

## Language, Culture, and Spanish Heritage Language Learners: Reframing Old Paradigms

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### **Abstract**

*Traditionally, the curriculum guiding many language programs has centered on the teaching of a “foreign” language to an audience of primarily second language learners (e.g. del Valle, 2014). Such a philosophy has relied on the belief in the existence of a single linguistic standard and an idealized community of native speakers from other countries. The increasing enrollment of Spanish Heritage Language (SHL) learners requires educators to reconsider the efficacy of such an approach in order to better address the needs of today’s student populations. A shift in classroom practices, however, requires a critical evaluation of the ideas that underpin the system of beliefs on which a traditional curriculum was built. Only after such an assessment can educators begin to acknowledge, value, and embrace the legitimacy of the diverse U.S. Spanish-speaking population and work to bridge the knowledge of classroom to that of the communities in which SHL learners live. The present article criticizes some of the firmly held opinions that sustain outdated perspectives and impede a reorientation of a traditional Spanish language curriculum. In doing so, the article offers a path to reorienting a program of study around the perspectives and needs of Spanish Heritage Language learners.*

**Keywords:** *Spanish as a Heritage Language, culture, standard language, idealized native speaker communities*

The 2017 Digest of Education Statistics indicates that the teacher workforce is predominantly both female (76.6%) and ethnically White (80.1%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Table 209.10). This profile of teachers stands in stark contrast to the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners in public schools, particularly Latino students entering Spanish classrooms. The challenge lies in reorienting a curricular mindset that has often positioned the Spanish classroom around teaching second language (L2) learners a “foreign” language to one of acknowledging, accepting and legitimizing the linguistic and cultural skills brought to the classroom by Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHL) learners from their communities here in the U.S. Such a shift in paradigms is not easy to accomplish, but is necessary in order to not only “rupture the yoke of colonialism” (Macedo, 2019) in Spanish language education, but also to provide SHL learners with the critical connections between language, community and classroom to allow them to grow to their full linguistic, cultural and academic potential. The present paper proposes a path for educators to shed false narratives that uphold notions of

language and culture and instead look toward embracing new ways of envisioning their classrooms and learners.

Many Spanish language teachers waiver between uncertainty, skepticism, and frustration regarding the abilities of SHL learners. They witness the SHL learners' understanding of sometimes complex structures and their knowledge of pragmatic tasks but are distressed by their apparent lack of mastery of seemingly simple grammatical principles or inability to recite the explicit rules explained in class that govern verb conjugations and spelling. Combined with SHL learners' use of non-conventional vocabulary and intermittent switching between English and Spanish, language teachers often assume that SHL learners are in need of focused grammatical instruction in "standard" language forms and the elimination of an "uncultivated" variety of language. However, what is more in order is for teachers to re-evaluate their perspectives on culture and language and readjust the lenses with which they view SHL learners.

One area that often occupies the periphery of curricular reform discussions is the notion of culture. Abstractly, we often think of culture as a quality that is detached from us; something that is externally displayed rather than as a code that is internally guiding us. This blind spot toward the cultural mores of a predominantly White, middle-class society renders the flaws of such systems of belief as invisible and unquestioned; the traditional, mainstream cultural points of view are deemed to be so "natural" and "common sense" that they allow us to "ignore existing structural and historical issues of power and domination" (Mitchell, 2013, p. 342). Viewed in the context of the U.S. educational system this blind spot toward embedded majority cultural biases only serves to perpetuate educational inequities that foster failure for CLD learners and subsequently blame them for their lack of success (e.g. Mitchell, 2013; Valencia, 1997). As teachers of language and as individuals with multiple cultural orientations, we must make the effort to raise our own awareness of the hidden beliefs we hold regarding SHL learners, the values we have regarding "appropriate" language, as well as the educational policies and practices we enact with respect to our classrooms based upon these notions.

### **View toward Spanish-speaking populations and the Spanish language: Historical and modern**

Schools in the U.S. have been an historical site of conflict for Spanish-speaking populations as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Spanish-speaking communities had long-standing cultural and linguistic customs that differed from those of English-speaking populations, clashes arose when these communities sought to retain their linguistic and cultural traditions and resist assimilation to an Anglo cultural model which presumed English monolingualism (Getz, 1997; San Miguel & Donato, 2010). From the onset, the language and culture of the Spanish-speaking populations in the U.S. were seen as foreign, inferior and incompatible with educational and economic progress.

These notions carried through in the approach to teaching Spanish in public schools during this same time. While there was resistance to retain the use of Spanish in public schools in the early grades in the Southwest, it was acceptable in the high school to further a student's aspirations for higher education (Getz, 1997). Thus, the tradition of teaching Spanish in schools has long been oriented around the instruc-

tion of learners who have not been exposed to the language outside of the classroom environment (Valdés, 1989). Accordingly, approaches to teaching Spanish have been geared toward providing L2 learners, who arrive with no previous knowledge of the language, with the rudiments of grammar and vocabulary, punctuated with “cultural tourism,” highlighting superficial cultural features of food, dress, music and holidays (Kubota, 2004; López, 2011). Such an approach only serves to perpetuate the comparative and contrastive “othering” of Spanish-speaking communities, does little to make meaningful connections between the classroom and SHL learners and, distilled in this manner, could easily devolve into lists of trends, tendencies and ultimately stereotypes (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

Efforts have been made to guide the teaching profession in the direction of greater consideration and adaptation of the curriculum to better include and meet the needs of Heritage Language (HL) learners. The works of exemplary authors in the HL field draw attention to the ways in which the textbooks continue to exclude authentic experiences related to HL learners (e.g. Holguín Mendoza, 2018; Leeman & Martínez, 2007), illustrate the psychosocial needs of HL learners (e.g. Beaudrie, Ducar & Potowski, 2014; Parra, 2016), and show how strengths of HL learners and second language (L2) learners are different in approaching grammatical judgements or classroom tasks (e.g. Montrul & Perpiñán, 2011; Potowski, Jegerski & Morgan-Short, 2009) provide avenues for more authentic engagement of linguistic and cultural skills of HL learners (e.g. Carreira & Kagan, 2018) and outline the dangers of judging HL speakers by monolingual standards (e.g. Beaudrie, 2015; Leeman, 2005; Martínez, 2003).

Before language teachers seek specific pedagogical remedies, it is important to recognize that the skills and abilities that HL learners bring to the language classroom are intrinsic qualities of their cognitive development through and regarding language and that distinct cognitive processes guide the acquisition and display of HL learners’ linguistic skills (Hulstijn, 2011; Zyzik, 2016). The early, natural exposure to language that HL learners experience provides them with a foundation of skills about how the language is organized with respect to the systems of phonetics and phonology (inventory of sounds, their combinations, and sentence intonation), morphology and grammar (the composition of words and the organization of words in sentences) as well as the meanings of frequently used words and sentence structures mapped into their linguistic network. HL learners process this information implicitly and automatically as part of what Hulstijn (2011) and Zyzik (2016) term Basic Language Cognition (BLC). Because of their BLC, many HL learners can evaluate the appropriateness of forms and meanings on an intuitive basis and can perform certain linguistic tasks more readily than they can explain how to do them or why a word, sound or expression “sounds right.” Thus, by virtue of their early exposure to language, HL learners are equipped with a linguistic “super power” that even they are largely unaware of; it is thus up to language educators to not only acknowledge the existence of these innate abilities, but to also aid HL learners in activating their skills to advance and develop their own linguistic potential to its fullest.

As an additional move in the direction of recognizing HL learner’s abilities, Trujillo (2009) creatively adapted the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages’ (ACTFL) World Readiness Standards for Language Learning (WRS) (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) to better exemplify the ways in which

the elements of the standards can be better interpreted for HL learners. Rather than conceive of the five Cs (Communication, Cultures, Communities, Connections, Comparisons) of the WRS as a set of separate rings that converge at one point, Trujillo places the dimension of Communication at the center of his figure enclosed in a triangle. The sides of the triangle denote the different modes of communication (interpretive, presentational and interpersonal) and the points intersect a first circle that envelops the four means of performing these modes of communication (reading, speaking, listening, and writing). This circle is surrounded by a larger one which includes the four remaining Cs. Referencing Freire's (1972) concept of *conscientização*, Trujillo encompasses all within a final circle which contains an additional element, "Consciousness."

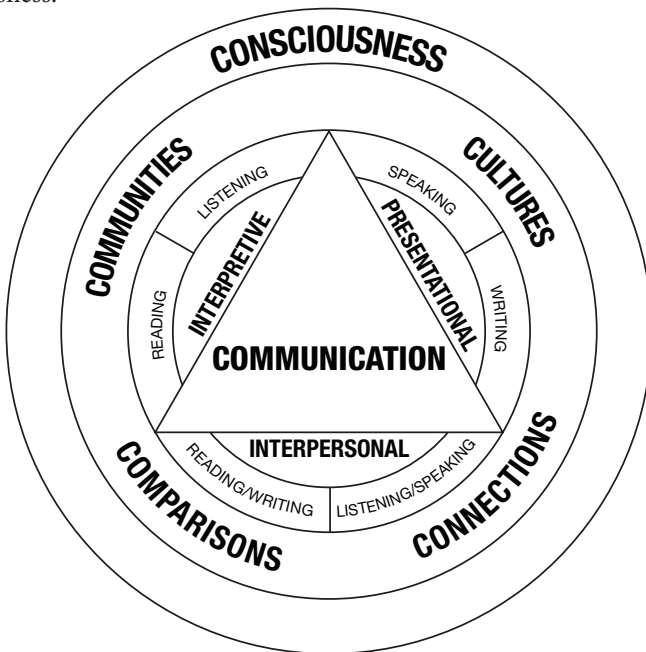


Figure 1. Reconceptualization of World Readiness Standard's 5C's into 5C + 1 by Juan Antonio Trujillo (2009, p. 379), reprinted with permission.

This reconceptualization and modification of the 5Cs of the WRS to create what Trujillo has termed 5C + 1, allows us to view these elements from a perspective that is more appropriate to HL learners. As communication is at the epicenter of the image, it is considered central to linguistic activities and the identity of the HL learner. As one pushes out from the center of the image, we notice that these linguistic activities can take the shape of many different modes and engage different skills. Importantly, Trujillo's encircling of these modes and skills with the other four Cs indicate that these linguistic activities are not separated from the concepts of culture, communities, comparisons and connections for HL learners. Rather these notions shape and are shaped by the diverse forms of communication in which HL learners engage on a daily basis; these notions surround and flow through the HL learner's identity and existence. Their linguistic performance is thus not separate from who

they are and how they see themselves when they interact with others. As one reaches the outer ring of the image, the addition of the notion of “Consciousness” reminds us that languages and their speakers are not always treated equally in society. Trujillo’s inclusion of this element recognizes the need for teachers and students to be aware of how the language is used and perceived outside of the classroom, and to foster the development of the other Cs that are not only enhanced by this awareness, but with an aim toward promoting equity.

#### **Four erroneous beliefs regarding HL learners**

There are several persistent, often implicit, “stock stories” associated with the Spanish language classroom that represent erroneous assumptions about language teaching and SHL learners (e.g. Delgado, 1989). Teachers’ belief in stock stories provides structure to what they perceive to be social and moral realities which, when left unchecked, ultimately perpetuate unwarranted stereotypes and hinder teachers from embracing a more open view of SHL learners.

The first mistaken belief is that SHL learners arrive with deficient knowledge about Spanish when measured on native speaker norms (see explanations in Lynch, 2012; Pascual y Cabo & Rothman, 2012; Valdés, 2005). Such a view assumes that SHLs’ linguistic knowledge is haphazard, unstable, and represents an obstacle to their linguistic, academic, and professional advancement. A second, and related faulty assumption is belief in idealized hypothetical communities of Spanish speakers (e.g. Carroll, Motha & Price, 2008; Fassett & Warren, 2004; Flores Flores, 2014; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Leeman, 2012; Valdés, 2005). To this end, some teachers feel that the objective of the classroom is to prepare HL learners to interact with unnamed future interlocutors, rather than real people that currently reside in their Spanish speaking communities. A third hindrance is the tendency to hold shallow views of real culture (e.g. Garrett-Rucks, 2016; Gay, 2002; Guest, 2002; Moncada Linares 2016; Nugent & Catalano, 2015; Trujillo, 2009). A misunderstanding of the nature and complexity of culture in general and a failure to recognize the diversity within and across Spanish-speaking communities in particular means that there is often little opportunity for SHL learners to make meaningful connections with the classroom. A final limitation is the misconception that the study of language is apolitical, devoid of prejudice, pretentiousness or injustice (e.g. Correa, 2011; Felix, 2009; Macedo, 2019; Suárez, 2002). In order to begin to adjust one’s view of SHL learners, we need to dismantle the faulty viewpoints on which they are founded.

#### **False belief #1: SHL learners arrive with deficient knowledge about Spanish.**

The first misconception regarding the linguistic skills of HL learners is perhaps the most persistent, that their repertoire of Spanish is somehow imperfect, impure, undeveloped or in some way deficient. Some of the earliest textbooks purportedly created to address the needs of SHL learners fanned these flames. Authors emphasized the corrective nature of the pedagogical approach as designed to eliminate “...la tentación de emplear anglicismos, arcaísmos y otros vicios de dicción [...the temptation to use anglicisms, archaisms and other vices of diction]” (Barker, 1972, p. iii). Such instruction was meant to go beyond a purification of one’s grammar; it

was to address issues of HL identity which the author deemed illegitimately formed through his/her lived experiences. Through the erasure of the SHL learners' connection to their informally-learned linguistic and cultural knowledge, the author hoped that "...el estudiante se adelante dejando a un lado vicios de gramática y a la vez ideas falsas acerca de su herencia hispana [...the student will advance leaving behind both vices of grammar as well as false ideas regarding his/her Hispanic heritage]" (Barker, 1972, p. iii) which the author termed "barbarismos [barbarisms]."

SHL textbooks produced during the subsequent 25 years commonly carried this legacy forward, albeit more subtly, by continuing to disregard and deny SHL learners as legitimate speakers of Spanish. In Leeman and Martínez's (2007) review of a dozen SHL texts produced during this time period, it was found that the objective of these materials was "not to improve attitudes regarding the Spanish that students speak, and certainly not to critically examine its subordination, but rather, to take students' particular circumstances into account in order to better teach them an ideologically elevated variety of Spanish" (p. 48).

The attitudes displayed in texts and/or perpetuated in classrooms through other means presume that SHL learners have acquired linguistic skills in rogue fashion, beyond the reach of rules and norms. Sociolinguists, however, know this assumption to be patently false. There are no "accidents" in acquiring a language in a natural environment. Individuals, perceive, process, and organize language in purposeful fashion whether done consciously or below the level of conscious thought. Languages do not develop in a vacuum; rather linguistic knowledge, such as that noted as part of BLC is acquired through exposure and interaction with others in real-life contexts.

Well-known examples of children learning English producing forms such as "goed" and "holded" do not illustrate a lack of rules, rather a lack of knowing, at that time, all of the exceptions to a rule that the child has created to make sense of how language is put together (see Jackendorf, 1994, for a broader explanation). Moreover, because adults understand the communicative intent behind these forms, they are not alarmed and dismayed by their presence and may not be sufficiently motivated to offer a correction. In fact, studies on first language acquisition have demonstrated how little impact direct, overt correction has on the child's reformulation of their own rules since they are not held at a conscious, explicit level (see again, Jackendorf, 1994 for summaries of this research). Finally, the use of words like "goed" and "holded" is seen as a stage in a child's linguistic development, and children who use such words are not viewed as linguistically condemned or irrevocably impaired in their ability to acquire forms that are representative of an adult model.

In similar fashion, SHL learners reproduce forms commonly found in their environment or create forms to fill in gaps in their knowledge based on an internalized set of rules grounded in this early exposure. What is different about SHL learners is that these unconscious rules regarding Spanish may have become infused with their understanding of English. There are often no hard and fast cognitive boundaries that are formed between the languages in one's repertoire that are prevalent in one's community, particularly when they are acquired early and to some extent simultaneously (e.g. Rothman, 2009). When placed in new situations, such as moving from a casual conversation in an informal environment to a formal presentation in a language classroom, SHL learners may try out novel forms of words and structures reflective

of the creative amalgamation of community linguistic models to which they have been exposed suffused with English.

The dilemma of the Spanish language teacher, then, is to resolve the conflict between the view of a “standard” and “community-based” varieties of language. At the heart of this perceived impasse is the notion that a “standard” variety is superior over the other. Nothing could be further from the truth. Speakers of all languages have a linguistic repertoire that adjusts to differences in speaker, circumstance and goals, and reflects a lifetime of internalized rules and norms learned through experience; no two speakers will be exactly alike. Holding fast to the existence of a linguistic holy grail in the form of a single “standard” only represents a highly romanticized notion of Spanish, one that can be easily invalidated by spending time in community settings where Spanish-speakers interact, watching any number of programs on television, listening to modern music or reading how characters interact with one another in narratives. Perpetuating the false notion of the existence of a single “standard” variety of Spanish and by extension, to holding SHL learners accountable to an artificial ideal, only serves to obscure the rich and diverse linguistic reality of Spanish-speaking communities in and out of the U.S. (e.g. Leeman, 2005)

A corollary to the theory of a single, universal linguistic “standard” is often expressed by language educators who have been schooled in Spanish-speaking countries who attempt to present their academic experiences as justification for adhering to particular linguistic norms (e.g. Austin, 2019). This skewed view not only attempts to invalidate the authentic experiences of SHL learners, it exemplifies Freire’s notion of “cultural invasion” whereby an outside entity, penetrates the authentic context of a community and begins to impose its norms, standards and world view (Gadotti & Torres, 2009). This perspective is denounced by Macedo (2019) who notes that

In order to avoid the violence of cultural invasion, foreign language teaching must move beyond the false and racist notion of “purity” and be informed by radical language pedagogy that respects and celebrates the language practices that students bring to school and makes concrete such values as solidarity, social responsibility and creativity (p. 12).

A presumed inferiority of the language and culture and the community from which they derive leads to SHL learners being questioned and judged more harshly despite their often greater wealth of authentic knowledge than L2 learners. Rather than looking to the prescriptive philosophies espoused in textbooks, or imposing standards from a cultural context that is far removed in time and space from that of the lived realities of today’s SHL learners, language educators would be better served by gaining an understanding of the linguistic and cultural influences that have molded and continue to shape SHL learners’ knowledge and their connection to the Spanish language in and out of the classroom setting.

### **False belief #2: The idealization of hypothetical communities.**

Romanticized notions of linguistic standards and purity are often coupled with idealized beliefs about the communities with whom SHL learners may potentially interact. Such beliefs frequently reference hypothetical, rather than authentic language communities and are often framed as a rationalization for the resolute adherence to

certain norms, standards, and values of pedagogical practice. Flores Flores (2014) notes that these notions spring from presumptions or stereotypes teachers make regarding the learner community “*La idealización del imaginario de la lengua-cultura objeto de aprendizaje suele venir con su contraparte: la formación de clichés sobre las deficiencias reales o hiperbolizadas de la cultura del aprendiente, sin que medie una valoración objetiva ni una reflexión sobre esta posición [The idealization of the imagined form of the language-culture that is the object of learning is usually accompanied by its counterpart: the formation of clichés regarding the real or hyperbolized deficiencies of the culture of the learner without taking into consideration either an objective valuation or reflection regarding this point of view]*” (p. 187).

These unrealistic impressions and subsequent expectations come in many forms. Some teachers may express such beliefs as wanting to prepare SHL learners to be able to interact with a businessperson from another country. Others may state that they do not want to hold a “double standard” or a “lower standard” for SHL learners as they do for L2 learners. Other guises of this rationalization include wanting SHL learners to seamlessly integrate with or at least “not stand out” to native speakers from other countries. Finally, teachers may profess that they do not want SHL learners to “fail” in becoming “true” native speakers.

As with the idealized notions of language, these conceptualizations of SHL learners’ social and conversational needs are more fanciful than real and are imbued with a healthy dose of elitism. By virtue of their cultural and linguistic circumstance, SHL learners are already members of legitimate Spanish-speaking communities prior to arriving to the classroom. As such they already negotiate relationships with family and friends, participate in cultural events, perform everyday tasks of taking children to school, patronizing businesses, getting medical and legal advice, etc. Their roles, identities and linguistic skills shift and adapt to all manner of circumstances and interlocutors that they encounter along the way such that “HL learners may use language to index hybrid social and cultural identities, a process that reflects belonging to and moving in and out of ‘simultaneously-existing multiple groups’” (Leeman & Serafini, 2016, p. 59). Thus, just as a SHL learners’ system of rules regarding language are not without organization, the ways in which they engage with other members of their community in different circumstances are purposeful and exhibit community conventions; language educators should thus seek ways to bridge, not obstruct, a path for the community-based norms and customs to be held in equal esteem in the classroom setting.

Relatedly, it is critical that language educators be aware of the starkly different connection between language and identity for L2 and SHL learners. While L2 learners can readily assume and cast-off a façade of being a Spanish speaker for the purposes of class exercises without suffering any social or psychological penalties, the same cannot be said for SHL learners. The effects of privileging the norms of an idealized language or a hypothesized community can be particularly damaging to SHL learners when aspects of their home language, culture and identity have been placed in conflict or denigrated in the classroom. No linguistic or academic advantage is to be gained by separating or erasing the authentic linguistic and cultural experiences of the SHL learner in favor of mythical, prospective encounters with an imagined community of speakers. Promulgating such a view only creates an



unnecessary divide between the classroom and the communities from which SHL learners originate.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that an individual's pronunciation and use of vocabulary or unique turns of phrase often are used by others as an index of a speaker's origin in any language (e.g. Lippi-Green, 1997). Only when there is a presumption of inferiority associated with linguistic features is there a belief that a speaker would desire to conceal his or her identity. Given that SHL learners effectively use their linguistic skills in everyday situations, there would be little benefit to them to mask their identity in most circumstances, and therefore there should be no presumption that SHL learners should need to attempt to do so.

### **False belief #3: Holding shallow views of real culture.**

The negation of the legitimacy of U.S. Spanish-speaking communities is often coupled with or supplanted by a shallow understanding of Spanish-speaking cultures in general. Textbooks aid in promoting these superficial notions by relegating the presentation of culture to side bars and sprinkling in profiles of famous people, historical events, traditional celebrations and foods between explanations of grammar and lists of vocabulary. Some classrooms may add folkloric traditions of dress, dance and music culture the form of posters or designated days of cultural celebration. While the intention of these efforts is to enrich learners' knowledge regarding the communities where Spanish is spoken, the reality is that this fragmented, tenuous presentation instead fosters the essentialization of culture rather than its appreciation from a deep, meaningful perspective (Garrett-Rucks, 2016).

True culture lies well beyond a collection of products and performances which represent only the tip of what Edward T. Hall (1976) conceived of as a cultural iceberg. While such surface manifestations illustrate a small fraction of what culture is, the remainder is held well below the surface of awareness. While often oblivious, even to the individuals that form part of the culture, these beliefs, values, and thought patterns are often associated with deeply held emotions and are much more subjective and resistant to change (Hall, 1976). These deeper aspects of culture include conceptualizations of time, the purpose and pace of work, the ways in which decisions are made that affect individuals and groups, the conceptualization of self, the notion of illness and approach to healing, the roles of individuals according to their gender, age, status, kinship, etc. just to name a few. Thus, far from clearly observable surface features, true culture is a complex, multifaceted, system of implicitly embedded values, traditions and perspectives that guide patterns of belief and behavior.

An additional misconception regarding culture is that while there may be variations in the manifestation of the surface features, there is a presumed commonality of the deeper aspects (Garrett-Rucks, 2016). However, it should not be assumed that because individuals from different places share a commonly understood language, that they share the same points of view or that they hold the same values and beliefs or behave in similar fashion in reaction to the same circumstances. This is particularly relevant as language educators at times may attempt to view SHL learners as mirrors, either wholly or fractured, of the heritage cultures from which their family is descended, rather than as individuals with unique personalities that have absorbed viewpoints from multiple sources. As Michael Guest (2002) reminds us

Culture, therefore, should be seen as an interplay between social and personal schemas, since when we carry out classroom management we are aware of and deal primarily with specific personalities and specialized group dynamics, not national or racial cultures *en masse*. There is no culture that does not have its share of rebels, the fashionably bored, the self-obsessed, the overly friendly, the terminally sulen, and so on. It is these characters, not monolithic cultures, that we regularly confront in our classrooms. (p. 157)

Focusing on only the surface features of a culture does little to acknowledge the significance of cultures at large, nor recognize their complexity. Similarly, envisioning SHL learners as uncritical embodiments of essentialized, or stigmatized cultural features, alienates them from the Spanish language classroom and fails to recognize them as individuals who comprise a unique, yet intricate system of linguistic and cultural qualities.

#### **False belief #4: Language is apolitical.**

In language classrooms, there is a common belief that the study of language is nearly universally constructive, enlightening, fosters tolerance, and is not burdened by controversy. This view, however firmly believed, is somewhat limited and overly simplistic in its perspective, particularly with respect to SHL learners. As a base concept, teachers need to first recognize that HL learners in general and SHL in particular are the survivors of several decades of failed societal and institutional attempts to eradicate their home languages (Austin, 2019; Macedo, 2019). Decades of societal contempt for speaking Spanish in public or on school grounds have been manifested as symbolic violence or open hostility ranging from microaggressions, to legal restrictions of work and residence, to arrest, to school segregation, to disproportionate relegation to special education classes, and to physical and emotional punishments (e.g. MacGregor-Mendoza, 2000, 2013). These abuses represent generations of mistreatment that are not overcome quickly and lightly, particularly if they are not acknowledged either as part of the foundation of the cultural and linguistic heritage of the learners in the classroom or as part of the continued prejudice that SHL learners face outside of the classroom. The “co-naturalization of linguistic and racial categories results in the profound social fact that populations come to look like language and sound like a race across cultural contexts” (Rosa, 2019, p. 122).

Classrooms therefore should not be bastions of cultural neutrality. Gay (2002) notes that such a perspective leads to the pointed circumvention of controversial topics such as

...racism, historical atrocities, powerlessness, and hegemony...[and promotes the] decontextualizing [of] women, their issues, and their actions from their race and ethnicity; ignoring poverty; and emphasizing factual information while minimizing other kinds of knowledge (such as values, attitudes, feelings, experiences, and ethics) (p. 108).

Failure to acknowledge or address controversial topics in language classrooms is not analogous to neutrality since “[a]ll too often heritage language programs may reproduce hegemonic power relations in promoting a dominant heritage without regard to the actual cultural diversity of its students” (Austin, 2019, p. 138). Silence on such topics implies, at a minimum, an unwarranted acceptance of discriminatory

perspectives and unfair practices which results in the complicity in the continuation of injustices. Confronting such societal inequities not only raises the *conscientização* of all learners, it empowers learners to consider ways to become agents of change for the betterment of society.

To provide such empowerment for her students, María Sweeney (1997) enacted such practices with fourth graders in New Jersey as they engaged in lessons regarding apartheid. In describing her overall approach, she explains,

I ask students to consider alternative views of events past and present. I ask them to look for missing or silenced voices in the materials we read and to consistently ask of what they read, hear, or witness:

Is this fair? Is this right? Does this hurt anyone? Is this the whole story? Who benefits and who suffers? Why is it like this?

Through such questions I seek “to give students the tools to critique every idea that legitimates social inequality, every idea that teaches them they are incapable of imagining and building a fundamentally equal and just society (Christensen, 1994, p. 8)” (p. 279).

Such an approach is at the core of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) approaches to teaching which seek to “[empower] students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural and historic references to convey knowledge, impart skills, and to change attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 13). Embracing such a perspective implies that language teachers will integrate genuine scenarios that reflect diverse, yet authentic points of view, provide L2 and SHL learners with the opportunity to challenge conventional points of view, and allow all learners to grow in their linguistic and cultural knowledge in a relatable and contextualized fashion in one course or across several (e.g. Holguín Mendoza, 2018; Leeman & Serafini, 2016; MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2016; Moreno & MacGregor-Mendoza, 2019).

Achieving the goal of becoming a more culturally and linguistically responsive language teacher is not beyond the realm of possibility, but it does require moving beyond traditional mindsets and standard activities. The acknowledged qualities of CLR teachers are that they

(a) are socioculturally conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, and (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 20).

### **Initiating the reframing of old paradigms with respect to SHL learners**

As a society, we do not seem to know how to educate a diverse population well. Nor do we collectively seem to know how to approach many other challenges that relate directly to equity and diversity such as distributing resources in ways that work for diverse communities or

communicating across lines of difference without regarding the differences themselves as a problem (Sleeter & Flores-Carmona, 2017, p. 7).

Shedding notions that are informally or formally believed is not an easy path as it requires a reconfiguration of the concepts that often have guided one's philosophies and approach toward teaching and learning. Nonetheless, new methodologies cannot be adopted fully or effectively without a critical re-evaluation of one's own system of beliefs regarding language, power, culture, identity and communities (e.g. Guest, 2002; Hollie, 2017; Kubota, 2004; López, 2011; Matias, 2013; Peterson, 2014; Sleeter, 2001). Failing to conduct such an examination will only promote successive cycles of half-hearted implementations and missed opportunities for achieving real change, all of which will result in ineffective outcomes and continual disappointment. Nonetheless, the growing number of SHL learners that are enrolling in K-20 classrooms obligates our commitment to such a goal.

The heart of a language does not reside in the mechanical features and system of rules that form its structures. Rather, it is found in the ways that people interact with one another in their own communities to joke, to barter, to praise, to educate and connect with one another to express love, joy, sympathy, remorse, and a host of other sentiments, which work to establish trust and friendships. Accordingly, SHL learners are products of such vibrant communities, not damaged goods that need to be either discounted or fixed, weighed and measured against a set of idealized notions. Instead, they are the bearers of linguistic and cultural treasures that are anxiously waiting to be revealed and examined.

To foster the acceptance and legitimacy of SHL learners' Spanish language use and to further their language education pursuit, we must make efforts to bridge local Latino communities and Spanish language programs. Through connecting our classrooms, and ourselves, to the variety of skills, knowledge, and cultures from the local Hispanic community and listening to the issues that affect them, we provide the type of relationship-building linguistic opportunities that foster learners' interactional competence.

The need to enhance the intercultural and interpersonal communication skills of all learners, starting at beginning levels of language instruction, is described by Fantini and Garrett-Rucks (2016) as crucial "...[to enhance] learners' ability to see beyond their own paradigm and to reflect upon their own singular way of seeing the world" (p. 6). Affording learners linguistic opportunities to deal with racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences, in a positive way—to understand and appreciate them—prepares our learners to push back against misguided impressions of Latino communities that propagate societal inequities. If we have any hope to "engag[e] students in deep reflections to raise their critical awareness around important and sensitive issues such as language ideologies and the power structures that have shaped students' beliefs about their own languages, cultures and identities [in order to] empower students' ethnolinguistic identity as part of their lives in the United States and as part of their global citizenship." (Parra, 2016, pp. 166-167), then we must be committed to embarking on a similar journey ourselves first.

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