Teaching Spanish as a Heritage Language: A Case for Language Awareness

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Scholars have used a variety of terms to refer to languages other than English that are spoken in the United States. For example, several prominent researchers in language maintenance like Eduardo Hernández-Chávez and Joshua Fishman, Michael Gertner, Esther Lowry, and William Milan have used the term ethnic. In Canada researchers like Marcel Danesi employ the term heritage to describe languages other than English and French that are spoken by immigrants there. Early on in her research, Guadalupe Valdés used the term non-English and later employed immigrant, ethnic, and heritage interchangeably. More recently she has referred to such languages as minority languages. Rather than discuss what the subtle differences in terminology might be, throughout this paper I use the term heritage language. While I focus solely on Spanish, I believe what I have to say has applications for the teaching of any heritage language spoken in this country (e.g., Korean, Hmong, Portuguese, Italian).

A 1979 report by the President’s Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies includes a section on speakers of languages other than English. The report states, “The US is blessed with a largely untapped resource of talent in the form of racial and ethnic minorities.” It goes on to say that by being brought into the mainstream of educational and employment opportunities in the areas of foreign languages and international studies, [these minorities] could be expected to make rapid, new, and valuable contributions to America’s capacity to deal persuasively and effectively with the world outside its borders.

(“Strength” 14)

Another report, edited by Richard Lambert and others, deals with our national resource base for languages and also includes a section that discusses how the United States underutilizes its native speakers of languages other than English (12).

Ana Celia Zentella underscores the lack of attention given to maintaining heritage languages and building on their speakers’ proficiency. Zentella describes the phenomena as the contradiction between “a national public outcry to increase our foreign language capability, on the one hand, [and] the consistent policy of devaluing the maintenance of the native languages of fifteen percent of the population,” on the other (39).

Guadalupe Valdés writes that the time-honored response in the United States has been to ignore the language richness of our immigrant groups and to take the position that the loss of ethnic languages was a price of becoming American (“Role” 30–31). A heritage speaker of Korean is supposed to forget Korean and study Spanish, French, or German to fulfill a high school or university language requirement. Until recently, the foreign language teaching profession worked very much within this tradition. Historically, we have been concerned with teaching languages primarily to monolingual speakers of English, and we have done nothing to maintain these languages in immigrant communities. Yet we understand that we must play an important role in producing language-competent citizens, and we are aware that our increasingly diverse population has important non-English language strengths. As Valdés adds, we can pretend that there are no such strengths and that we have no role to play in developing and maintaining those strengths, or we can explore how we, as a profession, can contribute to the development of a truly language-competent society (31).

There is a long history of efforts by immigrant communities to teach heritage languages in the United States. Fishman describes Saturday schools and afterschool programs in such languages as Chinese, Korean, Armenian,
One area she mentions has received almost no attention and is of primary interest to this paper: the development of these students’ speaking skills. Teachers need to be made aware that heritage speakers are not simply imperfect speakers of Spanish who have fallen short of the monolingual norm. They are, rather, complex persons who are fundamentally different from monolinguals. Unlike monolingual speakers of Spanish from societies in which Spanish is the sole or primary language, bilingual United States Latinos and Latinas are members of speech communities in which a single language does not meet all their communicative needs.

I feel current and aspiring teachers of Spanish need an introduction to language awareness. I don’t mean awareness of phonology, morphology, and syntax, for many already get some of that as part of their teacher preparation. I mean awareness of how languages and dialects are used in real-life social contexts, that is, how Spanish is spoken in the real world and, more important, why it is spoken as such.

Heritage speakers are usually bilingual and are part of what sociolinguists call diglossic communities: communities that have two distinct codes showing clear functional separation, one employed for formal or high functions and the other used for informal or low functions (Wardhaugh 87–88). In the United States, English is generally considered appropriate for formal exchanges (political rallies, business meetings, announcements, sermons, lectures, etc.), and Spanish is used in informal situations such as conversations in the home and interactions with other members of the speech community. As a result, heritage speakers seldom have the opportunity to hear Spanish used for high or formal functions (except, perhaps, on radio and television); thus they have no models for this register of the language and do not develop this level of Spanish (Valdés, “Role” 67).

Many people, including an astounding percentage of Spanish teachers, often refer to the students’ informal speech as dialect. For many, including these teachers, this term carries a negative connotation, suggesting that this speech is substandard, even defective. Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian point out that some people use terms like language variety, language differences, and linguistic diversity to convey the technical sense in order to avoid misinterpretations resulting from different uses of the term dialect (2).
speakers. Everyone speaks a dialect, even persons who use the educated standard variety of a language. The dialect that becomes standard is an accident of history. If Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch had been from Calabria or Sicily, Calabrese or Sicilian would be the Italian prestige norm instead of Tuscan, the dialect in which these authors just happened to produce a significant body of literature. Teachers need to be made aware that all dialects are equal, just as languages are. A standard variety's status has nothing to do with its intrinsic worth. Therefore, the tremendous concern over correct speech is explicable only by a consideration of the social functions of dialects.

Teachers' feelings about how these students speak Spanish have to do with the question of correctness, which seems to permeate everything language teachers do. Leo Van Lier asserts that teachers, conditioned by years of grammar-grinding activities, ask only one question when they encounter a piece of language: is it correct, or is it incorrect? Concern for correctness, he suggests, blinds them to the true appreciation of language and the creative joy of discovery and overshadows other issues that are more important for an understanding of language. The question of correctness masks the fact that language use is a living process that we need to appreciate and learn to understand better, not merely judge by a list of rules printed in a grammar book (81–82). We must focus on spoken language in its own right, not through the lens of writing. We have to look beyond issues of correctness to the dynamics of language use and diversity, and we have to appreciate rather than fear diversity. It is interesting to note that teachers trained in the more current communicative methodologies characterized by an extremely high tolerance of errors are the first to point out how incorrect the language of heritage speakers is. As a linguist I must reiterate that there is nothing wrong with the Spanish that heritage speakers use, and somehow we have to make teachers understand that the only mistake heritage speakers make is to use a particular variety or register in an inappropriate social setting or context.

We all understand that students must be able to command educated varieties of speech in order to hold certain kinds of jobs. However, any attempt to teach a standard dialect to a nonstandard speaker must take into account the social reasons that people speak the way they do. Some researchers have examined the teaching of standard dialects to speakers of nonprestige dialects. However, as Valdés has pointed out, there has been no such work involving heritage speakers of Spanish (“Teaching” 312). It is well known that speakers of African American varieties of English often master the mainstream variety on their own and without instruction. Many Latino bilinguals who speak an informal variety of Spanish have done the same, but we have no detailed studies of the process; we must carry out this type of research.

On the one hand, teaching the standard dialect to heritage speakers is worthwhile. On the other hand, a normative approach intended to change completely the way a person speaks is not only unwise but also probably doomed to failure. Educators and the community at large need to understand that nonstandard dialects are not bad and that no attempt should be made to eradicate them. If students stopped speaking the way their families and friends do, they would be ostracized. We have no right to expect them to reject the ways of speaking of their homes and communities. Rather, we need to teach them additional speech styles and foster an awareness of the correct contexts for specific styles. Students already know certain speech styles and know the appropriate use for some of them. We must make it clear to them that they are not expected to stop speaking their native dialects in the appropriate contexts and that heritage speakers should not be looked down on for speaking these dialects. They should understand that they need to speak the way their friends and families do when they are with their friends and families and that educators know the standard is probably inappropriate in those contexts. As Wolfson tells us, teachers need to be reminded that dialects have a significant value for the groups who speak them and therefore do not readily disappear, even where the standard language dominates the media and education (224–25).

Judgments that people, including teachers, make about these dialects—as with all languages and dialects—are based on their attitudes toward the dialects and the groups who speak them. The features that attract attention are completely arbitrary. For example, in English, the issue of whether or not to pronounce the consonant [r] is arbitrary; there is nothing intrinsically good or bad about pronouncing [r]. In some communities it may carry high prestige, while in others it may be stigmatized. The same could be said about the features that characterize informal varieties that heritage speakers bring into our classrooms. The students who speak these stigmatized varieties are not disadvantaged by inadequate language. They are disadvantaged by the negative attitudes toward their speech—attitudes that derive from their relatively low social status and its associations in people's (teachers') minds (Holmes 356). How do we change these attitudes? The key lies in promoting awareness of and respect for the diverse varieties of Spanish that heritage speakers use. Knowledge about dialects can reduce misconceptions and the accompanying negative attitudes, as Wolfram and Christian point out (22).

What, then, are the implications for the training of graduate teaching assistants and pre- and in-service teachers? First of all, in addition to the training they may receive in linguistics (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, history of the language), they should learn basic notions of sociolinguistics. They must understand the differences between the way the language is taught and described in pedagogical grammars and the way it is spoken in real life by real speakers (as opposed to imaginary, ideal
Language awareness must involve a conscious effort to put correctness in its proper place: it is a social phenomenon, on par with dress codes and table manners, as Van Lier asserts. Becoming more aware of language does not mean sticking your nose in a grammar book or textbook and studying it more intensely; it means looking up and around and pricking up your ears to hear and appreciate the language around you (82). Bringing these principles and attitudes to our classrooms will do much to encourage acceptance of the Spanish of heritage speakers. Rather than denigrate how they speak, we must endeavor to be sensitive to how they express themselves. While it may be inappropriate to use certain words, expressions, or forms of address in the classroom, it may be completely appropriate for them to do so within their speech community. Instead of “fixing” how they speak Spanish, we need to capitalize on their linguistic strengths and help them increase their linguistic range.

The eighties witnessed the emergence of an internationalist perspective that emphasized global interconnectedness as well as the need for the United States to become what Richard Tucker has termed a “language-competent” society (153). Richard Lambert also sees language competence as a crucial national priority (7). Language awareness can aid those of us who teach Spanish to find ways to bring heritage speakers into the educational mainstream. We must build on the Spanish they bring to our classrooms and use them to enlarge the nation’s pool of competent speakers of foreign languages. Thus, by taking advantage of this valuable linguistic resource, we will do our part to enhance the linguistic capability of the United States.

Works Cited


