Spanish BA will become teachers and, no matter the pedagogical approach used by those teachers, it is undeniable that they will need to possess a strong metalinguistic knowledge at all levels.1

L1 linguistic awareness develops through specific language and literacy experiences, and progresses incrementally from unanalyzed linguistic representations and a focus on meaning, towards increasingly analyzed representations and attention to formal aspects (Bialystok and Ryan 1985). However, lack of early literacy in Spanish alters this development, and puts HLLs in competitive professional disadvantage with people who have studied in countries whose educational systems emphasize such knowledge. While this might be unfair, we cannot avoid the issue altogether. Rather, we need to conduct research on the specific mental representations of HLLs’ linguistic knowledge and the most appropriate approaches to enhance metalinguistic awareness that stem from them. One aspect worth exploring is that of translation. While translation has been rejected in L2 classrooms, HL research and curriculum should explore and amplify HLLs’ natural translation abilities in order to strengthen linguistic awareness, translation competence, and pride in bilingualism (Malakoff and Hakuta 1991; Lörscher 2012). If we want to truly shift the exclusive SLA-oriented perspective in the Spanish curriculum, we need to fully explore the linguistic abilities and vulnerabilities in HLL bilinguals.

NOTES

1 In fact, teachers who feel insecure about their own declarative grammatical knowledge are more likely to hold prescriptivist views of grammar (Macken-Horarik, Love, and Unsworth 2011).

WORKS CITED