

## ***Enamoramiento in the Spanish Heritage Classroom***

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### **Abstract**

This article offers an alternative to revamp the Spanish curriculum with an emphasis on heritage language (HL) courses with a social justice mission that promotes falling in love with their language and cultures to foster language vitality. Classroom activities should be designed to challenge hegemonic language ideologies to change this low vitality. Attitudes matter in terms of language vitality, so the development of critical awareness in the Spanish heritage classroom is essential for students to foster a critical worldview and to empower them to overcome the prejudices against their local dialects through resilience (Leeman, 2018). Community service-learning can also be connected to Spanish for Specific Purposes courses to provide heritage language learners (HLLs) with more confidence in their studies and a connection with the community (Thompson & Brown, 2019). A new curriculum adapted to student needs is key to promote Spanish vitality and to recruit more students for our programs.

### **Keywords**

social justice; language vitality; language ideologies; critical awareness; resilience

### **Introduction**

Increased enrollment in Spanish programs in higher education in the 2000s was mainly due to the emphasis on language as a commodity and as a value in our society (Leeman, 2007). However, unfortunately this has not been the common trend in the most recent years.

Despite the continuous decrease in enrollment in world language programs in the last decade, Spanish heritage language (HL) courses have risen due to the increase of Latinxs in higher education (Beaudrie, 2012). Hence, here is the future of Spanish programs. Nevertheless, the space of these programs is still challenging, and their success depends on the role of the language program director (LPD). These programs are not institutionalized yet, so the LPD must advocate for the need for and importance of these programs, and unfortunately it is still difficult to find the support to combat negative ideologies about the value of U.S. Spanish (Beaudrie & Loza, 2021a). Paradoxically, Spanish programs have instructed HLLs from a monolingual perspective ignoring

the sociolinguistic realities in the U.S. Thus, local varieties should be incorporated into the curriculum (Pascual y Cabo & Prada, 2018).

There are several obstacles to institutionalization, such as the few course options for HLLs, lack of tenured faculty, lack of professional training and support, lack of materials, low enrollment, and retention (Beaudrie, 2021). However, moving HL programs from the periphery to the center of the curriculum is key to moving forward. In order to do so, HL and L2 (second language) programs' instruction needs to change, and a "heritage studies" program should be created for the sake of mutual benefits (Torres et al., 2018). Instructor training should focus on a curriculum that is culturally sensitive and social justice-oriented (Parra Velasco, 2021). A social justice approach supports programs that move away from language as a commodity, and instead language is used as a tool for social justice in the Latinx communities (Showstack & Coulcher, 2019).

This training should also address perspectives from different backgrounds and support continued professional development (Guerrero-Rodriguez & Long, 2022). Promoting Spanish maintenance should be one of the most important objectives in an HL course due to the low vitality of Spanish in the U.S. Classroom activities should be designed to challenge hegemonic language ideologies to change this low vitality. In order to do so, HLLs should become agents of change and have confidence in their Spanish competence (Amezcuca, 2019). This is key since they usually enter the language classroom with a great deal of insecurity. Thus, a class discussion on language variation is needed (Mrak, 2014).

Learning about language variation is also crucial for a Spanish major (in addition to taking linguistics courses) due to second language learners' and HLLs' misconceptions about nonstandard dialects (Marcos Miguel, 2022). In the L2 classroom, instructors usually receive training in the form of a short orientation and a methodology course during their graduate studies and feedback in the form of periodic observations (Sánchez-Gutiérrez et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the short orientation mainly focuses on the objectives of the program (Lord, 2013), and the methodology course is limited in terms of offering complex views on language teaching and learning (Gómez-Soler & Tecedor, 2018). Unfortunately, all this training does not usually take place in the case of HL instructors, despite the fact that even L2 Spanish instructors will likely have HLLs in the classroom. That is why Torres et al. (2018) claimed that it is crucial to train instructors to meet the needs of L2 learners and HLLs alike. Another issue is the lack of assessment in HL courses due to five challenges: absence of proficiency standards, lack of consensus on definitions of key terms, lack of knowledge of language variation, absence of assessments of linguistic skills, and scarcity of empirical research (Malone et al., 2014).

Attitudes matter in terms of language vitality, so the development of critical awareness in the Spanish heritage classroom is essential for students to foster a critical worldview and to empower them to overcome the prejudices against their local dialects through resilience (Leeman, 2018). HLLs need to see their HL as an asset, not as a deficient variety to be repaired (Sánchez, 2020).

An approach to make students fall in love with their dialects and culture by using authentic materials that are relevant to their lives is called *enamoramiento*, as suggested by Moreno (2020). Students are exposed to local authors and class discussions on topics affecting their communities. Also, the incorporation of testimonials in the curriculum unveils the inequities that Latinxs face, highlighting their resilience. They challenge conventional assumptions about the role of the researcher and the use of the collective experience to denounce marginalization (Bernal et al.,

2017). Instructors can therefore use critical pedagogical practices to teach immigration. Testimonials serve as counter-narratives that center student lives in the curriculum (Rodríguez & Salinas, 2019). They are part of the healing process and a way to express how oppression feels (Phillips & Deleon, 2022).

Critical pedagogies that question the standard language ideology and assumptions on language and identity need to be implemented (Leeman & Serafini, 2020). Amezcua (2019) reported that HLLs showed more motivation to maintain Spanish when engaged in community projects. Community service learning can also be connected to Spanish for Specific Purposes courses to provide HLLs with more confidence in their studies and a connection with the community (Thompson & Brown, 2019). However, there are still many challenges, such as the lack of instructors, partly due to the lack of recognition deriving from insufficient funding. Finally, professional development opportunities and pedagogical resources are scarce (Sánchez-López, 2013).

Successful departments are those that can count on rising enrollments and rising majors (Goldberg et al., 2004). In the same vein, successful programs consist of trained faculty on relevant pedagogy. Additionally, mission statements can be used as promotional tools to be shared publicly with a focus on student needs (Beaudrie, 2020).

## **Mentorship for Undergraduate Students**

In order to recruit students for our majors or minors, peer mentorship is key, especially coming from graduate students, who are more approachable for students who feel reluctant to talk to faculty directly (Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2018). Latinx college students face extra stressors such as discrimination or stereotyping (Flink, 2018). The pandemic had an impact on Latinxs due to their more restricted access to technology and mental health services (García-Louis et al., 2022). For first-generation students, taking courses on Chicana studies may contribute to finding a supportive environment (Berkner et al., 2007). Mentorship from other Latinx students and faculty can help students engage in this loving relationship between their studies, the histories of their families and themselves, and their communities.

Faculty of color can also serve as role models and facilitate comfort in academic settings (Dayton et al. 2004). Thus, Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) can facilitate interactions between faculty and students of color (Vargas et al., 2020). Unfortunately, there is usually a lack of Latina women in the faculty to mentor junior faculty who are also Latina women, even in HSIs (Turner et al., 2008). Even though Latina women have increased their presence on campus, their representation in leadership roles is still scarce (Johnson, 2017).

Mentoring requires cultural awareness. It should help foster reflection, empowerment, and reinforcement of Latinx identity to overcome institutional barriers (Morales-Chicas et al., 2022). Effective mentoring provides students with multiple benefits such as recruitment, retention, and a shift in university culture to inclusion and equity (Pagan et al., 2022).

Serrano (2020) found that even on the campus of an HSI, students had more interaction with other minorities in Ethnic Studies courses. That is why it is so important that faculty not be underrepresented in these institutions. In fact, HSIs' mission is enacting a culture of serving and supporting the Latinx community (García, 2017). Higher education faculty should foster an environment of respect and awareness of how Latinx students experience othering. They should

find space for critical conversations on racial-ethnic identities and include diverse scholars in the syllabi to respond to the social injustice and inequity experience of communities of color (Camargo et al., 2021). To fight oppression, Latinx instructors practice resistance, such as counter-storytelling to resist hegemonic discourses. Unfortunately, Latinx instructors are usually expected to take on additional roles such as translators which becomes an extra burden for them even though they do not see it that way. Instead, they feel they are giving back to the community (Guerra & Carrillo Rodriguez, 2022).

Many institutions have decided to use the term “world languages” instead of “foreign languages” or “modern languages” to erase hierarchies and put all languages at the same level (Brown & Thompson, 2020). Due to the decline in language enrollments, world language leaders have shifted from isolated language development toward more cultural, technology-integrated, learner-centered teaching (Amini & Amini, 2017; Hong et al., 2017). Therefore, faculty should focus on the acquisition of cultural competency to train students to become leaders in a global environment (Singer et al., 2021). Furthermore, creating professional courses, certificates, internships, and partnerships with other programs would enhance interest in these programs (Hadour, 2021). Finally, understanding student motivation to enroll in language programs would solve the issue (Parma & Bustin, 2021).

## **The Language Classroom**

The traditional world language curriculum consisted of language courses at the basic and intermediate levels and content courses such literature, culture, and linguistics at the upper-division levels. Nevertheless, language, culture, and literature should be taught from the beginning as a continuous whole (Geisler et al., 2007). The goal of Spanish language education should be dismantling the racialized hierarchy of the U.S. (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Additionally, Spanish as an HL should be a must in the curriculum of Chicanx Studies (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2021), or, I would add, in Latinx and Latin American Studies programs.

The language classroom should be a safe space for inclusion and awareness of Latinx culture to change the campus culture (Kuffner et al., 2021). The instructional goals of a language course with a social justice approach, and an emotional component linked to social justice values such as empathy and equity, should address the following issues: language variation, a consciousness of the arbitrary distribution of prestigious and non-prestigious varieties, the dominant language ideologies, and how to exercise agency to make their own decisions about language use (Beaudrie et al., 2019). In order to have a successful HL classroom, we need to master the use of technology for the incorporation of digital storytelling, online discussion boards, or individualized instruction (Beaudrie, 2020).

Pedagogical proposals to empower HLLs include the design of a project based on meaning, so that students can make their own decisions in transformative ways (Prada, 2022).

Ultimately, Spanish language learning is not only about the language itself but also about understanding the social dimensions of language, even metalinguistic content in the narrative of oppression (Avilés & Harb, 2022). The Spanish language is part of the cultural imaginary of U.S. Latinxs (Lynch, 2018). HL courses have a positive impact on HLLs by increasing their linguistic competence. Spanish itself can be used as a tool of resistance that strengthens their ethnolinguistic identities (Sánchez-Muñoz & Amezcua, 2019) if we focus on the emotional

connection between the classroom, the language, and the cultures. In fact, HLLs construct their linguistic identities in the HL classroom (Showstack, 2012).

## **Best Practices to Undo Raciolinguistic Ideologies in the Spanish Heritage Classroom**

Heritage speakers may suffer from linguistic discrimination at the university level since they may be perceived not as bilinguals but as semilinguals speaking a stigmatized variety of Spanish. This is usually the case when Spanish programs advocate for a standard language ideology (Brown & Thompson, 2018). Therefore, Spanish in the U.S. should be the center of the curriculum. As instructors, we should focus on the dialects of Latinxs. Along this line, we need to learn from these communities to understand the life stories of our students to make an emotional connection with them. In order to do this, we should implement a critical awareness pedagogy to understand how raciolinguistic ideologies work. Syllabi should be designed stating class objectives in an anti-discriminatory approach, teaching through questioning and challenging social inequalities, and assessing language and not opinions (Guerrero-Rodriguez, 2022). Since language and culture are usually integrated into the curriculum, students have the opportunity to develop critical cultural competence. By the end of each unit, a topic should have been addressed through a social justice lens, so that students can use language respectfully, can become conscious of stereotypes, and can be empathetic. Therefore, assignments should invite students into action to make decisions against unfair situations (Granda, 2021). A culturally sustaining pedagogy for teaching languages in the service of social justice empowers students to fight for social justice by helping them understand other people (Scalise, 2020).

Bilingual students need to be encouraged to leverage their translanguaging; they should use all their linguistic resources to learn. The heritage classroom is by no means homogenous. Thus, we need to teach with those differences in mind and engage with their communities. The Latinx community has suffered from deficit thinking and linguistic erasure (Guerra et al., 2020). Storytelling recognizes racial stress and helps develop competence to deal with it (Colomer, 2019). Digital storytelling can be used to assess student learning. It is student-centered and authentic, so it is evidence of U.S. Latinx stories (Martínez & Foulis, 2022). In sum, as teachers we should change our focus from teaching a language to valuing our Latinx language (García & Alonso, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic has increased the educational inequality for Latinx students due to lower retention rates and the digital divide, hence the dire need to narrow the Latinx achievement gap (Amezcuca et al., 2021).

As instructors, we must be aware of our own biases, of how our identities and ideologies may affect others. We should also establish norms for group interactions, acknowledge oppression of other groups, and avoid asking students to speak on behalf of the Latinx community as a whole. These strategies would help us dismantle raciolinguistic ideologies and engage in a dialogue with our HLLs regarding their reaction to them (Pascual y Cabo & Rivera-Marín, 2021). Fernández et al. (2022) proposed specific guidelines for instructors to achieve learning outcomes regarding diversity, multiculturalism, inclusion, and social justice: self-assessing biases affecting teaching, creating a collaborative learning environment, focusing on the structures that perpetuate oppression, and emphasizing participation and action. However, not all instructors may feel comfortable teaching social justice or relating to their students. Therefore, hiring the right faculty who are able to connect with their students is key. This emotional connection is needed to help

students develop *enamoramiento* through the coursework. Furthermore, training and resources are needed, especially due to students' resistance to learning about this topic (Kamenetz, 2018).

Critical Latinx pedagogy should be based on three goals: making students feel safe in the classroom, making students aware of the importance of their experiences and those of their communities within a narrative of oppression, and empowering them to intervene in the different forms of oppression they experience in their lives (Casavantes Bradford & Morales, 2021). Activist archiving anchors student experiences within histories of oppression, facilitates student connections with racism affecting minorities, and empowers students to share their experiences through the use of translanguaging (Avilés & Harb, 2022).

A transformative agenda contesting social inequities in the Latinx community is needed in language education to improve their education and for language maintenance (Beaudrie & Loza, 2021b). Latinx need to continue resisting erasure and recognize themselves as legitimate and real members of a multilingual country (Zuniga Fuentes, 2022).

## Conclusion

This article aims to emphasize the importance of HL courses and programs in departments of world languages, especially these days due to the decrease of student enrollment in language programs in higher education in general, and the increase of Latinx students in Spanish programs. Unfortunately, some of these programs are yet to be institutionalized and lack an LPD to advocate for and invest in them. HL programs do not usually count on the same amount of professional development opportunities and pedagogical support as instructors in L2 programs; hence the importance of hiring an LPD who is capable not only of fostering these programs, but also of developing a curriculum with a mission statement and a social justice approach that can enrich the surrounding Latinx communities and with an emotional component so that students can fall in love with what they are studying and find a purpose for it. Critical service-learning courses and Language for Specific Purposes courses may also be part of this curriculum to motivate students to “fall in love” with studying languages and see the multiple benefits behind it through the study and discussion of local authors, testimonials, or even digital storytelling. One of the main objectives in an HL course is fostering language maintenance due to the low vitality of Spanish in the U.S., so classroom activities should be envisioned to challenge hegemonic language ideologies to increase this low vitality. By developing a positive attitude towards Spanish and its dialects, students can be empowered to fight for social justice and become agents of change to give back to their communities as a result of this *enamoramiento*. Spanish should be seen as an asset and a means of resilience.

Another tool to recruit students is peer mentorship and faculty of color. Even HSIs lack enough faculty of color to mentor and serve as role models for the students. Ultimately, we should find out through students themselves how we can motivate them to enroll in language programs. The language classroom should be a safe space of inclusion for students that promotes language variation and cultural awareness. In the specific case of Spanish, Spanish in the U.S. should be the center of the curriculum, and strategies to dismantle raciolinguistic ideologies must be implemented, such as using a transformative agenda that discusses social inequities in the Latinx communities to resist erasure and establish themselves as legitimate members of a multicultural society.

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