TEACHING SPANISH AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Most world language teacher education programs prepare teachers to teach Spanish (and other languages) as foreign languages and not as heritage languages. What is the difference? Why does it matter? How does this distinction affect teacher preparation? What does being prepared to teach Spanish as a heritage language entail? And why is it important to prepare Spanish teachers for this mission?

First, the critical difference between teaching Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) and teaching Spanish as a heritage language (SHL) is the audience—the student population taking the class. SFL is typically intended for those students with no Spanish-language background. SHL is aimed at Spanish native speakers (SNS) seeking to study their heritage language. And these students are spread across the scale of native-speaker status, from fully native to marginally so, a consequence of family language usage and generational changes.

Second, SFL and SHL differ in the aims and goals of teaching and learning. Since SFL introduces students to a new language, students need to learn to communicate in Spanish by developing different types of competencies. Conversely, SHL involves learning more about a familiar language and studying its ethnic and linguistic roots. To this end, SHL grants Hispanic students the opportunity to maintain their heritage language, enhance their linguistic preparation for function in academic or formal settings, and thus develop their literacy skills, as they enhance their grammatical, textual and pragmatic competencies.

Third, the set of affective needs generated by the teaching and learning of SFL (usually related to learners’ language anxiety) significantly differs from that of SHL. For instance, Hispanic students may experience insecurities about embarking on the formal study of Spanish due to judgmental messages of linguistic inferiority. Another issue is the perceived linguistic prestige of different Spanish dialects and the linguistic prejudices surrounding the “less prestigious” varieties, which foreground the importance of raising sociolinguistic awareness and an appreciation of Spanish linguistic wealth (within the United States and elsewhere).

Clearly, these differences have an effect on language teacher-preparation programs. Since Spanish teachers and teacher candidates must know of and develop an understanding of the pedagogical issues surrounding the teaching of SHL, adequate teacher training dictates the infusion of teacher-preparation courses that address the needs of the SNS students that Spanish teachers will teach. Because traditional foreign language methods courses tap the demands of SFL, teacher education programs must take action and close these gaps by educating teacher candidates about the pedagogical and linguistic issues pertaining to the teaching of SHL to SNS.

Ideally, Spanish teachers seeking to teach SHL should demonstrate: a) native-like language proficiency, b) knowledge of pedagogical principles in language maintenance and literacy, c) sound understanding of the sociolinguistic and pragmatic issues of Spanish as a world language and language in contact, d) knowledge, understanding and respect of the students’ home culture and its role within the larger Hispanic world, and e) background knowledge of the history of the Latin American countries from which SNS hail. This list, however, could be longer, and institutions of higher education could even offer teacher-preparation programs that specifically prepare Spanish teachers for SHL. Spanish teachers and teacher candidates must know of and develop an understanding of the pedagogical issues surrounding the teaching of SHL.

The majority of preparation programs do not offer adequate training to teach SHL and foreign language teacher education programs must confront the challenges of offering adequate preparation (translated as more courses of specific content) in times when universities are mandating reductions in credit hours and/or canceling foreign language education programs due to budget constraints.

Some institutions have begun to think creatively and offer introductory courses that address the main issues of heritage languages teaching and learning. Typically, these courses (graduate and undergraduate) are offered in alternative formats, such as intensive weekend courses with online components, to satisfy the needs of both teacher candidates and accomplished teachers seeking professional development. The challenge remains for these courses to become an integral component of the prescribed teacher-preparation program for Spanish teachers.

Teacher preparation and student motivation are key factors in student success. It is our responsibility to advocate for those Hispanic students seeking to preserve their heritage language by thinking creatively and making the best out of challenging times.