



SPANISH LANGUAGE OF NORTH AMERICAN STUDENTS OF HISPANIC HERITAGE: A FIELD STUDY IN NORTH TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

Dual language programs are poised to produce bilingual/biliterate teacher candidates to alleviate bilingual educator shortages. Therefore, in search for ways to support the growing number of Spanish/English dual language programs in Texas, the authors of this paper analyzed the variations of Spanish language and proficiency levels of 9th grade heritage Spanish speakers. Researchers analyzed 62 students' written and oral productions in Spanish through an error analysis approach. The results obtained from this analysis were cross-checked with academic and personal data, providing important information on the linguistic needs as well as the factors mediating the different levels of Spanish proficiency demonstrated by the students. Furthermore, a differentiated instructional methodology was established to bridge students' specific needs with effective practices. Written academic language was planned with the group of native-like speakers, whereas speaking activity centers were implemented for the group of students with a passive use of Spanish, and game-like experiences for those heritage speakers who had lost much of their Spanish abilities. The findings from the study illustrate that by understanding Spanish heritage speakers' unique abilities and needs, instruction can be created that will build their ability and confidence with their language.

Keywords: Heritage speakers; inter-language; error analysis; practical application; Spanish in USA; biliteracy

Along with New Mexico and California, Texas is one of the states with the largest number of Spanish speakers in the U.S. (just over 30%)⁴ and the state with the highest growth of the three. Moreover, Hispanics constitute the ethnic group with majority of enrollment in Texas public schools (TEA, 2019). In fact, since a large number of Hispanic students are also English Learners (ELs), education mandates are in place to ensure that students receive adequate support (Faltis, 2011).

Per Texas Administration Code TAC 89.1205, school must provide an ESL (English as a Second Language) program if one or more ELs are identified in a district. A bilingual program should be

⁴ It is necessary to remember that the number of Hispanics is greater (New Mexico: 48.3%; California: 39%; Texas: 37.6%) but not all Hispanics speak Spanish.



offered when there are at least 20 or more ELs in the same grade level and with the same language background. According to the TEA report “Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2018-19,” the most frequent bilingual program is Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE). Schools implementing this model provide instruction in the mother tongue in order to avoid the loss of basic knowledge of non-linguistic subjects, but progressively, the instruction in English increases until students move to the regular monolingual mainstream system (Collier & Thomas, 2009). This type of program can last from 2 to 5 years in the *early-exit* model and from 6 to 7 years in the *late-exit* version. However, TBE programs are considered weak bilingual models (Baker, 1993) because they transition too early to English-only instruction. Other types of bilingual education programs are included in the next section as these provide some context for our study.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

In recent years, Two-Way Dual Language (DL) models have changed the bilingual education scenario aiming to serve not only ELs, but also monolingual English speakers and simultaneous bilinguals. This type of program is a strong bilingual model (Baker, 1993) because it aims to teach for biliteracy in both languages in elementary, middle, and high school education. (One Way DL program that only serve students who already speak the partner language, such as Spanish, are also strong bilingual models.) To achieve this purpose, educators utilize both English and Spanish as languages of instruction using a variety of implementation plans that range from 50% to 90% of the instructional time (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2002) dedicated to one language or another. Nonetheless two-way DL programs have increased access to bilingual education by enrolling not only ELs, but also non-ELs from Hispanic and non-Hispanic families who are now able to attend dual language schools.

However, these program models serving both students with L1 Spanish and L1 English are still the exception in the U.S., as English speakers enroll mainly in monolingual education (American Councils for International Education, 2017). Some factors such as the shortage of bilingual teachers (Arroyo-Romano, 2016), the attitude of families, especially those in monolingual settings (Surrain & Luk, 2019), and the availability of academic resources (Burke et al. 2018) have hampered the spread of dual language bilingual programs, thus maintaining proficiency of English as the main goal in the most common models (Alanís, 2000). Moreover, a high number of ELs attend monolingual classes in primary education (Kennedy, 2019), as they do not have the possibility of joining any bilingual program (PEIMS data TEA, 2011).

SPANISH FOR HERITAGE SPEAKERS IN HIGH SCHOOL

In secondary education, Spanish has been traditionally taught as an elective subject designed to acquire Spanish as a foreign language. However, heritage speakers (students of Spanish language background) opt for Spanish courses in middle and high school not only because it can be a professional asset, but because they seek a greater understanding of their culture, a connection



with members of their family, or a reinforcement of their own cultural identity (Dillon et al., 2019; Benjamin, 1997; Mazzocco, 1996).

Coming from a myriad of education models, Hispanic students begin secondary education with very different linguistic backgrounds. Differences in Spanish proficiency levels observed in heritage speakers emerge partly from the type of program where the elementary years were completed. Some heritage speakers have participated in English and Spanish Dual Language Models, others have attended Transitional Bilingual Education, and a good number of students come from English only schools with or without some ESL support. Nevertheless, a number of students enrolling in Spanish classes are English-Spanish bilinguals to some extent, as they have been raised in a home where Spanish was spoken. They can understand and speak Spanish to a certain degree (Valdés, 2000) and therefore, they have different instructional needs than students who are learning Spanish as a second language (Tallon, 2011).

As established by Briceño et al. (2019), many heritage speakers can feel discouraged when teachers over-correct them because they might not use standard Spanish conventions. Examples are phrases that borrow from English such as “*te llamo de vuelta*”, which is a literal translation of the expression “*I’ll call you back*”, yet not the standard way of expressing the same sentiment in Spanish. Another common example is the word *troca*, which is borrowed from the English word *truck*, instead of *camioneta*. These regionalisms are a natural form of communication among bilingual, transnational youth in North America, even though these types of idioms or expressions are not used in every Spanish-speaking country.

With this in mind, Spanish teachers must be properly trained to address the needs of linguistically diverse student populations (Fishman et al., 2001; Valdés, 2001). They need to be open to accept and even embrace the different variants of Spanish as well as provide support in vocabulary and literacy development based on students’ levels of competency. Understanding heritage speakers as a non-homogenous group with different linguistic, social, academic, and motivational backgrounds are key in implementing an effective instructional approach. Some heritage speakers, coming from bilingual education, may be ready to focus on academic Spanish; they would just need to further develop their literacy skills (Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000). They are even able to recognize forms deviated from standard Spanish conventions and selectively choose when to use them or not. Other heritage language students may need to start with basic reading and writing development in Spanish or even start off working on oral skills to develop fluent communication.

ANALYSIS OF SPANISH HERITAGE SPEAKERS’ PROFICIENCY

Research studies (e.g. Fairclough, 2006; Swender et al., 2014; Mikulski & Elola, 2011) show that heritage speakers’ differences in proficiency levels need to be specifically established. In response to this need, a study that concentrates on analyzing students’ linguistic productions at different stages of learning must be the first step in exploring and reshaping secondary Spanish courses for



heritage speakers. Students' linguistic systems present multiple forms of Spanish, which might deviate from standard language use. These deviations, (which had been previously perceived as errors, interference or incomplete acquisition), have been turned around by many scholars, under the theoretical perspective of translanguaging (García, 2019).

In addition, analyses completed by Penadés (2003) and multiple studies (e.g., Fernández, 1997; Ferreira, 2017; Guillén, 2018) have been used to establish how the linguistic system is built through successive stages of acquisition. Differences in students' Spanish use emerge from the amount, quality, or context of exposure to the language (Caffarra et al., 2015). There are also motivational factors such as self-confidence (Tallon, 2009) or one's own perception of the Spanish culture (Showstack, 2012) that can affect students' Spanish use. Looking for specific differences in Spanish proficiency levels, an analysis of this language system was contrasted against contextual factors (referred to here as socioacademic background), helping us to create different heritage speaker profiles in order to customize their language learning opportunities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, we analyzed the socioacademic backgrounds as well as the written and oral productions from a group of 62 heritage speakers enrolled in the 9th grade at a North Texas school. The goal of the study was to correlate Spanish heritage speakers' socioacademic backgrounds, psychological factors, and unique linguistic development needs that could be helpful in proposing instructional approaches that address their needs and improve their proficiency levels toward optimal bilingualism.

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was carried out in a high school education program of a charter school in a region of north Texas where the percent of Hispanic students was 52.4% (in 2017), which constituted an increase of 6 percentage points in 10 years, from 46.3% (in 2006). The percentage of Hispanics at the school was even higher (65%) since it is a school where the importance of languages (e.g., English, Spanish, Chinese) is embraced and therefore, the school has been able to attract many families, including parents who are looking for education models that encourage their children to maintain their mother tongue.

The school had a total of 102 students enrolled in the 9th grade and 64 were identified as students of Hispanic origin who qualified to be part of the study. Two of them were not considered heritage speakers, as they weren't raised in a home where Spanish was spoken. The other 62 took an exam called Prentice Hall Spanish Realidades for Heritage Speakers (2004). Results were utilized to classify students in three Spanish proficiency-based groups.



DATA COLLECTION

This study was developed in three different phases during one academic year, as follows:

Phase 1: (August-September)

At the beginning of the year, three groups of heritage speakers were created for the purpose of analyzing the type of instruction needed in the Spanish courses offered at school. The data collection instruments in this phase consisted of a Spanish proficiency test and a personal and academic questionnaire. The proficiency test measured vocabulary, reading, contextualized grammar, writing and speaking abilities through completion of multiple-choice responses. The following four ranges of performance were established in order to enroll students in one of the four Spanish courses available as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Ranges of Performance

	Spanish I	Spanish II	Spanish III	AP Spanish
Score Obtained	0 to 49	50 to 64	65 to 84	85 to 100

We also created a personal and academic questionnaire (Table 2) in order to identify students' socioacademic background, including demographic data, language exposure, self-efficacy, and perception of the Spanish language and culture. These four data sets were aligned to other language research (Caffarra et al., 2015; Tallon, 2009; Showstack, 2012).

Table 2
Students' Socioacademic Background

Socioacademic Background Data	
Demographic Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students' and parents' country of origin• Parents' level of studies and occupation• Number of years living in the US.
Language Exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Amount of time and context of communication in both languages• Years of study of Spanish instruction in school pipeline• Student considers themselves to be bilingual
Self-efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students language preference for communication• Self-evaluation of Spanish areas of improvement• How the student feels speaking Spanish
Perception of the Spanish language and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Importance of speaking Spanish and why• Feeling of pride of their Spanish origins and why



Phase 2 (October-April)

During this next phase of the study, we compiled students' writing samples using informal class writing, exams, and essays. These samples were classified into four categories of typological errors: 1) morphosyntactic, 2) lexical, 3) phonetic, and 4) spelling mistakes. In addition, we obtained audio sample recordings during oral exams, class presentations, and other practices such as role-play. We transcribed all audio recording for further analysis.

Phase 3 (May)

In the final phase, three evaluations were administered: (1) an exam from the students' textbook; (2) the Realidades for Heritage Speakers Placement Test; and 3) an exam based on the DELE B1 exam of the Cervantes Institute.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were examined by cross-referencing three main factors as follows: proficiency level in Spanish (three proficiency-based groups), socioacademic background (four data sets), and typological errors (four categories). Results were gathered from each of the three proficiency-based groups and compared to see if there was a relationship between Spanish proficiency level and one or several socioacademic characteristics. Regarding the typological errors, oral and written texts were analyzed considering deviated forms in four main categories: vocabulary, phonetics, morphosyntax, and spelling. To facilitate the analysis, we created a spreadsheet to enter data such as: (1) the category of the deviation; (2) frequency the deviation appeared; (3) the total number of words in the composition; and (3) one to three examples of the deviation.

RESULTS

Students in this study showed different ranges of proficiency, but all of them could understand and communicate in Spanish as none of them scored under 50 on the initial proficiency assessment.

Table 3

Proficiency level results during phase I

	N. Students	Classification	Description
Group A placed in AP Spanish	25	High: Native-like Level	Scored 85-100 on the placement tests.
Group B placed in Spanish III	24	Medium-high: Acceptable Level	Scored between 50- 64 on the placement tests.
Group C placed in Spanish II	13	Low Level	Scored between 50- 64 on the placement tests.



All three groups showed difficulties writing in Spanish, particularly applying spelling skills. Lexical borrowings from English were frequent in all groups, but more evident in groups B and C. These were also the two groups that presented morphosyntactical borrowings and uttered errors more commonly found in learners of Spanish as a foreign language (for example, to assign the wrong gender to a noun: *la problema*). Finally, group C had more frequent phonetic deviations, which are likely due to low exposure to the language.

Table 4

Typology of errors: Examples recorded in groups A, B and C. (Phase II and III)

Linguistic domain	Example	Groups		
		A	B	C
Morphosyntax				
Gender	Muchas restaurantes (correct form: Muchos restaurantes)		x	x
Number	Los fin de semana (correct form: Los fines de semana/ the weekends)			x
Subject-verb mismatch	La gente son así (correct form: La gente es así/ People are like this)		x	x
	Usted, ¿cómo has estado? (correct form: Usted, ¿cómo <u>ha</u> estado?/How have you been?)			x
	Yo gusto el pastel (correct form: <u>Me gusta</u> el pastel/ I like the cake)		x	x
Adjective order	Mi favorita actividad (correct form: Mi actividad favorita/ <u>My favorite</u> activity)		x	x
Pronouns	Yo gusta hacer matemáticas (correct form: Me gusta.../ I like...)			x
Prepositions	Me gusta <u>a</u> correr (correct form: Me gusta correr/ I like to run)		x	x
Adverbs	Nuestra herencia es tan importante (correct form: Nuestra herencia <u>es</u> importante/ Our heritage is important).	x	x	x
Verbs	Puedemos (correct form: podemos/ We can)		x	x
Lexical				
Inserting English Words	Ir de shopping (correct form: ir de <u>compras</u> / to go shopping)	x	x	x
False cognates	Mi madre no me soporta (correct form: Mi madre no <u>me apoya</u> / My mother doesn't support me)		x	x
Misuse of verb "ser / estar" (to be)	La poesía es relacionada con la historia (correct form: la poesía <u>está</u> relacionada con la historia/ poetry is related to history)		x	x
Misuse of verb "ver / mirar" (to see and to look)	No miré a nadie cuando entré (correct form: no <u>vi</u> a nadie cuando entré/ I didn't see anybody)		x	x



Coarse vocabulary	Ese viaje estuvo bien chido (correct form: Ese viaje estuvo <u>genial</u> / That was a great trip).	x	x	x
Phonetic		A	B	C
Omission of one vowel	Procupa (preocupa/ to worry)		x	x
Vowel confusion	Inondación (<u>in</u> undación/ flood); Lluvió (ll <u>o</u> vió/ it rained)		x	x
Voiced dental stop	Activida (actividad <u>a</u> / activity)	x	x	x
Simple and double “r”	Caros (carros/ cars); Ariba (arriba/ up);			x
Spelling		A	B	C
Wrong letter due to phonetic deviations	eligir (corret form: elegir / choose); pos (correct form: pues / then); aprió (a <u>b</u> rió/ opened); ariba = a <u>r</u> riba/ up)			x
Wrong letter due to lack of literacy 1: errors in one letter-one phoneme matching.	ensenyo (correct form: Enseño; teach); sair bonita es simportante (correct form: <u>Ser</u> bonita es importante/ to be pretty is important); passion=pasion		x	x
Wrong letter due to to lack of literacy 2: errors in non-univocal letter-phoneme matching	b / v: bino (vino/ wine); c / s: veses (veces/ times); c / k: Equipo ekipo (equipo/ team); caminan ha un lugar (Correct form: caminan <u>a</u> un lugar/ to walk some where).	x	x	x
Accent mark	passion (pasi <u>ó</u> n/passion); escondio (escondi <u>ó</u> /hided) barbaro (b <u>á</u> rbaro / barbarian).	x	x	x
Punctuation marks and other orthographic conventions	Mi madre, viene el Martes (correct form: Mi madre viene el martes / My mother will come on Tuesday).	x	x	x

In general, students with high proficiency levels demonstrated an awareness of their ability and recognized their need to improve their writing skills (74.6%). On the other hand, students with a lower proficiency level recognized first a need to improve their oral skills (35.4%). All but one student participating in this study considered themselves bilinguals to a certain degree (96.8) and connected their variances in Spanish skills to their family background and language exposure. We provide differences in demographics and language contact in Tables 5 and 6.



Table 5
Demographics results

Demographics			
Place of birth and no less than 7 years in the U.S.	Spanish Speaking Country 16%	U.S. Born 64%	
Spanish by region of origin	Mexican 82%	Puerto Rican 10%	Colombian 8%
At least one parent completed	University Degree 34.9%	Secondary School 49%	Primary School 16.1%
Work by sector	Tertiary (Cleaning, catering, shops) 73.2%	Secondary (Construction) 25.8%	

Table 6
Language exposure results

Language Exposure			
Home usage	Spanish 76%	Both Spanish and English 13%	English 11%
Academic Language (English / Spanish)	English: Main language Spanish: 3 to 6 years 43.5%	English: Main language Spanish: less than 3 years 30.6%	Only English language 25.9%

Even in the group with 76% of Spanish language usage at home, only 14.5% students (all of them are non-U.S. born) preferred to communicate in this language. A high number of students (64.5%) felt more comfortable using English in academic settings. Only 21% of the students showed no language preference since a majority of students in this study considered themselves to be bilingual.

The use of English-only at home correlates not only with low levels of proficiency in Spanish, but also with a poor perception of the Latinx culture. Students who did not feel proud of their Latinx origins (11.29%) came from the group where English was the main or only language, even when they knew that Spanish was their parents' mother tongue. These students associated Spanish with poverty, drugs, and alcoholism. Independent of their proficiency level, demographics, or perception of the Latinx culture, all students considered that mastering Spanish was important in increasing job opportunities (82.25%) or even learning more about their own heritage (17.75%).



DISCUSSION

In this study, we analyzed Spanish written and oral productions found in a group of 62 heritage speakers in a high school in North Texas. Our goal was to determine specific students' needs that could inform differentiated instructional practices targeting increased opportunities to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural.

STUDENTS PLACED IN NATIVE-LIKE SPANISH LEVEL (GROUP A: 25 STUDENTS)

Forty percent of students who reached native levels of Spanish were born in a Spanish-speaking country and/or completed elementary school in bilingual education programs. They felt proud of their heritage and interested in the history and culture of Hispanic countries. This type of student seems to be very aware of the similarities and differences with the linguistic systems of Spanish and English, being able to self-correct by pointing out the root of the error. Common characteristics can be grouped in two types: lexical (a need to improve vocabulary) and pragmatic-cultural (need to increase knowledge of their culture of origin and improve their writing skills, especially their spelling, grammar, and composition).

STUDENTS PLACED IN MEDIUM-HIGH SPANISH LEVEL (GROUP B: 24 STUDENTS)

One hundred percent of students who reached a medium-high level in Spanish were born in the U.S. and more than 90% spoke Spanish at home. Seventy-nine percent studied in a bilingual education program and received at least three years of Spanish literacy instruction. However, 100% of this student group prefers to communicate in English. They showed a high level of proficiency in familiar topics in receptive language domains (reading and listening), but need improvement in speaking and writing (mainly academic vocabulary, grammar in context, connectors and spelling). They presented frequent morphosyntactic errors (verb and preposition usage) in addition to their need to increase the lexical competence.

STUDENTS PLACED IN LIMITED SPANISH LEVEL (GROUP C: 13 STUDENTS)

Of the 13 students who remained at a low level of Spanish, 53.8% reported that they spoke English at home versus a 30.8% that spoke a mixture of both languages. A great number of parents of students in this group came to the U.S. as children so when they speak Spanish at home, the children respond in English. Only two students in this group of 13 total) attended bilingual programs so the majority never received formal instruction in Spanish. Almost 90% of these students feel ashamed to speak Spanish and 10% of students in this group had negative perceptions of their Latinx roots as presented previously. In addition to the type of errors that we have seen in the previous groups, other areas of support for this group include morphosyntactic and phonetic deviations.

MONOLINGUAL TEACHERS CAN PROMOTE BILINGUAL SKILLS

In order to support students' linguistics abilities (even before they get to high school), a multilingual perspective does not require teachers to be able to speak more than one language.



Teachers can promote biliteracy when they understand that speaking more than one language is an asset and not a deficit. Encouraging students to use what they already know in their mother tongue helps to promote biliteracy skills because it builds connections that enhance transferability between languages. What students already know in L1 does not need to be relearned, but when provided the right supports it can transfer to the second language (L2).

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Using the data from the study, we were able to go into the classroom and try out some instructional strategies aimed at developing the Spanish proficiency of the three main groups of students. These are the learning activities that show the most promise. Students with a native-speaker level who lack vocabulary are able to increase their lexicon by intensifying instruction of Greek and Latin roots. The use of prefixes, suffixes and affixes helps students maintain a connection between language and meaning which can be taught through mini-lessons using anchor charts of the roots. Divide students in groups and assign tasks related to Latin and Greek roots. When the tasks are complete, take a gallery walk, allowing all students to have a chance to review the work from all other groups. In order to help students developing a confident automaticity with these words, this instructional period can include also “clue games” that allow students to predict a number of words based on a detailed description of each word’s attributes.

Students who are below a native-speaker level, but possess optimal comprehension need structured speaking opportunities. Help students increase their vocabulary following a three- to eight-step process depending on their proficiency level. This oral language development strategy includes:

1. Observation;
2. Identification of the picture;
3. Definition;
4. Description of attributes;
5. Questioning technique;
6. Relationship and connection: to self, to the world, and to other texts.

In order to attend to the needs of students who are not used to speaking Spanish in spite of being exposed to the language from childhood, a leveling approach might be necessary. Provide students with game-like activities that spark their interest and increase their curiosity about Spanish language and culture. Present a series of pictures and then place students into small group. Challenge the students to make sense of the pictures by classifying them in any three possible



groups. Accept all attempts at speaking as long as students were able to justify their classification rationale. Completing this activity through learning stations allows the instructor to address more specific student needs because students' rotations increase time spent one-on-one with the teacher

SIGNIFICANCE

The Latino population and the Spanish language are of paramount importance in the state of Texas, since more than 50% of students enrolled in K-12 programs are Hispanic and a great majority of them (around 40%) are able to communicate in Spanish. The main purpose of this study targets the opportunity to enhance instruction of Spanish heritage speakers in high school, thus increasing their chances to graduate bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural.

Looking at this 9th grade sample as one that is representative of many classrooms in Texas, we can anticipate that our next bilingual and bicultural generations have a great potential to fulfill the demands of a global future. In order to maximize this opportunity, it is necessary to propose instructional methodologies that take into account the needs of a heterogeneous heritage Spanish speaker population. In addition, the results of this study point to the great potential to supply our own bilingual education teachers by providing the quality of instruction necessary to address language development.

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