A Cross-generational Conversation about the Future of Teaching Spanish

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RESPONSE

Challenging the Monolingual Status Quo: Heritage Speakers and the Future of Spanish in the United States

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Abstract: In this conversation between three language teachers from the same family with different teaching backgrounds (a retired AP Spanish high school teacher, a Spanish linguistics university professor emeritus, and a Spanish professor at a liberal arts college), we consider the ways in which our field has changed over the course of our careers and how we envision the future of the field. We argue that determining how to teach second language learners, native speakers, and heritage speakers in the same classroom, while simultaneously meeting the language learning needs of each group, will determine the success of the future of the profession.

Keywords: Advanced Placement exams/exámenes de Advanced Placement, heritage speakers/hablantes de herencia, Hispanics in the United States/hispanos en Estados Unidos, language labs/laboratorios del lenguaje, Latino, study abroad/estudios en el extranjero, Spanish for native speakers/español para nativo hablantes

In the summer of 1967, my parents met at National Defense Education Act Institute for Advanced Study for Secondary School Teachers of Spanish in Greenville, North Carolina. Prior to arriving, they both read the list of professors scheduled to teach that summer and they both formed assumptions about the other. My father assumed that Leticia Alonso Zepeda would be a know-it-all young woman from Mexico City. Upon seeing the name Anthony G. Lozano,¹ my mother assumed that he would be another one of those Texans who, despite his Hispanic surname, claimed not to be Mexican. Neither one of them could have imagined that they would go on to live a life together where the teaching of Spanish would be one of their shared passions and that they would have a daughter who also would follow in their professional footsteps.

Their successful marriage can be a metaphor for the future of the profession. Both of their initial assumptions about each other continue to reflect the expectations that we may have of our students as language learners. If my mother and father would have never changed their perception of one another, they would have missed out on the lifetime of happiness that they shared. Like their relationship, the success of the future of our profession will be measured by how we are able to replace biased assumptions with authentic interactions and balance the needs of heritage speakers, native speakers, and second language speakers in the classroom.

Throughout the course of their marriage, how best to teach Spanish to heritage learners was a constant topic of conversation. I joke that I was their language experiment because they wrote articles about my language acquisition as a bilingual child (de Lozano 1979; Lozano 1980a, 1980b). When I earned my doctorate and became a Spanish professor at a liberal arts university, the depth of the conversation continued. In many ways, our family’s pedagogical experiences trace the past and future of our field.
The Evolution of Heritage Learners and Technology in the Language Classroom

The language institute where my parents met prided itself in using the latest in language technology. At the time, many secondary Spanish teachers had limited contact with native speakers and very few of them had studied or traveled abroad. Language labs were introduced as a way for language learners of the era to listen to and reproduce authentic sounds. It was difficult for teachers in North Carolina, or most parts of the United States to find opportunities to converse with native speakers. My mother was among the first generation of Mexicans in North Carolina. It would have been impossible to believe that almost fifty years later, Hispanics are currently the largest growing community in North Carolina (US Department of Commerce 2015). The 2010 census recorded 8.39% of Hispanics in the state of North Carolina (US Department of Commerce 2015). At a national level, according to the Pew Center, “Hispanics will rise from 14% of the population in 2005 to 29% in 2050” (Passel 2008).

The makeup of our Spanish language classes in secondary and in higher education begins to reflect these changing demographics. While in some regions of the United States courses of Spanish for Native Speakers are a possibility and some scholars and teachers think it is the best pedagogical approach, in many schools or colleges these courses are not an option due to funding or due to irregular enrollment. We argue that there are ways to make the most of the mixed classroom and that, when done effectively, it can benefit both types of language learners. We share with you views that illustrate how a mixture of language learning backgrounds in a classroom can make a positive impact in the future of our field.

The following section is based on two interviews that I conducted with my parents over the course of seven months. In these conversations we discussed our views on the profession and its future. We focused on the role of heritage language learners and the evolution of language laboratories, as we believe these are the two areas where our profession has changed the most and that will define the future of our profession. I interviewed my father on December 28, 2014 and my mother on July 20, 2015. I created, posed and transcribed the questions.

Question 1: How have you seen the presence of heritage language learners change during the course of your career and what role do you think they will play in the future of the field?

Leticia: From 1975 to 1977 Tony and I directed the University of Colorado’s study away program in Jalapa, Mexico to the public autonomous Universidad Veracruzana [sic]. It was a program that was made up of sixty students, half of them were Chicanos and half of them were Anglos. Many of the Chicanos in the program were from the San Luis Valley of Colorado and while a few of them understood Spanish, others could not speak it. For many living in the country of their ancestors[,] it was a transformative process that gave them great cultural pride and it gave them an ability to speak to their parents and grandparents. As one of our participants wrote on The Daily Camera website, “I was able to converse with my father in his native language for the very first time after an academic year. Prior to my being fluent in Spanish, my father spoke to me in Spanish, and I would answer in English. . . . I am proud to share that without exception, the decision to hire me over my competitors, in my career in State Government has always been my fluency in Spanish” (Gallegos 2015).

At Boulder High School in 1993, I began to incorporate heritage language learners into the Spanish advanced placement classes. With its proximity to the University of Colorado, the majority of the students are Anglos who come from well-educated, affluent families. It was in those years that Mexican immigration to Boulder increased. Now the school is made up of 20%
Hispanic students. They are for the most part undocumented, first generation high school students who have emigrated from rural towns in Northern Mexico. The majority of the students are what we now call DACA students (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and most of them have parents who have had minimal schooling.

Initially I had neither the support of my department or of the administration, but as we successfully grew the program, we began to gain some support. The AP Spanish language class and the AP literature class became a way for native Spanish speaking students to realize that it was possible for them to take honors classes and dream of going to college. The program has continued and according Michelle Carpenter, the current AP teacher, “Hispano students make up ⅓ of the AP Spanish language and AP Spanish literature classes and the average grade on the exam is 4.3.” I see our continued success at Boulder High as an example of the ways that we can and should incorporate native speakers and second language learners into the same language classroom. They can learn from each other and learn together.

Anthony: When we wrote *Teaching Spanish to the Hispanic Bilingual* we had to argue for the need to create new pedagogical strategies to teach heritage speakers. I argued that “formal grammatical analysis should be presented to Chicano students not only as a valid part of their language experience in the schools but also as a tool for leading them into the study of mathematics, science and logic” (Lozano 1981: 84) and both your mother and I gave specific strategies for teaching grammar or helping students become aware of how they had already internalized grammatical structures. In many ways that book was groundbreaking because before that publication, language teachers hadn't given much thought or value to the need to address the best teaching strategies for heritage language learners. Since then several textbooks aimed at teaching heritage learners have been incorporated into the textbook market. As language educators and researchers we need to be willing to break old schemes.

Angélica: We can apply that idea to how we teach Hispanos. Depending on their individual language backgrounds, we need to help them to break their own language barriers. In addition to becoming comfortable and gaining confidence with their existing language skills, they should also learn how to speak, write and read as high school and college graduates.

Anthony: Yes, we should give them the skills to apply their knowledge to all levels. Language is an instrument and not everybody needs to learn how to talk like Fuentes or Borges, but if someone has a mechanic shop or works in the business world they need to have the skills to be able to communicate in those settings.

Angélica: When I began to work at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, almost all of my students were Anglo middle to upper class second language learners. During my years at the institution the number of heritage learners has grown. Recently when I taught a literature course, of the fourteen students, four were native speakers and all of them had different ethnicities, class backgrounds and language histories. My experience confirms that teachers with heritage learners should not expect their "native speakers to be all the same; each will be native in his own or her own unique way; each will have a different story to tell; and each will have a different personal and family background” (Otheguy and Toro 2000: 92).
My Hispanic students are a constant reminder that we need to continually work to find the best ways to incorporate them into the Spanish language major and requirements. While some institutions have long encountered these challenging questions, in regions of the United States where Hispanics are part of the recent history it is a new situation that we must face. We are doing our students and our profession a disservice if we ignore the learning needs of this growing population. As a way to recognize the presence of heritage learners in our classroom, several of my colleagues and I teach Latino literature texts in Spanish courses. We assign the texts in their original languages of publication (Spanish or English) but we discuss them in Spanish. We also developed a Hispanic Culture class that counts as a course option towards one of the requirements for the major. We offer service-learning courses where volunteer work with the Latino community is part of the curriculum. We have added these texts, topics and service learning components into our major courses because we believe the literature, language, and experiences of the Hispanic community must be part of what we teach our students.

In our conversations we noted that mixed language backgrounds in the classroom present new opportunities and challenges for the students and their teachers. As we incorporate heritage speakers into the classroom, we should value their cultural and linguistic knowledge, but, as García and Blanco (2000) remind us, “teachers should be careful not to use these students exclusively as native informants and as tutors for less proficient students. Such arrangements deprive the native speakers from their own linguistic growth and development” (88). These students should not be singled out as representatives of their entire culture. It is a balancing act to give value to their various linguistic backgrounds as a course resource while not relying on them to be native informers, but when it is done successfully it can enhance the learning experiences of both groups of learners. In my mother’s classes, it was her undocumented students who helped to explain Lorca’s Boda de Sangre to the second language learners. Their knowledge of rural culture where honor is more important than words made them experts in explaining to the Anglo students why they knew that the novio would kill Leonardo.

Allowing the native Spanish speakers to enroll in the Advanced Placement course opened new doors for them. My mother witnessed that with their success in the language classroom the heritage learners gained confidence in the classroom setting and were able to transfer these skills to other classes in other subjects. They also realized they could succeed in college level and honors classes and now many of them even decide to pursue college educations. Non-native Spanish language students had the opportunity to befriend classmates who they might otherwise have ignored. They became aware of their own social and economic privilege and realized that not all students assume that they will attend college. They also learned that many of their Mexican classmates in addition to being full time students often had to work full time jobs in order to help their families. In this way the class continually crossed economic, racial and social divides. Brown (2000) finds that empathy can contribute to the success of learning another language. The Anglo students became better language learners because of their relationships with their Hispanic classmates. In many ways the combination of language learners served as a living language laboratory and each student benefited from the interaction. Just as heritage learners helped to model different language registers and accents for their peers in the way language laboratories did in the past, technology can also serve as a model of language use and as a vehicle to study culture. The way we used language laboratories in the past has changed and how we will use language laboratories in the future must reflect current and future teaching trends, this takes us to the next question regarding language laboratories.
Question 2: How have you seen the use of language laboratories evolve, and what do you think the role of technology will be in the future classroom?

**Leticia:** Technology is a valuable resource when it is used as a way to teach and demonstrate other language dialects or regional and country differences. It can teach students how language varies depending on the sort of register and the community that is using the language. With the use of laptops and electronic tablets, students no longer have to use technology independently. They can use it in groups to study and discuss how language is used. It can be an effective way to value all types of regional and class differences. The more a teacher can give equal worth to all sorts of language and present a variety language examples being used in multiple contexts, the more students can take pride in the sort of language that is spoken at home and understand why different registers are necessary depending on the social circumstances. By exposing students to other linguistic examples they can learn how to feel comfortable with different accents. I have found that oftentimes the language learners that need to be educated the most are Anglo Spanish language teachers as they tend to only value the sort of language that they have learned in the classroom or abroad and are very rigid in their understanding of the language, even when it comes to native speakers’ other variations of the language. I find students are much more open to linguistic differences.

**Anthony:** Throughout my career I have noticed a standardization of Spanish. This may be due to the use of technology and to television. At the same time the lay language learner has a false perception that they will learn a language by buying a Rosetta Stone or similar programs. I call it the “Rosetta Stone syndrome.” Those of us who teach language know that technology alone cannot teach how to speak another language. I also find that in our profession there is too much emphasis on the specialized fields within Spanish, whereas I think we need to focus on our commonalities in teaching language.

**Angélica:** We have only to look at the evolution of language labs to see that how we teach language is changing. Now that textbooks make their audio, visual and lab materials accessible through their textbook websites, the language labs that used to hold these materials are no longer necessary. At my institution we reimagined how to use our language lab. We transformed a lab that housed dated technology and changed it into a space that invites a community of language learners, where students want to spend their free time and practice their language knowledge. Students are encouraged to bring their own technology and we also have portable devices that are available for checkout. We imagine future classrooms that encourage movement, where there are multiple types of seating spaces and whiteboards that can transform into projection screens when necessary. In the past language labs were full of individual spaces where students were contained in carrels and engaged in the individual activity of listening and recording their voices, the new language lab spaces should be flexible classrooms that invite interactions and create a sense of community.

The future of our profession lies not in the language laboratory but in the physical space of the language classroom. The Spanish classroom of the future should be based on a communicative approach where students are given multiple opportunities to produce and to practice language with other
language learners. The ultimate goal of the classroom is for our students to be able to leave with the skills to communicate with people from a variety of backgrounds and in a variety of settings. At its core language learning is and should continue to be about developing a community.

Through our conversations we acknowledged that technology in the classroom can be a very useful tool to create virtual communities and to research information, but we argued that its main worth in the language classroom is as a way to access realia. Technology should not replace the role that we as teachers play, but rather it should be a resource to enhance our teaching. According to Samaniego and Pino (2000), “Teachers should provide model registers using video, radio, movies, guest speakers, and the like, and then require students to model different registers, especially the formal registers, through role-playing, debates and speeches” (43). The use of technology helps students to develop a critical mind for how language functions in different settings. But technology is a supplement and not the means for language learning. In-class conversations and interactions are essential to learning a language and to making the material come to life.

Conclusions

The future of our profession lies in how we will be able to address the challenges of the growing community of Hispanics in our society and in the schools and universities where we teach. Just as my parents entered into their relationship with their different expectations of each other, we as teachers need to be cognizant of our own language learning backgrounds in order to consider how those backgrounds may impact the way that we teach the three types of learners in the classroom. We all must meet the challenge of addressing the needs of second language learners, native speakers and heritage language learners in terms of the content of our courses and the materials we use to teach them. As Valdés (2006) notes, “To date although one can identify various pedagogical goals and objectives in the literature on heritage language instruction, there is no clear articulated consensus about either goals or successful pedagogical practice” (195). Yet this should not stop us from continuing to seek the best methods to reach all of our students. We should create classroom communities that realize that their greatest assets are the various linguistic skills that each student brings into the classroom. The best way to accomplish this is in a classroom that values the unique language backgrounds and experiences of each of our students. Our goal as Spanish language teachers should be to help them all to continue to improve their abilities to communicate in a variety of settings and registers. Our ability to marry the various groups of learners in our classroom will determine the success or the failure of the future of our field.

NOTES

1 We are saddened to share that University of Colorado Professor Emeritus Anthony G. Lozano passed away while this essay was in progress. He was thrilled to know that this article had been accepted for the centenary edition of *Hispania*. Throughout his career the journal published several of the articles that defined his career as a linguist and helped professionals in our field to think differently about the way that we teach grammar.

WORKS CITED


Response to “A Cross-generational Conversation about the Future of Teaching Spanish”

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Keywords: bilingualism/bilingüismo, heritage language learners/estudiantes de lenguas de herencia, language policy/política de lengua, Spanish for native speakers/español para hablantes de español, Spanish in the United States/español en Estados Unidos

In “A Cross-Generational Conversation about the Future of Teaching Spanish,” Angélica Lozano-Alonso discusses a number of topics relevant to the future of our profession, but at the heart of the essay is the growing presence and importance of heritage speakers in Spanish classrooms. As we consider the future of Spanish teaching in the United States, we should also consider how the presence of native and heritage speakers provides world language teachers an opportunity to challenge the status quo of monolingualism in this country with examples of successful and dynamic bilingualism.

Like Angélica Lozano-Alonso, I grew up hearing Spanish at home, though in my case it was from only one parent. As one of the few children not from a monolingual English-speaking family in my North Carolina community in the 1980s, I was reluctant to use Spanish or even acknowledge what I knew outside of my home. I remember feeling mortified when my mother spoke to me in Spanish at an event at my elementary school. At parties or events with other Hispanic and Spanish-speaking families I had a set answer to the question, “¿Hablas español?”—“Solo un poquito.” Only as an adult trying to raise my own sons as bilingual have I come to fully appreciate my mother’s persistence in speaking to me and my sister in Spanish, and only as an adult have I come to understand how my childhood reactions fit into the broader picture of language attitudes and language policies in the United States.

When I moved back to North Carolina from California in 2006, I found a much larger and more vibrant Hispanic community than the one I knew growing up. Mirroring the rest of the country, more and more North Carolina colleges and high schools have Spanish courses designed for heritage speakers, and non-Hispanic students often have opportunities to use Spanish at work or with friends. Yet at the very same time, also mirroring nationwide trends, language programs are being cut at all levels across the state. In the public school system my children attend, which used to have a K–8 Spanish program, students now cannot even opt to take a language until high school.

This disconnect tells us much about attitudes towards language and towards multilingualism in the United States. In a sketch from his monologue Dress to Kill (2002), comedian Eddie Izzard pokes fun at similar attitudes towards bilingualism in Great Britain: “Two languages in one head?” he quips, “No one can live at that speed! Good lord, man, you’re asking the impossible.” Indeed, even as article after article is published touting the benefits of bilingualism, in much of
the English-speaking world monolingualism is viewed as the norm while bilingualism is seen as either an exotic talent or a source of suspicion. As language teachers, we have long been at the forefront of movements that push back against this view. As Spanish teachers in the twenty-first century, we have a unique opportunity to show our students—both heritage speakers and more traditional L2 learners—that bilingual individuals and communities can exist and thrive in the United States.

To do this, we must first and foremost support and encourage heritage speakers to take pride in their linguistic abilities. This may mean recognizing and affirming ways of speaking that are common to Spanish in the United States but traditionally seen as “incorrect” or non-standard, including forms like *haiga* or *fuistes*, and accepting that code-switching is a common practice in bilingual communities. While we want to help all students use formal, more standard language in writing, and avoid interference from English, when we as Spanish teachers belittle bilingual students’ ways of using of language we also inadvertently belittle their bilingualism itself, reinforcing an old stereotype that some Spanish-English bilinguals don’t speak either language well.

Instead of simply dismissing common but non-standard usage as wrong, we have an opportunity to engage heritage speakers in more nuanced conversations about language variation, formal vs. informal usage, and bilingualism itself. Engaging with bilingual students in this way bolsters their sociolinguistic competence and provides other students, colleagues, and the broader society with models of thriving and dynamic bilingualism that serve to celebrate rather than undermine individuals and communities. In the long term these successful examples of bilingualism can change attitudes and perhaps even policies in the United States, which will in turn serve to strengthen language programs at all levels.

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