

Promoting Diversity in the University Spanish Classroom: A Case for Blending Heritage Language Learners and Second Language Learners

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Introduction: This thesis discusses the instruction of Spanish to various types of adult language learners at the four-year university level. In the typical college-level foreign language program in the United States, instructors see in their classrooms a wide range of abilities to produce both written and spoken Spanish. Often, students are referred to as *heritage language learners* if they or their families have origins in a Spanish-speaking nation and have varying abilities to understand or to speak the language.¹ The students are considered *foreign language learners* or *second language learners* if they have origins in the United States or in other nationalities and do not have any working knowledge of Spanish. The goal of the typical foreign language program in United States universities is to devise a plan which optimizes learning for all of the students.

As a result of the different levels of production of the language on the typical campus, many Spanish programs have added classes specifically targeting the heritage

language learner. Generally, the heritage language learner versus second language learner split occurs for a semester or full year, with the students returning to a combined classroom setting for upper division course work. For this reason, one must consider the effects of these separations on the perceived level of rapport in the classroom when these groups of students are brought back together.

In deciding whether or not to divide adult learners of Spanish into classes designed for the heritage language learner or second language learner, one must first take into consideration the needs of each group. In addition, one must consider what is to be done with the myriad of students who do not fit neatly into either of these two rather narrow categories, such as the second or third-generation Hispanic student, without a strong grasp of the language, who wishes to be able to communicate more effectively, for instance, with grandparents. Moreover, instructors must decide on the textbooks and ancillary materials to use, pedagogical approaches to implement, methodologies to use and techniques to apply for each type of class.

Research has shown that the classroom environment has an impact on students' ability to produce the language they are learning. In the field of adult second language instruction, one of the primary concerns that linguists have is that language acquisition may be hindered by the attitudes of individual students or even of individual instructors. Many differences in background may occur among the students; even among the different groups of heritage language learners, and a sense of isolating division may develop between heritage language learners who are

¹ Linguist Noam Chomsky divides language learning into two categories: competence (or understanding) and production (or speaking). 'Competence' may be interpreted as "picking out a hypothetical body of unconscious knowledge that enters into but is not exhausted by its possessor's linguistic performance." 'Production', on the other hand, may refer to "decisions over what to say, which words to use, how loud to speak, ... whether or not to use an idiom and if so which...." (Barber, 2.1)

fluent in Spanish, learners who are Hispanic but do not speak Spanish proficiently and non-Hispanic second language learners who are attempting to learn the language. Differences in students' motivation for studying the language come into play, and if not addressed effectively, those motives have the potential to conflict and create misunderstandings.

Students at the university level have various motives for learning the language. For the heritage language learner, there may be a desire to expand his or her vocabulary, learn colloquial Spanish or gain skills in written communication. The student who is Hispanic but does not speak the language at home may desire to regain the language aspect of the culture to pass on to the next generation or to communicate with family elders. The non-Hispanic second language learner may wish to study the language for business or travel purposes, because of interest in the culture, or simply to fulfill a foreign language requirement.

If these various motives are not addressed and developed into a healthy respect for all cultures - especially the culture of the target language - the students' level of learning will be impacted. For example, according to linguist Stephen D. Krashen, students may develop what is called an *affective filter* that prevents input from reaching the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition under certain circumstances. Krashen suggests that if the student is anxious, has low self-esteem, and does not consider himself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language, he may understand the input, but the filter will prevent the input from being understood and will inhibit active response from the language learners. (5-7)

It is clear how the non-native speaker might develop an affective filter due to unfamiliarity with the sound system of the second language. Krashen and Terrell posit that if the student is exposed to long periods

of comprehensible input, this is to say, speech that is at the level of the learner, production will eventually come (20). However, an important question to ask is whether or not the student deemed a heritage language learner might also suffer the effects of the *affective filter*. Does this phenomenon merely occur among second language learners and the students who fall into the "gray zone" between these established categories, or might it also occur among the more proficient speakers of the language?

For instance, might the heritage language learner feel threatened by the oral or written performance of the second language learners when the different types of students are brought back together in the upper division courses? Is there an emotional benefit or even a toll for each type of language learner as a result of the one-year separation, and how might that affect the production of the language in the year that follows? The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the effectiveness of this separation and to discover whether or not this division is in the best interest of the heritage language learners in terms of their overall academic growth. For instance, when the two types of students are brought back together, are the heritage language learners able to participate comfortably? What is the heritage language learner's level of satisfaction with the classroom atmosphere during the split? How might that level change when the groups are brought back together?

Definitions: In choosing definitions for this research project, I acknowledge the fact that speakers of the Spanish language come from tremendously diverse backgrounds and prefer to choose their own labels.² For the

² According to respondents to a survey of opinions on the usage of the language, labels include: Coyote (a combination of Hispanic and Caucasian origin), Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, Mexican-American and Chicano,

sake of this research project I have selected two manageable categories, with the explanation that the “gray zone” between these categories contains those speakers who may have Spanish-speaking relatives but do not speak the language with a great level of fluency:

Heritage Language Learner: Someone with origins in a Spanish-speaking country who has the capacity to speak the language fluently, while not necessarily having been formally educated in the language.

Second Language Learner: Someone without origins in a Spanish-speaking country who chooses to learn the language for personal reasons.

It may also be helpful at this point to introduce a definition of *heritage language*. Linguist Stephen Krashen suggests that a *heritage language* is “one not spoken by the dominant culture, but is spoken in the family or associated with the heritage culture” (3).

Theoretical Frame: Research shows that the demographics of the typical university Spanish department are changing, perhaps more rapidly in some states than in others. Spanish programs have increased rapidly in popularity, especially since the 1990s, due to factors such as free-trade agreements, immigration and the rising Hispanic population in our nation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2003, Hispanics are the largest minority group in the United States. These factors have an undeniable impact on our nation in terms of cultural, political and economic influence. (Stavans, 6)

among other labels perhaps too numerous to count (Callahan, 12-15). The labels are too numerous to list given the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, I do respect these individuals’ right to choose the name by which they wish to be called.

Consequently, instructors now see a variety of different types of language learners on the typical university campus. Some students have emigrated from Spanish speaking nations and have a solid base of knowledge of the language. Others have been raised in the United States in families in which Spanish is the primary language. Still others have Spanish speaking family members, but have very little knowledge of the language. Some students have no family origin in a Spanish speaking nation and have no knowledge of the language or the culture.

California is an ethnically diverse state with a great need for instruction in second language acquisition (English primarily, and secondarily Spanish). It is therefore a good example of some of the costs involved in education. For instance, the California State University (CSU) system has 23 campuses. Looking at the provision of Spanish as second language classes in 2003, there were 19 campuses within the CSU system which offered undergraduate degrees in Spanish. According to a report produced by the CSU system, based on data submitted by campuses in the Enrollment Reporting System-Degrees program, the CSU granted 446 undergraduate degrees in Spanish during the period of 2002-2003. If we compare this to the 320 undergraduate degrees completed in Spanish a decade earlier (in 1992-1993), we can gain some perspective on the growing student population studying Spanish. It seems important for us to consider both the quality of the programs offered and the quality of the classroom environments these programs strive to produce.

Without respectable progress in the oral and written production of the language, the overall value of the Spanish degree diminishes. One must consider who pays the price for these degrees. In 2005, the cost of attending the CSU system was roughly \$2,520 per academic year for undergraduate students enrolling in more than 6 units. In addition,

the total cost for an academic year for a student living off-campus can run as high as \$18,500 (www.calstate.edu). Financing this education can pose a challenge, and students often require federal and state government aid, military aid, various grants, scholarships, and/or student loans in addition to (or in lieu of) personal or family earnings or savings. Clearly, college degrees represent a substantial investment of resources.

Furthermore, the cost is not only financial in nature, but may also be seen in the form of lost productivity in the many fields these graduates enter after receiving their degrees. Without the development of an adequate vocabulary and accurate verbal skills, these graduates are less skilled at performing translation or instructional tasks in their positions. The scenario of lost productivity in the form of ineffective communication with Spanish speaking immigrants can be quite unfortunate. Those who earn degrees in Spanish go on to work in the realms of education, law enforcement, healthcare, government agencies and the legal system, where accurate communication with Spanish-speaking groups and individuals is essential. It is for these reasons that the effectiveness of these programs deserves continual attention.

Methods: My project aims to compare the needs of the various types of adult language learner on the typical, mid-sized, mid-level, multicultural North American college campus. I intend to take into consideration the demographic spread of Hispanic communities within our nation in examining the reasoning for the structuring of Spanish programs. Furthermore, I will consider the work of the most relevant and outstanding linguists in the field, including Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell in regard to creating the optimal classroom atmosphere to facilitate language development across diverse groups of learners.

By means of an in-depth analysis of research literature, I intend to unveil the pedagogical goals motivating the one-year split between the two groups of language learners. I will also evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. I plan to concentrate on feedback regarding the actual effects of this division, and I will consider the demographics involved in the programs described by the various authors.

Moreover, I wish to propose a series of questions for further consideration. First, is the split necessary and beneficial to the heritage language learner? Second, if the split is necessary and beneficial, what changes (if any) need to be made in this approach to teaching to maximize the effectiveness of this type of division? Third, what areas of teacher education need to be improved in order for split classes to produce the best outcome for both types of students? Finally, might a different pedagogical approach produce the desired result without splitting the two groups apart?

Perhaps it is premature to question whether or not the division of the two types of learners is beneficial. This approach to teaching is a recent development. For instance, according to Brecht and Ingold, in 1997 a mere 7% of secondary schools offered classes for heritage language learners (qtd. in Schwartz, 229). Many current heritage language courses are based on the pedagogical approaches used in courses of foreign language or English as a second language (Schwartz, 30). Due to the newness of the field, educators may not yet be able to discern the advantages and disadvantages of the splitting of the groups. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, questions will arise.

Certain concerns deserve immediate attention. For instance, author and educator Andrew Lynch relates the struggles faced by many students and administrators as they try to differentiate between who is “more bilingual” or “more native” when deciding

which students should enroll in the classes for heritage language learners. He states: "These terminological debates generally lack value in practice, and may result in learners being placed in classes where the level is inappropriate to their actual abilities." The course titles and classification process can intimidate heritage students, causing some to opt for courses intended for second language learners. In the process, these students often face a discouraging semester in a course that is not appropriate for someone with their level of knowledge of the language. (30)

Many educators recognize the deficiencies this can induce in the preparation of future language teachers. M. Cecilia Colombi and Ana Roca address this issue:

[Instructors] increasingly find themselves in teaching situations for which they have received little or no training and practically no orientation during their college education or even their graduate training. In the majority of schools of education and foreign language and linguistics departments, most of the course work aimed at educating prospective Spanish language teachers offers little if any preparation in such areas as first language acquisition, theories of reading and writing, bilingualism, and pedagogical issues of heritage language learners...In spite of the fact that the Spanish heritage language population has increased enormously during the last ten years, schools of education – almost without exception – do not require their majors to take courses in the field of heritage language learning and teaching as part of graduation requirements. Indeed, students are lucky to even find elective courses in this area as part of the curriculum. (5-6)

Perhaps the split between heritage and second-language learners is the best solution to the current problems in the development of heritage languages. More research is needed to assess the actual results of this pedagogical approach. However, it could be argued that there is value in diversity in the classroom.

For instance, textbooks and other curricula for the heritage language classes might differ in a pronounced way from textbooks and curricula designed for second-language learners; for instance, the texts might vary significantly in key areas relating to cultural knowledge. In a textbook for the heritage language learner, author Ana Roca includes a short story by José Antonio Burciaga entitled "Mareo Escolar", which describes in a vividly heartwarming manner the struggles he faced growing up as a Spanish-speaking child in Texas. Clearly the inclusion of this type of story in a textbook is important for the sociological development and encouragement of the heritage language learner. However, it can be argued that it is even more important for the non-Hispanic student to be exposed to this type of reading material. I would think non-Hispanic second language learners would benefit greatly from learning of the struggles faced by the Hispanic students who will be their future class peers when the two groups are brought back together for advanced language instruction.

The challenges of introducing this type of cultural curriculum to a diverse group of students may outweigh the challenges involved in splitting up the two groups of language learners. This could be especially true in light of the current weaknesses in teacher training alluded to earlier. But no matter which approach is favored -- be it the current practice of splitting up the groups or a change of approach in the teaching of culture -- Spanish departments will need to evolve to a level in which differences in cultures and levels of language use are addressed in a positive and supportive manner, one that helps to maximize student success.

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