Heritage, Identity, and Learning at Stake: Marginalization in a Diverse Spanish Class

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ABSTRACT

A surge of diverse heritage language learners in American schools has contradicted the longstanding ideology that this population is monolithic. Previous theories about separating foreign language learners (FLLs) and heritage language learners (HLLs) are problematic because they fail to address the diversity of the HLLs that end up in schools today. This research report lends support for the claim that less proficient HLLs are more suitable for a heterogeneous beginning language class than those that are highly proficient. Placing a highly proficient HLL in a beginning level language course can actually be detrimental to both emergent learners’ development and the educational outcomes of the entire classroom community. Moreover, the monumental task of teaching a heterogeneous class like the one analyzed here complicates and is complicated by an already-problematic school context. This study exhibits how the classroom talk privileged certain classmates while marginalizing others, halting educational progress.

KEYWORDS

Classroom Talk, Discourse, Heritage Language Learners, Heterogeneous Classes, Learning Opportunities, Positioning, Socially Situated Identities

INTRODUCTION

Spanish-speakers hail from a variety of different locales around the world. Therefore, classifying Spanish-speakers has resulted in the adoption of unique terms which emphasize different characteristics. The U.S. Census Bureau has chosen to use the term Hispanic (or Latino) with this population on official documents. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a Hispanic is “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (www.census.gov). Current demographics of the United States provide staggering numbers with respect to an exploding Spanish-speaking population. Published in December of 2012, the most recent census estimates the number of U.S. Hispanics at 52 million, which is about 16.7% of the total population.

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In fact, Hispanics are widely acknowledged to be the current largest ethnic/racial minority in the U.S. Indeed, twenty-five states listed Hispanics as their largest minority group per the 2010 census.

As the Hispanic population takes root across the U.S., the Spanish language too fortifies its stronghold as a dominant minority language. In fact, in the census data from 2010, 37 million of the 52 million U.S. Hispanic residents (five and older) reported speaking Spanish at home. More than half of these people also self-reported that they spoke English “very well.” The commonly-held myth that Hispanics retain the Spanish language at the expense of learning English is simply a fallacy. It could be argued, due to this self-reported data, that bilingualism and biliteracy are held in high regard.

The rapidly growing number of Spanish speakers has major implications for classroom instruction at all educational levels and across content areas. There is an ever-increasing number of students entering school with some degree of Spanish language skills. Students born in the U.S. who do not consider themselves native speakers of Spanish are often labeled heritage speakers (HS) or heritage language learners (HLL). For the purposes of the present paper, the definition of a heritage language learner is adopted from Valdés (2005, p. 412): “the student may speak or merely understand the heritage language and be, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language.” Based upon this definition, the heritage learner’s proficiency can fluctuate along a continuum. Some heritage learners are highly proficient in both Spanish and English. They may have attended dual-immersion schools where instruction took place in both languages simultaneously. Others may have been educated primarily in the U.S. and consequently, have very little to no receptive or productive skills in Spanish. A great deal of variety can come between these two examples, as well.

Spanish-speaking students bring a wide range of diverse language experiences to the classroom that must be considered. Numerous scholars have discussed the diversity of Spanish-speaking students in the United States: “the U.S. Spanish-speaking population is extremely diverse in terms of linguistic backgrounds and abilities” (Leeman, 2005, p. 36). Therefore, it is not sufficient to assume that each speaks the same variety of Spanish, nor that they all speak and write Spanish at the same proficiency level.

HLLs often self-identify and have variable affiliations with the target language and culture. Each HLL is a distinct case that should be treated as such. It is the teacher’s job to establish a rapport with students and encourage students to open up about their language experiences. After obtaining this type of information, teachers have the complex task of tailoring instruction so that it meets the distinct needs of their Spanish-speaking students. The teacher’s mission is all the more arduous when HLLs enroll in classes meant for traditional FLLs. (FLLs are all students who do not have a heritage claim to the target language.)

This study lends support for the claim that less proficient HLLs are more suitable for a heterogeneous beginning language class than those that are highly proficient in the target language. Having a highly proficient HLL in a beginning level language course can actually be detrimental to both emergent learners’ development and the establishment of a positive classroom community. Moreover, the monumental task of teaching a heterogeneous class complicates and is complicated by an already-problematic context. Cases such as the one presented here call into question the current policy for HLL placement of HLLs in American schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spanish Heritage Learners in American Schools

Research has demonstrated that HLLs have linguistic, affective, and social needs which are distinct from their monolingual peers that study Spanish as a foreign language (Roca, 2001; Valdés, 1997). Current policy denies these differences, making the situation a black and white one. For example, some Spanish-speakers who lack Spanish literacy skills are denied access to Spanish courses. This is crucial because the majority of Spanish-speakers could benefit from some type of Spanish instruction,
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