

Hispanic Culture Teaching and Learning: The Case of Heritage Language Learners

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Introduction

Language teaching to native or heritage speakers of the Spanish language is becoming an increasingly popular topic in research literature. Additionally, the topic, and others related to it, are of particular importance in the United States given that Spanish is the nation's most studied foreign language and the most spoken heritage language (Brecht & Ingold, 2002). This literature review will explore the theory, research, and classroom application pertaining to the teaching of culture especially as it relates to classes in the United States designed for native or heritage speakers of Spanish (hereafter HLLs for heritage language learners) as well as mixed-classes, herein defined as classes in which HLLs are in the same class as students who are learning Spanish as a foreign language. Given that the literature specific to this area focuses on theoretical concepts and practical applications, as opposed to more formal research studies, those two aspects will be discussed in greater detail.

Heritage Language and Heritage Language Learner Defined

The broad definition of a heritage language is a language with which a learner has a personal connection (Fishman, 2001). Under this definition a student who has ancestors from Spain and is studying Spanish would be considered a heritage language learner, even if that student were a monolingual English speaker. Another common definition of an HLL is someone who has had some exposure to the language, most often at home, and is able to understand and

perhaps speak it to some extent (Potowski, 2005). It has been pointed out by many who have done work in the field that these individuals encompass a large variety of capabilities (e.g. Durán-Cerda, 2008).

Definition and Importance of Culture

As stated earlier, this review seeks principally to analyze culture teaching in classes whose students include HLLs in their ranks; however, a concept worth mentioning is that culture and language are inextricably linked. For instance, in a literature review of culture teaching, it was recognized that expression within a linguistic context is always accompanied by a particular cultural context and without the cultural context the words are meaningless (Paige, Lange, & Yershova, 1999). Therefore, the most effective language classes would likely include culture as a central feature of their curriculum (Alarcón, 1997). Of course, there are and have been various definitions of culture. For the purposes of this paper, the model of culture, when speaking of culture teaching in the context of a Spanish for HLLs class, was given by a theorist who represented culture with a figure of three concentric circles which were said to represent the contact as well as the constant state of change that constantly occur within identities and between cultures (Alarcón, 1997). This model represents well cultural reality for HLLs.

Goals and Objectives

General Culture Teaching Goals and HLLs

There are many general goals related to culture teaching that have been stated with relation to foreign language classrooms. Some that have been mentioned in the literature as being particularly important are the aptitude to see situations from various cultures' way of seeing them

(Bateman, 2004) and being given the chance to be immersed in a target culture in order to gain those viewpoints (Paige, Lange, & Yershova, 1999). As researchers have recently pointed out, in the case of HLLs, culture does not fit into a dichotomous native culture versus target culture relationship; Bateman & Wilkinson support Alarcón's statement by suggesting that it is instead a matter of constantly moving within two culturally distinct ways of interpreting their life experiences (2010). For language learners for whom it is not practical to gain the aforementioned cultural immersion by spending time in another country, it makes sense to structure opportunities for them to interact with available cultural insiders, such as their HLL classmates.

Culture Teaching Objectives for HLLs

In addition to arguing for the creation of separate classes for HLLs, many who have written on the subject have proposed objectives for the teaching of heritage language learners of Spanish. Among these goals, stated both explicitly and implicitly in the literature, are learning targets related to the teaching of culture. Alarcón (1997), after having reviewed several goals proposed for the instruction of HLLs, suggested two central objectives for culture teaching as it relates to this group. These are the cultivation within students of (1) a positive self-image as agents of change, and (2) an appreciation for the diverse varieties of culture and Spanish language in the United States and the rest of the Spanish-speaking world. In some ways echoing that statement, the importance of students studying the functions that their heritage language and its countries will carry out in the future and how they individually can be important in tomorrow's society has been elsewhere underscored (Scalera, 2000). In addition, a volume produced by the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (2000) suggests that instructor's goals for HLLs should include working to augment their cognizance of their own cultural individuality, and Kagan and Dillon's (2000) "matrix for heritage learner

education” calls for the inclusion of attention to HLLs’ daily realities in their homes and in their communities. Therefore, according to these goals, HLLs in Spanish language classrooms must be given the opportunity to not only learn about other cultures but also to reflect on their own.

Classroom Realities for Heritage Language Learners

As of 2004, Potowski and Carreira (2004) point out that there were no standards, agreed-upon or otherwise, in the field of teaching Spanish to HLLs. They point out that this lack pervaded all levels of Spanish heritage language classes including the absolute, or near-absolute, absence of a methods textbook and teacher training as well as state-sponsored teacher certification and national standards for Spanish HLLs. Upon reviewing the syllabi of methods courses for teachers of Spanish, Potowski and Carreira found that very few even mention heritage language issues.

Make-up of Classes

Despite what seems to be almost universal agreement in academia for the establishment of separate language classes for HLLs as well as the efforts of large ethnic communities to convince school districts to incorporate these courses, attempts to establish them have overall met with limited success in the United States (Brecht & Ingold, 2002). In fact, the results of a recent nationwide survey by National Foreign Language Center and American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese demonstrate that only 18% of college or university Spanish programs and 9% of junior high and high school programs offer courses that are specifically designed for HLLs (as cited in Potowski & Carreira, 2004). Furthermore, states in which there has historically been a substantial population of HLLs, such as California, Texas, and New

Mexico, have had more success in the establishment and continuation of programs designed to better meet the needs of HLLs than those that have not had that historical demographic.

As an example of the just-mentioned fact, Bateman and Wilkinson (2010) surveyed teachers of Spanish throughout the state of Utah and found that 75% of those who responded to the survey indicated that no special Spanish for HLL classes were offered at their schools. They found that most HLLs were taking a Spanish as a foreign language class for beginning or intermediate students, which are not designed to best serve these students' development of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Moreover, the survey revealed that, even within specialized Spanish classes for HLLs, most schools have only one class that serves all levels of HLLs. That, of course, is difficult because not all HLLs have equal linguistic and cultural competences. Interestingly, another survey (Potowski, 2002) of one program that included Spanish courses for both HLLs and those who were learning Spanish as a foreign language found that many HLLs chose to take Spanish as a foreign language courses rather than the courses designed for them. The students indicated various reasons including ignorance of the existence of the alternate class, scheduling conflicts, and the belief that they would easily earn a good grade in a Spanish as a foreign language class. All of these findings confirm the belief stated by Potowski and Carreira (2004) that classes that demonstrate a linguistic and cultural mix will be the norm for Spanish classes in the United States.

The foregoing reality presents a variety of challenges. For example, in terms of class composition, surely a Spanish classroom that includes HLLs who speak Spanish mainly at home but do not see their parents often (Potowski, 2005) as well as students having an English background that includes learning English as a second language or speaking a marginalized dialect would pose several unique challenges (Potowski & Carreira, 2004). It is important to state

once again that typical Spanish classes do not meet the needs of HLLs but are probably the most common setting in which they are given the opportunity to learn more about Spanish and its various related cultures.

Materials

Speaking generally of cultural material in textbooks, it is mentioned in the volume edited by Paige, Lange, and Yershova (1999) that, for better or worse, the point of view represented is usually that of the author. In addition, the volume also mentions that these materials tend to be superficial especially in their focus on supposed culture facts. Bateman and Wilkinson (2010) point out that HLLs may be disinterested in chapters on Spanish or Mexican culture or the amazing lives of famous Hispanics. They say that such disinterest stems from the fact that in such chapters students' bilingual and bicultural reality are ignored. Alarcón (1997) underscores the fact that most texts either do not mention Latino culture in the United States or briefly touch on it at the end of the book. The program about which Alarcón writes begins culture study by first considering the reality of their students' lives.

Teachers: Skills, Training, and Perspective

As has been mentioned, language classes with students, and also teachers, of varying degrees of linguistic and cultural skill are the norm including classes made for HLLs. Given that such courses are common, Potowski and Carreira (2004) suggest that providing teachers with training to face the opportunities and challenges of such a setting needs to be high on the profession's priority list. In Bateman and Wilkinson's (2010) study, HLLs were seen by teachers as being resistant to education and literacy in general and, in particular, the development of their

heritage language skills and the exploration of other Spanish speakers' ways of life, including of course the differences in the usage of words that are different from their own. Despite these difficult realities, there are certain potential advantages to, for instance, a class with native students whose teacher is a non-native speaker of Spanish. Among these is the probability that the teacher's skills are complementary to those of the students. For example, in terms of culture teaching, a teacher may have traveled to or lived in some of the HLLs' ancestral lands which perhaps they have not yet seen. Such a circumstance would allow teachers to provide students with their insights and also allow students to share how their experiences may reflect that insight. In addition, a class whose students include both HLLs and Spanish language learners gives both types of students the opportunity to reflect on their own culture. It also gives the language learners the opportunity to learn more about the cultures being studied directly from a cultural insider.

Pedagogical Principles and Approaches

Culture Teaching

Traditionally, the teaching of culture in language classes has been an ancillary objective with the primary goals being the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Alarcón 1997). A similar focus was also shown in an in-depth study of six schools (Valdés et al., 2006) whose programs' focuses were shown to be the teaching of literature and grammar as well as college-credit examination preparation. As indicated previously, any exceptions to this focus do not occur within a framework contextualized by agreed-upon principles of proven best practices. However, some common principles and promising practices have been suggested in both the literature on language/culture teaching and on teaching HLLs.

A More Student-Centered Pedagogy

Among the principles that are repeatedly mentioned in the literature is the notion of a more student-centered pedagogy. It has been suggested that instructors can work with students by guiding them through a course that will enable them to learn of and discover culture (Paige, Lange, & Yershova, 1999). After having discussed suggested objectives for teaching HLLs, Alarcón (1997) suggested that those objectives should be carried out within an educational setting in which students are actively participating. Upon evaluating bilingual education classrooms in New York, García and Otheguy (1997) found that students were engaged in a teacher-guided discovery process that enhanced communication between students, allowing them to make use of a fuller, richer way of expressing themselves. This interaction was observed to reflect the students' homes and communities and therefore likely included a simultaneous reflection of both the cultural and linguistic treasure these students brought to their classrooms. Potowski (2005) has observed that extenuating circumstances, which make the establishment of a specialized curriculum for HLLs impossible, should not deter a concerted effort by teachers to acknowledge and appreciate students' HLL identity. Shrum and Glisan (2009) have also expressed the belief that, no matter the level, a language-learning program should be centered on learners.

Self-Awareness

A previously-mentioned, related theme that stands out in the literature is the need for students to have a heightened awareness of their own culture and for teachers to help them do so. It has been recommended that instructors let students examine cross-cultural interaction from their point of view, thus empowering them to discover their own opinions (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Furthermore, it has been suggested that we can better comprehend distinct ways of interpreting cultural realities by first having an increased sensitivity to and understanding of our

way of interpreting them (Galloway, 2001). Thus, Valdés (2001) has declared the major challenge of Spanish instructors of HLLs to be teaching in such a way that all benefit from a learner's personal tie to the language and culture.

Ethnography

One method that has been successfully employed to meet this challenge is the use of ethnographic interviews. In general, ethnography is a technique utilized to acquire cultural insights from an insider's, or native of that culture's, perspective. This is done by interviewing a cultural insider from the community who is able to give a unique and exclusive viewpoint on a given subject (Rodríguez Pino, 1997). This procedure requires an organized system in which students can be taught to pose evocative questions and develop listening skills in a genuine situation. This approach can also be useful because it has been suggested that it is a worthwhile activity for HLLs to impart their original perspective on their life at home and within the culture (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Although it requires a significant time commitment from both the students and the teacher, conducting ethnographic interviews can lead to a variety of positive outcomes.

Despite the challenges of its coordination, one such project (Bateman, 2004) yielded results that included changes in stereotypical or otherwise misconceived points of view. Some students who participated in the project also reported an augmentation in their Hispanic language/culture learning aspirations. Although Bateman's project focused on traditional students of Spanish as a foreign language interviewing native speakers of Spanish, similar projects have been successfully carried out in classes designed for HLLs. For instance, one class required HLLs to interview one of their relatives or a member of the community in Spanish and talk about

Latino culture (Durán-Cerda, 2008). The positive results of this project were summarized in the report by one student's reflection on the project, which is quoted in part here:

Para mí esta entrevista que le hice a mi padre fue muy interesante y pude aprender tanto de él y de nuestra familia que nunca sabía. En la entrevista mi padre se abrió...y [habló] de cosas en detalle y temas que nunca habíamos hablado...cuando...mi papi llegó aquí a los Estados Unidos también para él fue difícil llegar a un país donde él no sabía el idioma...y tratar de hacer una vida aquí...Como hispano, él tuvo que trabajar mucho para poder establecerse en este país. Lo que me dijo mi padre me ayuda a apreciar más todo lo que yo tengo...Es muy interesante hacer estas entrevistas porque cada hispano/latino tiene una historia que contar y cómo ellos han hecho un camino para nosotros. Es muy importante saber las historias de ellos, sus logros, sus triunfos y eso nos da la seguridad para seguir adelante. (Durán-Cerda, 2008, p. 48)

(For me this interview that I did with my father was very interesting and I was able to learn so much about him and our family that I never knew. In the interview my father opened up...and [spoke] in detail about topics and things that we had never before spoken of...when...my daddy arrived here in the United States it was also difficult for him to come to a country where he did not know the language...and try to make a life here...As a Hispanic, he had to work a lot to establish himself in this country. What my father told me helps me to appreciate what I have here more...It is very interesting to do these interviews because every Hispanic/Latino has a story to tell and how they have made a path for us. It is very important to know their stories, their achievements, their triumphs and that gives us the confidence to go forward).

Conclusion and Suggested Further Research

When speaking of how the challenges of teaching HLLs have been met, an often-cited voice in the field observed:

Efforts to develop both theories and policies that might guide the teaching of Spanish as a heritage language [including culture teaching] have been carried out by isolated individuals at different institutions reacting to problems faced by students in very different programs (Valdés, 2001, p. 12).

In this way and many other ways, the field of teaching HLLs is in its infancy. That nascence seems to hold true even more so for teaching culture to HLLs. Although it appears there is more to learn from these students than to teach them, especially considering that most HLLs' teachers are not cultural natives, there are clearly several areas that research has yet to explore. Many of these were mentioned by Kagan and Dillon (2008). Their list, which was based on an earlier compilation by Brecht and Ingold (2002), applies broadly to heritage language research and specifically to culture teaching as part of the instruction of HLLs. The list included developing principles of effective program design, materials and curricula, studying heritage communities, and establishing an infrastructure to encourage resource and knowledge sharing that will facilitate appropriate instruction. Kagan and Dillon also suggested that understanding cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds of heritage speakers must be central to the ongoing work in the field.

There are additional future directions for the teaching of culture to HLLs. There is a need for more formal studies of the use and effectiveness of ethnographic interview projects in classes designed for HLLs. In addition, there is a need for long-term studies that gauge the lasting impact of such projects (Bateman 2004). Research is also needed to increase understanding of the interviewees' perspective in such projects (Bateman 2004). Furthermore, because virtually

every class in the United States that includes HLLs is composed of a mixture of linguistic abilities and cultural backgrounds, studies are needed that better illuminate realities and best practices in such settings (Bateman & Wilkinson, 2010). These are just a few specifics in an important area of an increasingly popular field of research.

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