

Teaching Spanish Heritage Language Learners in the P-12 Mixed Classroom

Victoria G. Fisher

Oklahoma State University

### Abstract

This paper explores the topic of teaching Spanish Heritage Language Learners in the Spanish classroom with both Heritage Language Learners and Second Language Learners. The contents, including a literature review, applications for teachers, and directions for further study, are directed toward the question: How would a teacher meet the unique needs of Spanish Heritage Language Learners in a course that teaches Spanish as a foreign language?

*Keywords:* Heritage Language Learners, mixed classroom, Spanish, Second Language Learners

## Teaching Heritage Language Learners in the Mixed Classroom

### I. Introduction

It is to be expected that as the number of Hispanic people and Spanish-speakers in the United States continues to rise, we as a nation will continue to experience change. Some of these changes are appearing in our schools: both in what we teach and to whom (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). Spanish classes in particular are seeing increased enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), with some Hispanic students having an extensive background in the language and others having only minimal exposure. These Hispanic students fit under the broad term of Heritage Language Learners (HLLs in this paper). Although when writing about Spanish HLLs, the term *Heritage Language Learner*, strictly speaking, may refer to any individual with Spanish as his or her heritage language, for the purposes of this paper the term HLLs will refer to those who have some ability in the language, even if it is only auditory comprehension. While some outside the field of world language education may argue that Spanish HLLs do not need to be in a Spanish classroom, this is the equivalent of saying that native English speakers here in the U.S. do not need to take twelve years of English classes, which is currently the custom and standard for high school graduation.

The enrollment of an HLL in a Spanish class not specifically designed for HLLs creates an environment that will in this paper be referred to as a *mixed classroom*. Granted, almost any class of any subject or grade will have a variety of abilities, intelligences, and skill levels. However, a mixed classroom, particularly in the introductory courses, has the potential for a wide gap in language competency. While not a perfect analogy, the situation can be likened to a beginning pre-algebra class with students that have the ability to converse about calculus. The

teacher would likely be concerned about how to meet the needs of all students present, and rightfully so. Moreover, the students that can converse in Calculus may be able to read mathematical formulas but not understand the rules for how to write them. Some may know how to explain the concepts colloquially but not be able to use the academic vocabulary the other students are accustomed to learning out of a textbook. This situation is similar to that which Spanish teachers find themselves in when HLLs are present in a classroom.

Spanish HLL students are not necessarily advanced learners, even though this is entirely possible. They are students who have had significantly greater exposure to the Spanish language than the students who are in the beginning stages of studying it. Valdés (1997) identifies eight different types of HLLs with abilities that range from the “newly arrived” immigrant students who have been well educated in a “prestigious” variety of Spanish to the “receptive bilingual” who cannot speak the language but can understand a spoken variety (p. 14). Unless an HLL falls into the receptive bilingual category it would be undoubtedly better for HLLs to have their own Spanish classes in order to best meet their needs. However, the mixed classroom is what is most common because there may not be enough HLLs enrolling in Spanish to justify a separate class.

This paper seeks to shed some light on the subject of teaching a mixed classroom. It is not the goal to solve or address all issues regarding the mixed classroom. Neither is it the goal to support the continuance of the mixed classroom model in working with HLL students. The objective in writing this paper is to respond to the need to have something practical for Spanish teachers teaching mixed classrooms, as there are not sufficient writings on this particular subject (Carreira, 2012). This paper will begin with a literature review, proceed with possible applications for teachers, and conclude with directions for future research.

## II. Literature Review

### A. *Theoretical Similarities*

Despite their major evident differences, HLLs and students learning Spanish as a second language (Spanish L2 Learners) seem to have some similar instructional needs. According to Lynch's study on the similarities of HLLs and Spanish L2 Learners, both have similar grammar needs (2008). The students in his study included HLLs born in the U.S. and Spanish L2 Learners that did not start learning Spanish until middle or high school and had studied the language for five or six years. He found that both groups of students had similar grammatical and lexical performances on oral interviews. This seems to suggest that HLLs and L2 Learners could benefit from a similar class that strengthened the students' grammar and lexicon in their oral proficiency, with the caveat that the L2 Learners in this study were not introductory level students but already had years of study in the language.

Lynch suggests combining students on the lower end of the language mastery continuum (receptive bilinguals) with beginning Spanish classes (2008). He suggests that this would be feasible and acceptable for these HLLs because their needs are similar to those of L2 Learners, but he also recommends using some materials that are more advanced, particularly audio materials, in order to acknowledge and develop their strengths along with the rest of their abilities.

In a study by Valdés (2005), HLLs and L2 Learners were compared in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. In her view of SLA research, some HLLs would be included because she includes areas such as acquiring a second dialect or a formal register part of SLA. Taking second dialect and formal register acquisition into consideration is an important

aspect of working with HLLs because these are two possible and common goals for these students (Acevedo, 2003).

*B. Interaction between HLLs and L2 Learners*

A second facet of research pertinent to teaching the mixed classroom are the empirical studies highlighting interactions between HLLs and L2 Learners. As a preliminary note, these studies do not include L2 Learners of beginning levels of Spanish. All the L2 students in these studies are either of an intermediate or an advanced level. Another important consideration is that the number of studies analyzing the interactions between the two groups is low, with Bowles (2011) indicating that there are only two other studies apart from that particular study, making three in total.

While it would be sensible to assume that L2 students benefit from working with HLLs in group projects, the HLL students also have something to gain. Both the study by Bowles (2011) and the study by Blake and Zyzik (2003) show that the two groups of students benefit from working with each other, though the studies do not agree on the extent of the benefit. In Bowles' (2011) study the pair activity yielded mutual help, albeit different support from each type of student in the pair. The HLLs were edified in their orthography skills by the L2 students and the L2 students received help from the HLLs in grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, in Blake and Zyzik's study, the L2 Learners seemed to reap more rewards from working with HLLs than what the HLLs received from the L2 students (2003). Attitudes toward working in HLL-L2 pairs were positive in both studies.

Mixed classrooms are not an experience unique to the U.S., even for the Spanish language. There are also mixed classrooms in Canada, and Campanaro (2013) gives insight in

her thesis to mixed classrooms in that country. She notes that students seem to see mixed classrooms and mixed group projects as mutually beneficial. The attitudes of the students toward one another and the relationships between students and the teacher are also favorable.

Campanaro's findings support the studies in the U.S., although HLL and teacher attitudes in the U.S. can be less than desirable for HLLs because of a lack of respect for the home dialects that these students bring to the Spanish classroom (Bernal-Enríquez and Chávez, 2003).

### *C. Literature with Suggestions for Teachers*

The final segment of the literature review will be the most practical to teachers who find themselves in a beginner level mixed classroom. Unfortunately, although it is the most applicable and therefore arguably the most needed area of ideas and research for teachers, there is very little that addresses these needs (Carreira, 2012). Few studies give suggestions for teaching a beginning level mixed classroom, and those articles and suggestions will be explored here. None of these sources specified a particular HLL ability level as the primary beneficiary, but comments will be made to address this.

In her article on meeting the needs of HLLs, Carreira (2012) suggests using the Community Language Learning (CLL) method in the mixed classroom. The Community Language Learning method was developed by Charles A. Curran and stemmed from his background in psychology (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). The basic ideas of the Community Language Learning classroom are centered on taking care of the whole student, not simply surface behavior or academic aspects of the student experience. The teacher, or knower in CLL terminology, takes a similar role of a counselor in the classroom, and the students, or learners, take the role of counseling clients. The knower presents the learners with a message they want to

know in the target language, and these messages tend to focus on what learners are thinking and feeling. The learners repeat the messages given by the knower, and the language is acquired by the repetition of messages and by overhearing other knowers speak their feelings. The goal is to create a community in which the learners feel safe because learning occurs best in environments the learners perceive as safe and accepting (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). In this model the HLLs would be able to serve as both learners and knowers and would thus be dually engaged in the classes. This method could likely be used in beginning and intermediate level classes with lower and middle range of abilities for HLLs, especially if oral communication is the focus of the class.

Incorporating elements of a language arts class into the mixed classroom is a logical suggestion made by Potowski (2015) because of the parallels between many HLLs and native English speakers in language arts classes. Using the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) standards combined with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) standards, the teacher would take elements from both types of classes to meet the needs of the two groups of students. There would be a heavier focus on literature and formal writing than what is typically seen in L2 Spanish classes, and therefore this suggestion would work best for more advanced L2 Learners or in a class that is carefully scaffolded in order to prevent L2 Learners' discouragement.

The most common suggestion for mixed classrooms throughout the literature is to structure the class using differentiated instruction because differentiated instruction, by its nature, is suited to classes with a range of abilities and content knowledge (Carreira, 2007 & 2012; Potowski, 2015). In differentiated instruction the teacher "...must mark or identify the differences both in students and in possible teaching strategies, and make adjustments according



to what will most benefit students and best facilitate learning in the classroom (Blaz, 2006, p. 2).” In other words, differentiated instruction takes into account the variety of students and their abilities in planning for instruction, which is exactly what is needed in the mixed classroom. The differentiated class provides students with different options in the content, process, product, or a mixture thereof. It should be mentioned that although a variety of options are offered and the student has greater control of his or her education, this does not mean that some students are aiming to meet some goals while others are directed toward others (Blaz, 2006). Differentiated instruction begins with the same state and national standards and allows students multiple ways to meet those standards. Students that need extra challenges can choose more challenging paths, and students who need simpler instruction can choose that path as well. However, all paths essentially lead to the same destination.

Using some of the activities that are typical of a differentiated classroom (although differentiated instruction promotes a certain mindset as much as practices and activities), Carreira (2007) presents some examples of what a differentiated classroom would look like. She highlights using stations, centers, agendas, learning contracts, and multiple-entry journals/reading logs in the mixed classroom. These instructional practices allow for HLLs to be challenged beyond what a typical introductory Spanish class would offer them and does not separate them from the class. HLLs and L2 Learners are working side by side, even if each group is working on a different project. It seems that differentiated instruction is able to work for any level of Spanish class and any classification of HLL.

#### *D. HLLs as Tutors*

One way to put HLLs into a leadership position while simultaneously increasing the necessary grammar practice is to have them serve as tutors to L2 students. When HLLs get to teach their language to an L2 Learner, both groups benefit (Quintanar-Sarellana, Huebner, & Jensen, 1997). This is in part because teaching requires both thorough knowledge of the material and the ability to explain it, which when combined represent a higher level of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy than merely having the grammar rule memorized. In addition to honing their grammar skills, tutoring L2 students helps the HLLs feel that their bilingual abilities are valued in the school and gives them the confidence they often lack (Quintanar-Sarellana, Huebner, & Jensen, 1997; Potowski, 2015). In the model presented in this study, the HLLs offer the tutoring assistance after school hours and must demonstrate preparation in advance. This could be easily adapted to a once-a-week in-class activity in which the HLL student(s) tutor struggling students or various students in a rotation schedule. In this way, both groups are able to obtain what they need.

### **III. Applications for Teachers**

The literature review presents a number of potentially productive ideas for teachers in a mixed classroom that can apply to various class levels and to diverse HLL abilities on the language mastery continuum. First, mixed group work including short exercises and longer projects should be an integral part of a mixed Spanish classroom. In introductory Spanish classes the L2 Learners would benefit from the extra input and help on grammatical and lexical content. The HLLs would build confidence in their own Spanish-speaking abilities and solidify their grammar skills. In the intermediate and upper level courses the HLLs and L2 Learners can help each other with orthography and vocabulary, respectively (Bowles, 2011). One typical recommendation is that the teacher speak to the class before beginning the group work to discuss

the benefits to each category of student to help them understand the rationale behind the assignment and to promote self-esteem.

Second, while teachers may not feel comfortable conducting classes according to the CLL method in its entirety, the sense of community and openness to share language-learning, even its frustrations, could be a goal not only for mixed classes but for language classes in general. Because of the perceived “threat” to self-confidence the differences in ability can create, it is especially important to build that sense of community between HLLs and L2 Learners. To do this, perhaps scheduling time for students to reflect on their linguistic growth and to express their frustrations and concerns related to language learning in a guided discussion would help to develop this sense of openness, team-building, and community.

Third, the importance of differentiated instruction in the mixed classroom cannot be understated because of its positive and “can do” attitude towards having a classroom of diverse learners and because of its numerous activities to allow as many students as possible to have a rigorous, appropriate academic experience. As Blaz articulates, “Differentiating... asks that you consider expanding your repertoire to see if you can reach a few more students (2006, p. 4).” The central focus is to find different ways to help students learn in the way that works best for them. Centers, stations, and contracts are only a few ideas of how to differentiate the mixed classroom (Carreira, 2007).

Student journals are another recommended way to differentiate language instruction, according to Blaz (2006). In a differentiated journal activity the teacher would give open-ended writing prompts in the target language and allow students to develop their responses to the extent of their ability. For example, a teacher may give the prompt, “¿Qué te gusta hacer durante los

fines de semana?” (What do you like to do during the weekends?) A beginning student may respond with only a few basic sentences using chapter vocabulary, while a HLL may choose to use words not included in the chapter vocabulary but are nonetheless important to him or her. The HLL may also write more, if desired, and has the opportunity to express more profound thoughts. In this way, a teacher can differentiate for ability and allow students to have personalized products.

An additional example that comes from the author’s own experience in working with a second and third grade introductory level mixed classroom is scaffolded reading. In this activity the teacher sits with the students in a circle and reads a children’s book in Spanish to them. The book is carefully chosen beforehand so that it is stimulating to the HLLs but is also simple enough to easily explain to the L2 Learners. While reading the book, the teacher asks the L2 Learners questions that are pertinent to the current unit (colors, numbers, etc.) and asks HLLs comprehension questions in the target language. Providing multi-leveled questions helps reinforce the desired content taught to L2 Learners while addressing the greater stimulation need of the HLLs. In addition, it was the author’s observation that the HLLs would ask for clarification of certain words during the story, signifying that they were also learning new vocabulary. This activity provided differentiated content and seemed to be effective for both groups of students.

Fourth, setting up a tutoring system either in class or after-school in which HLLs can help beginning L2 Learners would provide similar linguistic support for L2 students and affective support for HLLs as assigning group work but with the added grammar reinforcement for HLLs because of the required prior preparation.

#### **IV. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The lack of research and academic writing on the topic of teaching mixed Spanish classes represents the main limitation of this paper. Though having HL students in beginning Spanish classes is not the ideal situation, more research is needed to support teachers who seek to teach their mixed classes well despite these limitations. Specifically, studies on the use of differentiated instruction in mixed beginning classes and its effects on class attitudes, classroom management, and HLL progress in orthography and writing skills would be valuable. Another advantageous study could examine the gains in HLLs and L2 Learners through group work in beginning level Spanish courses.

#### **V. Conclusion**

The increase of the Hispanic population in the United States has led to the rise of Hispanic students in the public school system (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). In order to meet the needs of diverse groups of students, the teacher of the mixed classroom can incorporate differentiated instruction, the community support of the CLL method, group work, and a tutoring program to better accommodate for the changing needs of today's students. This is not to say, of course, that these are the only ways to meet the needs of a mixed classroom, nor is it to say that the teacher of the mixed classroom must change every practice overnight. Instead, as suggested by Carreira (2007) on differentiated instruction specifically, "...teachers should begin the process by focusing on a few activities and slowly build up a bank of activities over time (p. 77)." This serves to remind us that in order to meet the needs of our students our practices must continue to change as we grow in experience and knowledge. It is a process, and bit by bit we are striving and changing to become better teachers.

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