An Analysis of Spanish Language Maintenance Motivation in a Heritage Learning Classroom

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Abstract: Centering language maintenance as a primary goal in heritage language (HL) education contributes to strengthening the language skills of HL speakers. Current research argues that HL classes that build on HL students' linguistic confidence and stimulate HL students' agency can lead to a more profound commitment to maintaining their language (Beaudrie et al. 2014; Leeman et al. 2011; Sánchez-Muñoz 2013). This study adds to existing research on language maintenance and, in particular, explores students' perspectives on the impact HL courses have to reinforce and promote HL maintenance. Seventeen students enrolled in a Spanish HL course at a four-year public university were interviewed about their learning experiences. The participants shared that course projects (i.e., the family interview, family tree, bilingual poem, and community project) allowed them to gain confidence in their Spanish to become advocates of language maintenance. The results show that these activities led students to discover new ways of incorporating Spanish in their everyday life, reinforcing their linguistic capital, and using Spanish beyond the classroom and their homes. In sum, this study provides valuable information about how a heritage course can promote students' HL maintenance through the implementation of pedagogical strategies that connect students with their local communities and families.

Keywords: Spanish heritage language pedagogy, Spanish maintenance in the classroom, pedagogical strategies

Introduction

Spanish is one of the most-studied second languages in secondary schools, colleges, and universities (Beaudrie, Ducar and Potowski 2014). The parallel growth in the number of college- level Spanish courses not only includes students who are classified as second language learners, but also students who have already been exposed to Spanish either at home or in their communities (Beaudrie 2012). Students in second language classes who had previous exposure to Spanish gained increasing attention from educators and researchers who argued that these classes (second language) were not meeting the academic needs of these students (Valdés1981; Carreira 2011). In particular, Valdés (1981) urged instructors to acknowledge skills the students brought into the course. She advocated for developing pedagogical theories and effective educational practices specific to this group of students who are referred to as heritage language speakers. Heritage language speakers are those who were either born or raised in the U.S. and were exposed to Spanish either in their homes or in their communities (Valdés 2001, 2015). This definition is one of the most commonly used in the field of heritage language (henceforth HL) and is

well suited for an educational context and in particular for this study since it best describes the abilities these students bring to this specific learning environment (Beaudrie and Fairclough 2012; Beaudrie, Ducar and Potowski 2014).

Valdés (1995, 2006) contributed to the development of adequate goals to meet the needs of HLS, which became the foundation of the field of Spanish HL and its pedagogical practices. Beaudrie, Ducar and Potowski (2014) provide a detailed list of these goals of HL, which are 1) language maintenance, 2) acquisition or development of a prestigious language variety, 3) expansion of bilingual range, 4) transfer of literacy skills, 5) acquisition or development of academic skills in the HL, 6) positive attitude toward both the heritage, dialects of the language and cultures, and 7) acquisition or development of cultural awareness, which was proposed by Aparicio (1997). This research study will primarily focus on the first objective: language maintenance. In previous HL research, it has been found that the most potent contributors to language maintenance are the solidarity of the community and the active involvement of the family, along with the students' development of a critical language and sociolinguistic awareness (Beaudrie 2015; García 2003; Holguín Mendoza 2017; Leeman 2005; Leeman and Serafini 2016; Martínez 2003; Silva-Corvalán 2001; among others). Furthermore, in addition to recognizing the impact these previous domains of home and community can have on language maintenance, it is imperative also to analyze, as argued by Valdés (1995), "how classroom activities can help delay or reverse language shift" (310). Therefore, understanding how certain activities and pedagogical approaches can contribute in motivating the student to maintain their Spanish and further develop their language skills beyond the classroom is beneficial for HL instruction as these will be specific tools that can be implemented in the curriculum design of current and future HL courses. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine what classroom activities completed in a course promoted or led students to become committed to maintaining and further developing their skills in Spanish.

Literature Review

Heritage Language Loss and Maintenance in the U.S.

The maintenance of Spanish and the shift from this language towards English is a dynamic and complex situation in the U.S. There are many elements such as 1) the acquisition of Spanish as the mother tongue or second language, 2) the proficiency of Spanish and its development, and 3) the quantity of Spanish usage on a regular basis (Bills 2010) that impact the continuum within the Spanish-speaking community. For this reason, Spanish maintenance and Spanish loss should be seen as a continuum and not as a binary.

In addition to economic, social, socio-historical, and hegemonic language ideologies impacting the shift in the continuum, Martínez (2006) explains, that the theory of ethnolinguistic vitality can also apply to explain both Spanish maintenance and Spanish loss. For instance, a low vitality of Spanish can lead to a preference for English as the dominant language. Conversely, high vitality of Spanish within the community contributes to the maintenance of the language. In the United States, the vitality of Spanish is influenced by 1) the status of the language within the society among all language speakers, 2) the demography of where the language is spoken, regardless if there is a high population of Spanish speakers, and 3) the support the language receives from institutions such as educational and governmental organizations (Martinez 2006). As of today, the vitality of Spanish in the United States is low, given its devaluation and lack of support from educational and government institutions. Regardless of the "abundance of speakers, and the thriving [Spanish-speaking] media and business" in many U.S states, the vitality of Spanish is also low because of the deficit perspective towards the language, which consequently results in low rates of language maintenance among the Latino community (Carreira 2013: 407).

Spanish maintenance has been studied in Latino communities and throughout the different generations of HL speakers (Rivera-Mills 2012, 2013; Martínez-Mira 2009; Velázquez 2009; among others). There are also studies that focused on analyzing the language attitudes that impact the Spanish continuum (Achugar and Pessoa 2009; Bills 2010; Hudson and Hernández Chávez 2000; Martínez 2006; among others); but only a few studies have delved into analyzing how HL courses can contribute to the maintenance of this heritage language. For instance, Leeman, Rabi and Román-Mendoza (2011) conducted a study with students enrolled in an HL class. The course used a critical pedagogy were students developed critical language awareness. In this course, students began to question the language ideologies that stigmatize Spanish. Students also discussed the socio-political factors impacting Spanish maintenance, and most importantly, they put their knowledge "into action" by participating in a service learning project. By facilitating afterschool language workshops for elementary students, participants shared in interviews that they became advocates for Spanish maintenance. One student, in particular, shared that the "experience teaching [in these afterschool workshops] allowed her to activate a powerful new understanding of herself" (490). By participating in this service-learning, students became language activists and agents of Spanish maintenance in their schools and the community.

The Role of HL Pedagogy in HL Maintenance

Beaudrie (2009) and Valdés (2001) claim education is one of the domains and resources to promote language maintenance and reverse language loss.

The researchers argue that the classroom should be a welcoming environment where students receive support to further develop their competence in Spanish and gain confidence in their language abilities. This educational domain and HL programs in particular are an efficient and reasonable place to also address the stigma attached to Spanish by "nurturing learners' bilingual and bicultural identity through a curriculum that responds to their affective, social, and developmental needs; orienting instruction towards addressing the needs of U.S. Latinos, and responding to the realities surrounding the use of Spanish in this country" (Carreira 2013: 407).

It is vital, however, that HL programs and classes incorporate the students' input and their needs into the curriculum; unfortunately, Beaudrie and Ducar (2005) argue that this continues to be a challenge in curriculum design. As of 2012, there were about 169 HL programs in colleges and universities throughout twenty-six U.S. states (Beaudrie 2012). In Beaudrie's (2015) analysis of 62 HL classes' syllabi in 35 public universities in 15 U.S. states, she found that half of these programs continued to focus on "teaching students either standard or academic forms of oral or written Spanish" (9). This approach in HL classes is problematic because it devalues the variety the students bring from home and at the same time implies that their dialect is inferior compared to the prestige variety they are learning in class (Martínez 2003). This approach is not only detrimental for the student but also for the maintenance of the language (Villa 1996). Leeman (2005) and Martínez (2003) advocate for an end of silencing the home variety of the students and urge for the implementation of a critical based dialect awareness approach and critical language awareness. However, in Beaudrie's (2015) analysis of the current methods in HL classes, only one class had implemented a critical based dialect awareness approach. While half of the classes focused on predominately teaching the standard variety of Spanish, there continues to be a need in HL programs for an appreciation and acknowledgment of the variety of HL speakers. For this reason, Beaudrie (2015) and Valdés (2015), advocate for HL courses to make students' dialect central in HL instruction as well as taking into account the needs and wants the students hope to accomplish from taking the class. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate the needs of the students into not only the curriculum, but also design activities that would encourages the students to commit to maintaining their Spanish.

The present study contributes to how the educational setting in particular heritage language classes and activities can be used to promote language maintenance. As Beaudrie (2015) emphasized, there is a great need for research that examines what takes place in the classroom in order to understand and analyze the impact HL classes have on students; thus, it is necessary to analyze what kind of activities have the most impact on student's interest in maintaining their Spanish. This study, therefore, provides an understanding of how an HL course fosters language maintenance, increases students' linguistic capital, and

meets the first goal of HL pedagogy (to promote Spanish maintenance). The research questions that guide my study are 1) How can an HL course promote and foster their Spanish maintenance? and 2) What activities implemented in the HL classroom impact students' interest in maintaining their Spanish?

The Study

In order to examine the HL students' experiences in the course, a qualitative research design was employed in the study. Data was collected by conducting a short demographic survey and individual semi-structured interviews with the researcher at the end of the Fall 2014 semester. Interviews were chosen over any other qualitative method as this instrument provides great depth of the participants' experiences and reflections on specific situations (Seidman 2013). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the responses from the open-ended questions were coded inductively using thematic analysis (Seidman 2013). The thematic analysis of their comments shows three major themes of their experiences in class, which will be discussed in the Research Findings section.

Participants

The 17 participants who volunteered to partake in the study were enrolled in a Chicana/o Studies 101 at a four-year public university in California. The researcher visited the course and invited the students to participate; 22 students were enrolled in the course, but only 17 volunteered. The class was particularly designed for HL speakers, and it was open for all students at the university. There were students from different class levels such as incoming freshman to graduating seniors and from different ages that ranged from 18 to 35 years old. Twelve of the participants identified as females and 5 identified as males. Their majors varied from different disciplines, and most of them self-identified as Latina/o, Hispanic or Chicana/o students. Additionally, the majority of the participants' family of origin were predominately Mexican. Three of the students' family of origin were from El Salvador. Another participant's parents came from two different Spanish-speaking counties, one from Mexico and the other from El Salvador.

Given that the purpose of the research was to analyze an HL course, Chicana/o Studies 101 was the only class in the entire university that was designed for HL students. Consequently, this course was chosen. Chicana/o Studies 101 (Spanish for Chicanos/as) is a lower-level undergraduate course taught under the Chicana/o Studies Department at a public four-year university in California. The class focused on expanding the skills students already brought from home, such as a high degree of communicative proficiency and also in developing their reading and writing skills. One of the primary goals of this 17-week-long class was to strengthen the students' linguistic confidence. In

reading the course syllabus, it became evident that in addition to exams, quizzes, and book assignments, the students had to complete two major projects. The first project was the "Personal History Project" which included four parts and was 20% of their overall grade. The first part included a mini research to find out why each student was given his or her name. The second part required students to conduct an interview with a family member about their obstacles and achievements in their lives. The third included a family tree about the history of their loved ones. For this particular assignment, students were asked to be creative and bring a visual of their family tree. The last part of this first project was to write a poem of their experience of being bilinguals. Once the participants finished the poem, the entire class voted for the best. Each of the chosen poems was read by the author and was also published in a department's magazine (CHS 101: Spanish for Chicanos/as course syllabus).

The other big project required students to complete a "community project," which was 30% of their overall/final grade. This project consisted in volunteering in an organization in the students' community to explore the "relationship between language and some cultural expressions important for the target Latino community" (CHS 101: Spanish for Chicanos/as course syllabus). In particular, students were required to get involved in an organization where they could use their Spanish. They were also required to write a reflection about their experience in their respective organization. Furthermore, it is necessary to mention that the instructor was trained in heritage language pedagogy and research. However, the researcher did not interview the instructor about the course nor asked her about the reasoning in assigning these projects. The information provided about the course is taken only from the CHS 101: Spanish for Chicanos/as course syllabus and from what the students shared in their interviews.

Data Collection

After completing a consent form to volunteer, the students were asked to answer a demographic and language use survey. The objective of this survey was to collect data from each participant about their linguistic profile with questions regarding their daily use of Spanish in different contexts and with various family members. In addition to the survey, one semi-structured interview was conducted of all 17 participants enrolled in Chicana/o Studies 101. The interviewed took approximately 30 minutes, and it was conducted in Spanish. The students responded both in English and Spanish to questions such as: What has been your experience in CHS 101?; What was your most impactful learning experience in the class?; How has CHS 101 impacted your daily use of Spanish?; and, Are you taking any actions outside of this class to help you maintain and develop new skills in your Spanish? If so, what do you plan to do?

Research Findings and Discussion

The impact this HL class had on the participants is projected in multiple forms. In particular, the outcomes will be explained in addressing the most common themes that emerged from an inductive thematic analysis. I employed Thematic Analysis (TA) as the qualitative data analysis method to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset that provide an answer to the research question being addressed. Patterns are identified through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding, and theme development and revision. One of the advantages is its flexibility. Therefore, after listening to the audio recording multiple times to familiarize myself with the data, I transcribed each interview verbatim. Then, I open coded the transcription and established categories. Once I looked at patterns within the categories, the different patterns pointed me toward three themes: 1) linguistic confidence key for Spanish maintenance 2) bonding, advocating, and finding yourself, and 3) Spanish use beyond the classroom.

Linguistic Confidence is Key for Spanish Maintenance

Sánchez-Muñoz (2013) highlighted that a HL class could help students to develop confidence in using Spanish with their family and in their community. This is precisely what some of the students in the current study highlighted as one of the most impactful learning experiences in this class, gaining confidence and using their Spanish more on a regular basis. Even, gaining confidence to feel comfortable to speak Spanish with the professor of the class as Kathie highlights: "*en la clase yo decía que la profesora es la experta del español y qué tal si yo decía las palabras equivocadas y pues no me sentía tan cómoda, y ahorita ya al final del semestre me siento cómoda hablar en español.*" [sic] In Kathie's experience, we can see that by the end of the semester she did not feel uncomfortable anymore speaking Spanish around the professor. Increasing the confidence of the participants is vital because by doing so they become active language users because this confidence helps students to step out of their comfort zone and use the language in and out of the classroom and beyond their homes (Beaudrie 2009).

The confidence the participants built in the course is because of the specific skills they have developed in class and the personal connection they have cultivated with Spanish, as David explains:

> *Esta clase, CHS 101, me dio esa seguridad y me hizo entender que el español es parte de mí y ahora ya me siento más orgulloso de hablar español. Ahora ya me siento más seguro porque ya aprendí más nuevas palabras y también del uso de los cognados. Ya ahora como que hay una seguridad más por todo lo que aprendí con la profesora en la clase, [quien] me enseñó mucho [y] me dio la seguridad que necesitaba* (David).

For Andrea, having confidence allowed her to be more comfortable in helping others: "I feel more comfortable. I could help people now if they need help with directions, so I can guide them and stuff; so, it has made me feel more comfortable to use it on a daily basis rather than not knowing it all." In an earlier part of the interview, Andrea shared an incident that happened to her at the metro station with a Spanish-speaking elder woman who approached her to ask for directions. Andrea stated that she knew precisely the stop in which the woman needed to get off the bus and the directions to get to her destination. However, Andrea mentioned that she could not find the words to tell her in Spanish. Instead, she tried to use her body and facial gestures. The older woman walked away without allowing Andrea to explain the directions. This experience hurt Andrea's feelings because she felt she was not Mexican enough as she was not able to give directions in Spanish, but more than anything, she explained "feeling bad" for not having the confidence to speak Spanish. She stated that at the beginning of the semester, she did not feel confident and that she did not want to read out loud because she was embarrassed. However, this class helped her gain this confidence and, as explained earlier, she now feels more comfortable helping others as well as speaking Spanish.

It is evident from these student reflections that one of the ways this HL course has fomented language maintenance among the students is reinforcing and strengthening their linguistic confidence.

Reconnecting, Advocating, and Finding Yourself

Furthering the skills and gaining new skills in the heritage language is one way students can reinforce their confidence in Spanish. Another important technique is implementing activities that provide students opportunities to use Spanish with members of their family and their community. In fact, the majority of the participants stated that the Personal History Project (i.e., family tree, bilingual poem) and the Community Project had the most impact in their lives and their use of Spanish.

For Carolina, the experience of completing a family tree was meaningful because she was able to develop a sense of belonging as she had always battled with figuring out her identity. She explained that she struggled with feeling out of place; she did not feel Mexican enough because she spoke English and did not practice many of the traditional Mexican celebrations. At the same time, Carolina did not feel American enough because of her skin color. In the process of completing the family tree, she realized the importance of embracing her bicultural identity and understand that both cultures represent who she is.

Acknowledging the interconnection between their HL and their ethnic identity with activities such as a family tree can motivate students to maintain their Spanish. This is why Sanchéz-Muñoz (2013) and others have highlighted

the need for HL instruction to acknowledge and foster students' ethnic and cultural identity. Strengthening these aspects can reinforce positive feelings about their Spanish and culture. For instance, classroom reinforcement of the interconnection between language and identity made David realize that: "I, we as Latinos, we have to maintain our Spanish here in the United States umm, it is a language we have to value because it is part of us and it makes us who we are and makes us unique, and I am proud to speak it." As he explained, the significance of maintaining the language was reinforced by the value assigned to Spanish in class.

For her community project, Carla volunteered at an elementary school where she helped out the students who were in an English learning program. She mentioned that after completing her required hours: "*planeo quedarme más tiempo que las ocho horas, quiero trabajar más con estudiantes ahora de chiquititos a grandes. También quiero participar en organizaciones de inmigración para poder hablar más el español con la gente*" [sic]. Here we can see that Carla plans to continue helping out an older population and work at an immigration office to continue using her Spanish. The linguistic capital students are building in this course is not only from activities that foment their writing, reading, and other skills, but also from activities such as the interview, family tree, and community project that allow them to explore more about their identity and family and have opportunities to engage with the Spanish-speaking community.

Spanish Use Beyond the Classroom

In reflecting on their experiences in the class, participants stated that this class sparked their interest to use more Spanish and to continue using it in their everyday life. For instance, Carlos explained that this class motivated him to read and write more in the language. He also mentioned that: "I am trying to like get little books just to read in Spanish and just like practice so that it is stronger too, like what she [Professor] said, you have to be practicing" [sic]. In fact, the activities students completed in class such as the bilingual poem, one of the assignments of the Personal History Project, and the Community Project encouraged them to use Spanish in settings where they usually only use English. Paco, for instance, shares in his interview that "it's funny because I have actually started writing music in Spanish, so it definitely opened a new world. I love music so, um I just learned that I really enjoy writing music especially in Spanish. [This assignment] definitely has opened a new world in my passion for me in music where I am able to now write songs in Spanish." The assignment Paco is referring is to the bilingual poem him and his classmates had to write. Writing this poem led him to discover his gift for writing creative poems in Spanish but also composing Spanish songs. Completing this assignment sparked new interests,

such as listening to Spanish music. He specified that before this class, he only listened to music in English.

Another student, Carmen, decided to text only in Spanish to her family and her Spanish-speaking friends. She shared that by texting in the language she motivated her friends to use it more. Grace, another participant, discovered the value of Spanish through completing the Personal History Project and the Community Project. Grace shared, "Spanish is more important than what I used to think it was." She argued that the motivation to maintain Spanish should go beyond the economic benefits because Spanish is essential in validating their social experiences.

In sum, these reflections demonstrate the influence this course had on students. Specifically, completing the Community Project and the Personal History Project, students discovered new passions and new interests to use Spanish in settings they would normally only use English. Additionally, through these experiences, the participants became committed to expanding and further developing their skills in Spanish.

Conclusion

The analysis of course curriculum in a context of HL pedagogy shows that HL maintenance is promoted and reinforced among the students, therefore, meeting the primary goal of HL pedagogy: Spanish maintenance (Valdés 1995, 2006; Beaudrie, Ducar and Potowski 2014). There are many ways in which language maintenance is stimulated, but the most evident is by reinforcing students' confidence in using Spanish in class, at their homes, and in community settings. As Beaudrie and Ducar (2005) stated, the lack of confidence is one of the biggest obstacles for language maintenance. Gaining and reinforcing this confidence improves the students' self-esteem but also boosts the commitment for the HL speaker to develop their skills further and continue to use Spanish beyond the classroom (Beaudrie 2009; Leema et al. 2011). As it was reflected in the students' experience, the activities in class such as the family tree, bilingual poem, and community projects not only reinforced students' linguistic capital and commitment and motivation in maintaining their Spanish, but also provided them an opportunity to become advocates of language maintenance, to reconnect with their family members, and to strengthen the interconnection between their language and ethnic identities.

Given that a limitation in this study is that it only analyzes one class, we cannot assume that all HL courses have similar scenarios that reinforce language maintenance. However, this study provides valuable information on pedagogical tools that can be incorporated in HL classes to motivate students to maintain their Spanish. One of these strategies is centering students' experiences in the curriculum. The present study claims that a primary motivation for students'

Spanish maintenance beyond the classroom is the opportunity to explore Spanish in the context of their lived experiences, rather than limiting it to exposure to language diversity or the standard variation in the classroom. Students were particularly inspired by the opportunity to volunteer and contribute to their Spanish-speaking community. Future research should consist of interviewing instructors and conducting a semester-long longitudinal analysis to examine further how Spanish HL courses are impacting and/or contributing to Spanish maintenance.

In conclusion, due to Spanish's low vitality in the U.S., promoting Spanish maintenance should be a priority in any HL course. The efforts to promote linguistic agency in HL speakers can be carried out through classroom activities and projects that allow students to reinforce their linguistic capital and challenge hegemonic language ideologies by centering their bilingual and bicultural lived experiences. Furthermore, promoting students' linguistic capital and challenging hegemonic language ideologies can contribute to reversing language loss and Spanish's low vitality in states with high Spanish-speaking populations. To shift from low to high vitality, a collective effort is needed, and one step forward is incorporating activities to the HL curriculum prompting students to be agents of change and confident Spanish speakers in the light of Spanish language maintenance.

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