

# Educating University Foreign Language Teachers to Work with Heritage Spanish Speakers

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## Introduction

The number of Spanish speakers in the United States has been increasing, and many colleges and universities have responded by adding heritage<sup>1</sup> language courses to their Spanish language curriculum. The need and rationale for such programs have been discussed at length in the Spanish for native speakers literature (e.g. Valdés, Lozano & García-Moya, 1981; Merino, Trueba & Samaniego, 1993; Colombi & Alarcón, 1997). However, approximately 68% of US postsecondary institutions do not offer heritage language courses (González Pino & Pino, 2000) and at those that do, bilingual students may still enroll in language courses designed for learners of Spanish as a foreign language (SFL). They may also enroll in advanced content courses taught in Spanish, such as grammar or composition, which often do not separate bilingual and SFL students by language background.

The experiences of heritage speakers in FL courses are likely to be colored both by their attitudes toward their own Spanish varieties as well as by their instructors' attitudes toward these varieties. An exploratory study (Potowski, forthcoming) sought to understand the experiences of 25 bilingual students in university FL courses through focus group interviews with students and individual interviews with seven

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "native Spanish-speaking", "bilingual", and "heritage" will be used interchangeably to refer to students raised in the United States with Spanish as a home language. These individuals can show a wide range of Spanish language abilities

Spanish instructors. The study focused on how students' and instructors' attitudes towards heritage Spanish varieties affected the students' FL classroom experiences. The findings of this study led to the development of a teacher training session for new teaching assistants (TAs), which will be presented after a brief description of the context.

## Context

Of the approximately 27,500 undergraduates at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), around 5% are Hispanic. According to a university report (Stevens & Gonzo, 1998), fifty-five percent of these 1,500 Hispanic students come from the Chicago area<sup>2</sup> and two-thirds of them speak Spanish at home. Only about 50% of the surveyed Spanish-speaking students intended to use high school courses to fulfill their foreign language requirement, while 5% intended to take a proficiency exam to do so. This means that approximately 45% of the heritage Spanish students take language courses on campus, and since 70% of UIUC students fulfill their foreign language requirement with Spanish courses, many bilingual students end up taking Spanish courses to fulfill their language requirement.

UIUC offers a two-course heritage speaker series, which typically enrolls between eight and fifteen students per semester. Students who pass these two courses fulfill a four-semester foreign language requirement. If they choose to major or minor in Spanish, they enroll in advanced 200-level courses along with SFL learners. The 200-level courses, which enroll approximately 250 students per semester majoring or minoring in

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(Valdés, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Chicago has the third largest Hispanic population of United States cities (Census, 1990).

Spanish, are content courses that address topics such as grammar, composition, conversation, and literature. Each semester, an average of 90 students at the 200-level are heritage students. While it may be argued that since these courses focus on content, not language learning, they need not distinguish students by language background, it is reasonable to postulate that bilingual students have different needs than foreign language learners. It is worth noting that given the campus population, the majority of students who take them are SFL learners. Despite the existence of the 100-level Spanish for heritage speakers courses, an average of 30 bilingual students per semester at UIUC enroll in 100-level Spanish foreign language courses<sup>3</sup>.

#### Bases for the TA training session

Heritage students at both the 100-level and 200-level participated in the exploratory study (Potowski forthcoming) that gave rise to the TA training session. Three major themes emerged from the student focus group interviews: 1) Many heritage speakers felt that their Spanish was not "good"; 2) Heritage speakers often indicated that they felt at a disadvantage compared with their SFL classmates; and 3) Their views of their instructors' roles and instructional behaviors were varied.

For example, some students felt that the feedback they received from their TAs about their Spanish varieties was sound but insensitive, while others said their TAs' feedback had been very insulting. Other TA behaviors that students cited as making them uncomfortable included holding unreasonable

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<sup>3</sup> Some campuses prohibit heritage students from taking non-heritage language courses, but UIUC does not. The reasons for which heritage speakers chose SFL courses were

expectations for their knowledge of the Spanish language and expecting greater classroom participation. Of the seven TAs interviewed, four did operate within a framework of error correction when providing linguistic feedback to their heritage students.

Since heritage students will likely continue to take courses designed for and/or mostly taken by foreign language learners in higher education settings, focus should be placed on improving what occurs in these classrooms. While it is a valid goal to expose bilingual students to more a formal variety of Spanish and expect it to be used in academic work, "correction" should not be the framework. Non-native students' Spanish is undoubtedly corrected often by TAs, but bilingual students can have strong negative reactions to such "correction" of their home language since it pertains to a personal and cultural history. Instead, Spanish departments with heritage students in FL courses need to provide all TAs with guidelines on how to respond to these students' language varieties. This suggests a need for TA training in language awareness, called for by both Roca (1997b, p. 39) and Gutiérrez (1997, p. 34). The focus of this article is the TA training session that was carried out at UIUC in the fall of 1999.

### The TA Training Session

A 90-minute "Heritage language awareness" session for new TAs was carried out during the campus-wide orientation week preceding the start of fall classes. Several new TAs each year are non-native Spanish speakers from the United States and others are International Students. At this session there were eight new TAs from the United States, Spain, Mexico, Colombia,

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explored in Potowski (forthcoming).

and Cameroon. It was reasonable to predict that some of them would not be familiar with the context of Spanish speakers and the Spanish language in the United States, nor with the varieties of Spanish spoken here. For this reason, a sociolinguistic focus seemed appropriate. The following discussion of the session will be divided into three categories: 1) attempts to elicit instructor knowledge and beliefs about sociolinguistics/language variation; 2) activities with authentic heritage language samples; 3) evaluation of the session, including the need for pre- and post-session activities in the future.

#### Instructor knowledge and beliefs

The field of teacher education has benefited from investigating how second language teachers' beliefs, knowledge theories, assumptions, and attitudes impact their teaching (Borg, 1998; Burns, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Smith, 1996). For example, language instructors typically consider one of their tasks to be the correction of students' emerging language systems. This corresponds to a view of the TA in a role as language authority, the one in the classroom who knows Spanish and teaches it to students who do not. With heritage students, this often manifests itself as a "correction" of non-standard forms, which has been mentioned often in the SNS literature (e.g., Aparicio, 1997, p. 223; Hidalgo, 1997, p. 89; Valdés, 1981, p. 11). Assuming that teacher training can only have a lasting impact on teachers' classroom practice when it addresses their existing beliefs (Briscoe, 1991; Borg, 1998), this session attempted to elicit participants' beliefs before presenting them with sociolinguistic concepts. Parts A and B (Appendix 1) asked participants to gather in groups of five to discuss their

answers to two sets of questions. Each set was followed by a group discussion lead by the session facilitator.

Question A1 was intended to encourage thought about how ways of speaking a language can differ based on geography, socioeconomic status, formality of the situation, and other sociolinguistic factors. To illustrate formality, Zentella's (1997) "beach-wedding" metaphor proved useful. As Zentella put it so well, when people go to the beach, they wear shorts, sandals, and other appropriate beach attire. When they go to a wedding, they wear suits, dresses, and other formal apparel. Wearing shorts and sandals to a wedding is very likely to be considered inappropriate, but we do not throw away those items just because we are attending a wedding, nor do we call them inherently wrong. As with language, we choose what is most appropriate for the situation. It is not the job of TAs to "fix" the Spanish of bilingual students, but rather to teach them additional, more formal speech styles (Gutiérrez 1997, p. 35).

Question A2 aimed to elicit instances of "linguistic one-upmanship" that TAs may have encountered, with the aim of discussing the feelings those kinds of judgment can cause. A very lively discussion resulted. Questions A3, A4, A5 and A6 dealt with issues of societal bilingualism. For example, we discussed how in Spain<sup>4</sup>, minority languages such as Catalan and Basque are supported by school practices and enjoy relatively high status, which typically lead to high levels of literacy in those languages. Question A6 opened up the topic of languages in contact and phenomena such as borrowing and codeswitching. It was hoped that engaging the TAs in a discussion of these

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<sup>4</sup> Many TAs in our department are from Spain.

topics would prepare them for understanding more about the linguistic effects of languages in contact as well as how the United States' overall lack of support for minority language maintenance can restrict the development of heritage students' Spanish abilities.

In Part B, questions B1 and B2 were designed to underscore the fact that the United States has the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world (United Nations Population Information Network, 1996), including one of the world's largest Spanish-speaking cities, so the varieties of Spanish spoken here may not be so easily dismissed as inferior to others. Question B4 introduced the concept of a *heritage Spanish speaker* and addressed some of the factors that influence the Spanish spoken in the United States. The sociolinguistic information presented in Part A is revisited within this specific context. While discussing these concepts, the facilitator gave oral examples of codeswitching and explained that it is a valid communicative strategy. It was also mentioned that some heritage speakers may associate the Spanish language with conditions of discrimination and poverty, and that their resultant preference for English can have consequences for their Spanish use and development (Zentella, 1997).

Question B5 brought up the concept of "standard" Spanish. Quotes from Escobar (1976), Fishman (1972) and Hidalgo (1997) were displayed on an overhead projector (Appendix 2). TAs were encouraged to use the terms "variety" instead of "dialect", which despite its linguistic accuracy can often have negative connotations, as well as "formal" and "informal" instead of "standard" and "nonstandard" when providing feedback to heritage students.

## Activities with authentic heritage language samples

The exploratory study (Potowski, forthcoming) indicated that some TAs engaged in a traditional form of error correction with heritage students. They circled the form or usage in question and replaced it with what they felt was correct. When in doubt as to the "acceptability" of a bilingual students' vocabulary item, these TAs referred to a dictionary or asked colleagues whether they had ever encountered the term. One TA described a dilemma of having to accept and respect all dialects while also having to discriminate whether a syntactic structure or vocabulary item was actually "incorrect".

Gutiérrez (1997, p. 35) cautioned against an overbearing concern for correctness that masks the lively processes of languages. He also stressed that any attempt to teach a standard variety of language requires an understanding of the social reasons that people speak the way that they do. Not enough is known about how to teach "standard" Spanish to bilingual speakers<sup>5</sup>. If one of the goals of teaching Spanish to heritage speakers is to help them acquire a formal variety and to expand their range (Valdés, 1997), what form should feedback on their linguistic production take?

Part C (displayed in Appendix 3) involved reading eight sentences written by bilingual students and discussing how to provide feedback on the variety of semantic, spelling, and verb usage issues they contained. In their groups, TAs were asked to read and respond to these sentences as if they had appeared on a student's homework assignment. The items were sentence-length because the intent was to isolate linguistic usages rather than discourse strategies, and they were written as opposed to oral

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<sup>5</sup> For discussions of the concepts of standard and nonstandard Spanish and their implications for teaching, see Hidalgo (1990, 1997) and Villa (1996).



for ease of presentation and discussion, but the ramifications for oral speech were discussed as well.

Although it did not seem fruitful or possible to create strict rules for TA feedback, these future 100-level TA's were presented with a guide for giving feedback - when to give it, how to give it, and when not to give it. The two main guiding principles were as follows:

1. Heritage students' Spanish is a natural, valid linguistic system like any other.
2. When deciding whether to give corrective feedback, ask yourself: Will the form the student has used mark them excessively as a user of a stigmatized variety of Spanish, or as someone who has not received formal instruction in Spanish?

The terms "excessively" and "stigmatized" are difficult to define. They can vary in meaning according to the person, the place, and the context, so these guidelines need further development. Considering examples from Part C provides a starting point for discussion. For example, the spelling errors in examples C1 "empesamos", "perdendo" and C3 "forcan", "deven" can be pointed out to the student, but TAs need to develop a sensitivity to how much feedback on spelling can be usefully incorporated by a student at a given point in time. This is true for FL learners as well. Some errors can be remedied by using a dictionary, but others like C3 "baser" require explanation.

However, should the use of the indicative instead of the subjunctive in C2 be "corrected"? The mood system in United States Spanish appears to be undergoing a shift to the indicative in some contexts (Silva-Corvalán, 1995). Spanish departments may need to consider whether it is worthwhile to insist on heritage speakers' use of the subjunctive in exercises

that specifically solicit it. This approach may be criticized if SFL students would lose points for not producing the subjunctive while bilingual speakers would be permitted to use the indicative, but it seems a reasonable adjustment based on the different language development tasks of each group of students. Advanced grammar courses may be a more appropriate place to present heritage students with information about the uses of the subjunctive.

Several cases of possible influence from English are presented, such as using the use of the gerund instead of the infinitive (C1 and C3 "hablando") and semantic items such as C4 "no están trabajando" for "no funcionan"; C6 "aplican" for "solicitan"; and C7 "llamar pa'tras" for "regresar una llamada". While such examples are not very clear-cut as to their acceptability in formal contexts, students should be told that they are fine but that another word might be considered more academic and perhaps be understood by more Spanish speakers in the world. TAs should be reminded that instead of referring to language as "standard" or "nonstandard," terms such as "academic" and "colloquial" or "formal" and "informal" should be used.

In C6, some would argue that by using "haigan" and "sacastes", this student does mark herself as a speaker of a stigmatized variety of Spanish. TAs were told that they should inform the student that these forms are fine and valid, but that "hayan" and "sacaste" would represent a more academic variety of Spanish. TAs need to take the time to explain these points while affirming that they respect students' native Spanish varieties. It was proposed that points should not be taken off for the use of such forms.

In C5, the conditional was asked for, but the student

answered with the present simple. In this case, the TA should explain that by working with the conditional form, the student can expand his range of expression. When using exercises that ask students to produce a given form, TAs need to be aware that many heritage speakers, who often use the forms correctly in their everyday speech, are often unaware of the linguistic terminology associated with them. TAs were instructed not to take points off "at first," but more formal guidelines need to be established based on the goals of the curriculum.

Some of the examples in Part C are instances of colloquial oral language, such as C1 "tonses" and C8 "orita" and "nomas." Students should be told that the forms are fine for speaking, but that in writing, another word would be more appropriate. One TA in the session suggested that instructors can give students an example in English of the differences between formal and informal language, such as the use of "because" versus "'cuz" in an academic paper, in order to illustrate that all languages show this kind of variation.

After completing these activities, TAs were given a short presentation on a few other points that had emerged from the exploratory study. These included the idea that not all bilingual students like to be called on in class, nor should they be expected to know all the answers. TAs were also reminded about the heritage speakers course and that they were expected to guide bilingual students there. A faculty member with knowledge of heritage speaker issues is a needed resource for instructors with questions or concerns regarding their bilingual students.

#### Evaluation of the session

The thirteen participants (eight new TAs and five course

supervisors) rated the session on an anonymous evaluation form. Eight people indicated that most of the concepts and information presented in the session were new to them. Eleven people wrote that as a result of the session, they felt confident in their ability to respond to heritage speakers' language in an appropriate manner<sup>6</sup>.

As noted earlier, the field of teacher education can benefit from investigating how language teachers' beliefs, knowledge theories, assumptions, and attitudes impact their teaching. For this reason, the session was video- and audio-taped for later analysis of teacher beliefs and their interactions with the information presented in the session. Additionally, each new TA was to be interviewed two months after the session in order to assess their experiences with heritage speakers. Unfortunately, time did not permit these post-session activities, begging the question of whether the session was successful at influencing TAs' attitudes and classroom behavior. Continued interviews with heritage students in SFL classes about their experiences are also crucial in assessing the impact of such a session.

The incorporation of these topics as a unit within the required semester-long seminar on language teaching pedagogy was suggested, but the 90-minute session was granted instead. In order to present more information than the 90 minutes would allow, a pre-reading packet was designed with articles and excerpts including Roca (1997a), Hidalgo (1997), Gutiérrez (1997) and Anzaldúa (1987). It was suggested that the incoming TAs would read the material during the on-campus orientation week prior to the session and incorporate their reactions into

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<sup>6</sup> The other two participants did not answer this item on the questionnaire.

the session discussions. A three-page post-session essay was also proposed, in which TAs would answer general questions and synthesize their opinions about what they had read and learned. This essay would be required as part of their teaching preparation, and the successful completion would be noted in each new TA's file. It was hoped that this official note would reflect the importance that the Spanish department placed on issues pertaining to bilingual speakers by making TAs more accountable for the information presented<sup>7</sup>.

However, the department felt that the proposed reading was too burdensome for TAs busily juggling domestic and orientation schedules their first week on campus. Unfortunately, following a personnel change, the heritage language session was dropped from the new instructor orientation program. Given the increasing numbers of heritage speakers on United States campuses, Spanish departments may soon decide to focus more permanent attention on the Spanish course experiences of bilingual students and look for ways to educate both TAs and faculty members about these students and their language varieties.

## Conclusions

Valdés (1981, pp. 8-10) wrote that bilingual students do not belong in Spanish foreign language courses. Even when a heritage alternative exists, heritage speakers may still enroll in SFL courses. The experiences of the heritage Spanish speakers interviewed by Potowski (forthcoming) indicated that the classroom learning environment may benefit as a result of an instructor language sensitization session such as the one

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<sup>7</sup> My thanks to Amanda Harris-Nolacea for these suggestions.

described here. Although some TA trainers who have carried out this kind of linguistic and cultural awareness-raising session found it unsuccessful in changing instructors' attitudes (María Dolores González, personal communication, 1999), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign attempted to address these issues through such a session.

This session attempted to combine teacher education about Spanish in the United States and linguistic attitudes with concrete techniques for giving sensitive and useful feedback on bilingual students' varieties of Spanish. Clearer language development goals and feedback policies are still needed for all TAs and professors with heritage speakers in their classes. The field of SNS will benefit from research about other campuses' heritage Spanish-speaking students' course options, choices, experiences, and the training of the individuals who become their teachers.

# Appendix 1

## Part A: Language Variation

- A1. In your country, does everyone speak the same way, all of the time? If not, give some examples.
- A2. Has it ever been suggested to you or to someone you know that something you/they said in your/their native language was not very correct or appropriate?
- A3. If your country is bilingual, what is the majority language? What other languages are spoken?
- A4. Are the languages you mentioned in #3 treated equally in your country? Explain.
- A5. Are the languages you mentioned in #3 taught in public schools in your country?
- A6. Can you think of any examples of the majority language influencing the minority language?

## Part B: Spanish in the World

- B1. What are the five nations with the greatest number of Spanish speakers in the world?
- B2. To the best of your knowledge, approximately how many Spanish speakers live in the following cities?  
Madrid            Barcelona    Los Angeles    Chicago  
New York        Mexico City    Bogota            Buenos Aires
- B3. Is any Spanish-speaking group "famous" for the way they speak Spanish? Explain.
- B4. Here at the University, we have heritage Spanish speakers from Chicago. They grew up with Spanish in the home, and their Spanish can sometimes seem different from the Spanish of other countries. Which of these factors do you think could contribute to this? Please discuss why. List any additional reasons you can think of.
  - \_\_\_ English is the dominant language of the country. Heritage Spanish speakers are bilingual with varying degrees of competence in and need for Spanish and English.
  - \_\_\_ Most Spanish speakers in the United States do not receive formal education in Spanish. Some college students have never read or written in Spanish.
  - \_\_\_ Languages are constantly undergoing natural structural and functional changes.
  - \_\_\_ Some of these students' parents were immigrants with low levels of formal education.

- \_\_\_ The United States has a strong monolingual ideology. Campaigns such as "English Only" and laws such as Proposition 227 in California limit linguistic rights and are often considered racist policies.
- \_\_\_ Spanish-speaking groups in the U.S. tend to suffer from higher levels of poverty and unemployment.
- \_\_\_ Some students often have little contact with educated, monolingual varieties of Spanish from other countries.
- \_\_\_ Most subordinate languages in contact are subject to influence from the majority language.
- \_\_\_ Other (please explain).

B5. What kind of Spanish do you think we should be teaching here at the University?



## Appendix 2

¿Cuál es el español "estándar"?  
["What is 'standard' Spanish?"]

Margarita Hidalgo (1997) nos dice que...

*[Margarita Hidalgo tells us that...]*

La variedad estándar se define como la norma lingüística ideal, que resulta ser más bien una abstracción o una representación promedio cuya variabilidad es incuestionable (Escobar, 1976).

*[The standard variety is defined as the ideal linguistic norm, which is really an abstraction or an average representation whose variability is unquestionable.]*

El español estándar es el dialecto social o regional que se elevó en prestigio por razones económicas o políticas y, por tanto, se convirtió en el instrumento de la administración central, del sistema educativo y de la literatura nacional (Fishman, 1972).

*[Standard Spanish is the social or regional dialect that rose in prestige for economic or political reasons and, as a result, became the instrument of central administration, of the educational system, and of national literature.]*

En los Estados Unidos, la lengua inglesa es de hecho oficial y el español no es oficial de hecho ni de derecho, ni siquiera tiene una posición de co- o semi- oficialidad. Definir entonces los criterios de corrección...resulta una tarea más compleja, puesto que...son varios los dialectos regionales que se hablan en el país (Hidalgo, 1997).

*[In the United States, the English language is official in fact, and Spanish is not official either in fact nor by law; it doesn't even have a position of co- or semi-officiality.]*

*Defining correction criteria, then...ends up being a very complex job, since...there are several regional dialects spoken in the country.]*

## Appendix 3

*Part C: Responding to Language Samples from Heritage Speakers*  
*Note: Written accents are not a focus of 100-level language courses and were not addressed in this session. They were added to these samples for easier reading.*

C1. "Hablando inglés siempre es mal por nuestra lengua, porque si empesamos a dejar nuestra lengua tonses estamos perdendo nuestra cultura."

"Speaking [*gerund instead of the infinitive "hablar"*] English is always bad for our language, because if we begin [*misspelled with "s" instead of "z"*] to abandon our language then [*misspelled, missing initial "e"*] we are losing [*misspelled "perdiendo"*] our culture."

C2. "No creo que la inmigración a los Estados Unidos es un fenómeno negativo para nuestra sociedad."

"I don't think that immigration to the United States is [*indicative instead of the subjunctive "sea"*] a negative phenomenon for our society."

C3. "Ha nadie lo forcan a vivir en los Estados Unidos y ha nadie lo deven de forcar a hablar el inglés, pero todo el mundo de ve de tratar porque hablando inglés baser la vida más fácil."

"No one [*preposition "a" misspelled with "h"*] is forced [*misspelled with c instead of z*] to live in the United States, and no one should [*misspelled with v instead of b*] be forced to speak English, but everyone should [*misspelled*] try because speaking [*used gerund instead of infinitive "hablar"*] English will make [*misspelled periphrastic future "va a ser" as "baser", a word that doesn't exist but which is phonetically identical*] life easier."

C4. "La mayoría de las máquinas no están trabajando."

"The majority of the machines are not working."  
[*calque/borrowing "trabajando," usually used to refer to the work a person carries out, instead of "funcionando."*]

C5. [*The exercise asks for the conditional form. The prompt read, "¿Qué harías con mil dólares?" "What would you do with a million dollars?"*] "Con mil dólares yo puedo comprar mis padres algo especial."

"With a million dollars, I can buy [*present tense "can" instead of conditional "would"*] my parents something special."

C6. "Cuando los estudiantes aplican a las escuelas de medicina,

es importante que haigan mantenido un promedio alto. Si no sacastes buenas notas, no te van a aceptar."

"When students apply [*calque/borrowing "aplicar" instead of "hacer una solicitud"*] to medical school, it is important that they have [*'non-standard' form of the subjunctive "haiga" instead of "haya"*] maintained a high average. If you didn't get [*'non-standard' ending -s on second person singular preterite*] good grades, they're not going to accept you."

C7. "Yo le llamé pa'tras pero no estaba en casa."

"I called him back [*calque/borrowing for "back"*] but he wasn't home."

C8. "Orita las escuelas nomas quieren enseñar el inglés, no el español."

"Right now [*informal word and spelling*] schools only [*informal word*] want to teach English, not Spanish."

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