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Reflections on the usefulness of traditional classroom setting for heritage learners at the beginner level in Spanish.

Objective:

Despite the growing field of research into the experience of heritage learners in the language classroom, most critical work on the topic focuses on students with an intermediate level in the target language. In the last twenty years our descriptions and understanding of heritage learners have been widely, and justly, expanded, so that we now consider a multitude of students with various levels of contact, experience, and proficiency in the target language as heritage learners. While there is certain recognition for the benefit of classes taught specifically for heritage learners, especially when it comes to considerations of a student's identity in relation to the target language, these classes are commonly geared towards intermediate levels. There is little consideration of the benefit of heritage learner classes for those students who, despite significant exposure to a language at young ages, still only display beginner proficiency. This paper aims to demonstrate the usefulness of beginner-level heritage learner classes for students of Spanish. Based on interviews with two Spanish heritage learners who began formal study of Spanish at the university level in a first-semester class, and using a successful Spanish for Heritage Speakers class at the intermediate level as a model, we propose ideas for a similar class at a lower level that would address the needs of the two students in question.

Partial review of literature

In the past thirty years, the study of heritage learners in the language classroom has become a prominent topic in research on second language acquisition, foreign language

pedagogy, and applied linguistics.¹ Much of the debate in the field addresses the questions of what is a heritage speaker and what kinds of assessments can identify them. The National Heritage Language Survey (2011) has identified several traits of the general profile of the heritage speaker in the United States as a speaker that acquired the heritage language before English, and who have fairly strong aural skills (Carreira and Kagan 40). This study gives us an idea of the most commonly found heritage language speakers in the United States, but it does not speak to groups of heritage learners whose skills in the heritage language are still roughly equal to that of a beginner foreign language student. For this reason, in the present paper I take the more broad characterization of heritage learners as proposed by Susan Oguro (2012): “In this study, we use the term heritage to describe school children who are being educated primarily through English but who also have contact with other language(s) through their family or community” (71).

With increases in globalization and international mobility, as well as a growing appreciation in the United States for multilingualism, language teachers are bound to see more and more heritage learners in their classrooms. Spanish, however, continues to be the largest heritage language in the United States (with Mandarin Chinese in second). Caryell, et al. (2010), have given attention to the unique situation of Spanish as a heritage language in the United States. They explain that it is distinguished by the large populations of native Spanish speakers, geographical proximity of Spanish-speaking countries, and constant influx of new immigrants, by which exist some communities where Spanish is available as much outside of the home as within. Furthermore, at many universities Spanish programs are one of the few language departments large enough to make specialized classes for heritage learners feasible.²

Given the large communities of Spanish-speakers in the United States, there are more opportunities for children to hear and use the language outside of the home. The exposure to

¹ See Van Deusen-Scholl (2012) for an extensive review of recent scholarship in the field of heritage language learning.

² This does not mean that only Spanish or Chinese programs should be concerned with the role of heritage learners. Some language programs, though small in class size, attract heritage learners almost exclusively. An example that comes to mind is the beginning Korean classes at Boston University, where the handful of non-native American students that enrolled in the class found that they were largely outnumbered by students of Korean descent who already had somewhat of a basis in the language. Needless to say the non-native students found the class was too accelerated and somewhat frustrating.

Spanish is nevertheless mostly in informal contexts, and heritage speakers from Spanish communities are often lacking the formal and/or academic registers, although there is a growing interest in Spanish for professional uses. They also tend to have more aural fluency, and lag somewhat in writing skills (Carreira and Kagan 51-52).³ While this is not so different from other heritage languages, in the case of Spanish the presence of a community of Spanish speakers outside of the home makes Spanish heritage learners somewhat less reliant on having a native Spanish-speaking parent (contrary to what Kondo-Brown [2005] has observed in Japanese heritage learners). Thus it is not uncommon to find heritage speakers in Spanish that are not of Hispanic descent (as is the case of the two students profiled here). Furthermore, because of the number of Spanish speakers in the US and the size of many Spanish programs in schools, it is possible to offer more specialized classes in this language, such as multiple levels of Spanish for Heritage Speakers. As our understanding of heritage speakers deepens, so does our appreciation for their unique paths to language acquisition.

Profile of intermediate-level Spanish for Heritage Learners course:

The Spanish Department at Yale offers one sequence of Spanish for Heritage Speakers, which comprises a third- and a fourth-semester language class. Below and above this level, students are expected to enroll in standard beginner or advanced conversation classes, respectively. With respect to the sequence of grammar topics in the mainstream Spanish classes, the Spanish for Heritage Learners covers lessons in a completely different order. At the intermediate level, the class still reviews the sounds of the alphabet and the conjugation of the present tense (which, as Sybil Alexandrov notes, many of her students do not know completely, often missing the “nosotros” or “vosotros” forms, or collapsing the –ER and –IR conjugations). The syllabus is less fixed, leaving room for the professor to decide from week to week how much time to spend on any topic. The teacher of this course comments that she has to constantly probe her students to see what they know. Although it is an intermediate course, it is really a mixed levels class, as the students come from diverse levels of exposure to and

³ In this sense Spanish is not necessarily different from other heritage languages. In the United States,

proficiency in the target language. Students are approved to take the course based on an interview with the professor.

In the Spanish for Heritage Speakers class, the students practice much more writing and aural activities than in the Spanish for non-native speakers. In the latter, the predominant activities are closed grammar exercises (fill-in-the-blanks, modeled questions, etc.). The professor of the Heritage Speakers class notes that her students often complete these exercises with ease, yet, they often have to work more on distinguishing between forms that are either phonetically or lexically similar. In the Heritage Speakers class, students write five essays and watch four movies, much more than the three compositions and one movie per semester that are completed in standard Spanish classes. She uses weekly formative online assessments and individual assignments to work grammar outside of the class, which she mostly dedicates to discussion. One of the greatest benefits of the Spanish for Heritage Speakers class, says Alexandrov, is that students feel supported and less embarrassed to participate. She maintains a low affective filter even when correcting students by maintaining that in class they are studying a more academic/professional register, but that it is not necessarily more correct, much less any better than what they are used to hearing at home.

Profile of Student A⁴:

This student is not of Spanish or Hispanic descent. However, he grew up in Miami Beach, Florida, where he often heard and used Spanish (primarily from Cuba) in daily activities, from spending time with friends to shopping at local markets. His father and grandparents, though not of Hispanic origin, are both fluent in Spanish. Though neither of them studied Spanish in a formal classroom setting, the grandparents' work environment forced them to learn to communicate with employees in the language. The father learned Spanish as a child from native Spanish-speaking caretakers, social activities and work experiences. The student speaks English at home with his family, and took Spanish for eight years in school, starting in the 4th

⁴ Student A was in my class for the first three semesters that he took Spanish; Student B I have only become acquainted with after she completed four semesters of Spanish study.

grade. Upon coming to Yale in 2011, he placed into a first-semester Spanish class, based on the Spanish Department's standardized placement test, an examination which is a combination of multiple choice questions and an essay component.

Although this student did not grow up in a family of native Spanish speakers, he exhibits many of the qualities that research in the field has identified as typical of a heritage learner. His pronunciation and intonation is near-native, and his audio comprehension is far above that of his peers in the classroom. During the first semester of Spanish class, his performance was strong in the beginning, when the focus was on mastering the sounds of the alphabet, personal introductions, and colloquial phrases. Instruction in this class was almost completely in Spanish from the very first day, and when other students seemed to not understand what I was saying, he could follow commands, such as, "Open the book to this page," "Please start this exercise," or "Work in pairs." It was helpful to me to have someone in the class that I could use to model activities or vocabulary, and he was eager to participate. However, once the class material introduced verb conjugation, this student began to have difficulties. The rest of the semester and much of the second semester in Spanish, when the curriculum covers all verb tenses except the conditional, were particularly hard for him. He says seeing a tutor for help was often frustrating, because they would work on mostly written exercises. He eventually found that repeating the conjugations out loud and speaking with students in more advanced classes were the most effective strategies for learning the verbs, and he has since been performing much better in class.

Profile of Student B:

Student B was born in Maryland to an American mother and a father who grew up in Colombia, but whose own parents are American. Her parents thought to raise her bilingually, and as a toddler she could speak a little bit of both languages. She remembers being corrected about which language to speak to certain members of the family. As a small child her family moved to New Jersey, and she attended an English-only school. Once in a formal school setting, she spoke less and less Spanish even when at home, eventually refusing to speak it at

all. She attended a Latin Academy for high school, and so took four years of Latin, but did not study any other foreign languages. In her sophomore year at Yale she began Spanish courses and placed between a first-semester and second-semester level. After a few days of class in the second-semester level, she changed to a first-semester class, where she was more comfortable.

When taking Spanish, this student found speaking to be the hardest for her. The first few weeks of class, she says, were easy, and she was able to follow along with the professor's explanations (which were mostly, but not entirely in Spanish). She was able to learn vocabulary and conjugate verbs without error, especially when the words were similar to words she had studied in Latin. She comments that oral exams were the most difficult for her, and that although her grades were fairly high in these evaluations, she was still shy to participate in class. She also tended to ask questions in English unless prompted by the professor to pose the question in Spanish. When asked about her study habits, she says that she studied for Spanish class more or less the same way she prepared for Latin in high school, mostly by writing sentences with the words and making flash cards. She says that, although she has completed four semesters of Spanish, she still rarely speaks it with her father, preferring to communicate with him in English. She studies anthropology at Yale, and is currently writing a senior essay on the relationship between language and identity in the Mexican-American community in Southern California.

Conclusions:

Overall, the Spanish for Heritage Learners class does not do much differently from what all instructors should strive to do in their language classes. The "one-size-fits-all" instruction typical of many foreign language classrooms (Carreira and Kagan 58) does not necessarily benefit non-native students, either. Ideally every language teacher should incorporate questions of identity into the class discussion, encourage a low affective filter in the classroom, give individual assignments based on students' strengths and weaknesses, and gauge the pace of the class based on students' performance. However, as Sybil Alexandrov has noted, the heritage language class helps students immensely to feel supported and involved in a community based

in Spanish language. The heritage learners benefit from being able to identify with their peers and can take advantage of accelerated aural practice. This effect would be even more valuable to a heritage learner at the beginner level, when just beginning study of the language. These students are even less secure in their language skills in Spanish and, I believe, highly vulnerable to feeling alienated in the language classroom, either because of idiosyncratic skill sets or conflicts of identity.

The two students profiled in this study illustrate some of the difficulties of being a heritage learner in a class designed for non-native students.⁵ Student A, for example, is aware that speaking the language out loud helps him the most, yet many classmates in the standard Spanish classes are more reticent. Although this student is not of Cuban descent, he identifies with the Cuban-based Spanish of southern Florida, and has maintained both the distinctive accent and lexicon of that region throughout his classes⁶. Student B, although quiet in class herself, would benefit from the identity reflection in the heritage classes. She is obviously interested in the role of language in the formation of identity, as per her senior essay, and yet she seems to be struggling with her own relationship to the language. She is similar to the subjects described in Coryell, et al., in that she seems to be searching for a kind of linguistic purity and is hesitant to use Spanish unless she can be sure that she is using it “correctly.” In a heritage learner classroom she might have found support and community among other students working through the same.

The benefits of courses geared towards heritage learners, however, should not disparage the possibility of teaching a successful class with a mix of non-native students, heritage learners, and even some native or bilingual students that are trying to acquire a more academic register. Edstrom (2007) has noted several positive outcomes in these classes in the way that a diverse group of students help each other to fill in each other’s gaps in the acquisition process, and Bowles (2011) has shown that non-native and heritage learners actually do cooperate and

⁵ Interestingly, neither one fits the profiles described by Valdés (2001), who bases her breakdown of heritage speakers on ascendancy to a native speaker that immigrated to the United States.

⁶ This, it should be noted, despite having always studied Spanish with instructors of a strong Castilian accent.

negotiate more or less equally when working in pairs in the classroom. Ultimately it is up to the course instructor to be aware of each student's language background and to foster a supportive and accepting class environment for each to negotiate their own relationship between the target language and their personal identity. To this effect, it is important to continue research in the field of heritage learners, as students of this background will have a larger presence in the classroom, and it is the instructor's responsibility to be sensitive to their needs.

Questionnaire used to interview students for this study:

1. What is your family's background? (i.e. Where were your parents and grandparents born? What languages do they speak? When did they learn those languages?)
2. At home, what language is spoken most often? If more than one language is spoken, are there different times when each one is used?
3. How much did you speak Spanish growing up?
4. Did you ever take formal Spanish classes before coming to Yale?
5. Can you describe your experience in the language classroom at Yale? What have you enjoyed about class? What has been frustrating or disappointing?
6. What parts of class are easy for you? (e.g. written homework? participating in class? oral performance? quizzes and exams? vocabulary? verb conjugations? etc.)
7. What parts of class do you find difficult?
8. What activities in class have you found most helpful?
9. How do you usually study for an exam in Spanish?
10. What study habits have you found work best?

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