Chapter 16
Bridging the L1–L2 Divide:
Learner-Centered Instruction in the Heritage/L2 Spanish Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter engages the reality of the university classroom that includes Heritage-Learners (HL) and second-language learners (L2) of Spanish. Rather than furthering the "what if" considerations of the idealized heritage learner in a quasi-homogenous group and specialized course track, the author focuses on the very pressing question of ways in which HL and L2 populations face similar learning challenges in an intermediate-level Spanish writing course. Drawing on research about learner-centered and HL and L2 language-learning pedagogies, the author discusses how implementation of progressive assignment design and targeted learning skills development supported L2 students and transitional bilinguals in the mixed classroom. Finally, the limits of this mixed classroom model for HL and L2 learners are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic research agenda in the field of heritage language teaching has been primarily concerned with emphasizing significant differences between heritage language learners (HL) and classroom-educated foreign language learners (L2). In less than two decades, a robust body of research has been produced that enhances our understanding of HL students along a continuum of proficiency. These studies rightly underscore the need to re-evaluate foreign language curriculum, instruction, and assessment in order to serve the needs of the HL and L2 students (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 2016).

The rich insights into the heritage language learners resonate with me due to personal experience. The terms "receptive bilingual" and "overhearers" were not available when I began to study Spanish in college in the mid-1980s (Au et al., 2002; Oh et al., 2003). I was identified as a heritage *listener*, a classification in that region of western Nevada that swept into its net a vastly heterogeneous group. Sorted in accordance with my limited speaking skills, I was placed in the first semester of college Spanish. I found myself seated with over twenty-five students in a lecture room with stadium seating at a land-grant

college. During the first days of class, our instructor accidently dropped some items on the floor and uttered a Spanish phrase that is, well, never found in first-year textbooks. I couldn't suppress my giggle and caught his gaze. He tracked my language production and soon challenged me with additional assignments. My instructor was a full-time high school teacher of Spanish and German, and good fortune had placed me in the hands of an instructor that was willing and able to individualize materials and instruction based on my degree of proficiency.

But I also attribute my rapid advancement in an undergraduate Spanish program (I concurrently completed the fourth-semester language course and a senior seminar in Spanish literature) to characteristics that were later concisely delineated in dimensions of heritage learners (Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012, p. 8). Curiously, my Spanish language proficiency was based on language contact, not heritage. Due to little racial/ethnic diversity in my small home town in California, Spanish was the language of my friends and neighbors, and of the agricultural laborers (often native speakers from Mexico) beside whom I worked during the summers. My great-grandfather had emigrated from China to Panama which resulted in mixed-race lineage; however, I had been born in the United States and raised by parents that spoke Mandarin and Cantonese to one another but strictly required English as the lingua franca of the household, in spite of their accents and inaccuracies in the dominant language. With regard to Spanish language proficiency, I was very much like my HL classmates that could understand spoken Spanish in familiar, limited contexts but had minimal competency in language production. However, in spite of what my L2 classmates and instructors may have assumed, I now believe that it was not my "heritage-language" competence that proved to be an advantage in the first- and second-year classroom. I was a motivated language learner that had very low anxiety about dialectic variety and for whom Spanish was voluntarily adopted as an ethnolinguistic identity. Not only did I possess advanced literacy skills in English but also I had the capability to navigate the college classroom, to self-regulate my learning, to ask specific questions that elicited answers that I needed, and to accept responsibility for my own language development – even if that meant doing more than required. In sum, key developments in my learning skills, resilience in my affective dimension, and an innate understanding of the sometimes uneven balance of linguistic function and form positioned me for success as a language learner.

As I completed those first semesters of college Spanish, most of my HL classmates struggled in the traditional Spanish classroom, many did not earn marks as high as the L2 students, and few sought to complete the Spanish program. They and I had seemingly started with the same language skills (although later research would cast doubt on the way language placement and proficiency had been determined), and had access to resources and differentiated instruction yet I was one of the few that advanced beyond the low-intermediate coursework. Throughout the years of my graduate studies, I simply considered myself one of the lucky few, unaware that scholars were actively laying the groundwork for a radical shift in the theoretical and pedagogical models that characterize heritage language competencies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study came about when I was faced with an instructional impasse. Recently tenured, in fall 2006 my regular teaching load was revised to include a fifth-semester composition course that served as a required threshold class for the Spanish program. The course had been designed for traditional foreign language learners. Due to enrollment demands and limited resources at this regional campus of a Midwest university system, there are no separate classes for Spanish HL students. At that time, the

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