

## *Yo hablo el español de mi pueblo: A Conscious Curriculum for the Heritage Language Learner*

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### **Abstract**

*The search for a more comprehensive and conscious curriculum for Spanish heritage language learners and Spanish native speakers (SHL/SNS) is a task that many educators are making a priority due to the diversity in the classroom. This paper focuses on presenting the theoretical framework and approaches that have facilitated SHL/SNS instruction in our institution in the Southwest. The theoretical framework includes a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) approach, the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, funds of knowledge, and Pueblo-based pedagogy, followed by activities that have been effective in establishing a conscious curriculum in SHL/SNS pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** *Spanish heritage learners, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, funds of knowledge, manifiestos, cuentos infantiles, community projects*

### **Background**

My first introduction to Spanish heritage language (SHL) instruction was as an undergraduate student at New Mexico State University. I fondly remember my professor whose class seemed like a courtship with the Spanish language. The curriculum presented in the course introduced me to the romantic relationship with my own language and culture, which I continue to foster to this day. For the first time in my schooling, I was allowed to see myself through a different set of eyes that came from a place of love and acceptance; an experience that transformed me personally and academically. Reflecting on that experience, I now understand that the beauty of heritage language instruction relies on helping the student bridge multiple facets of their identity—primarily family, school, and community.

Now, as an educator of Spanish for heritage Spanish for heritage and native speakers (SHL/SNS), I am able to provide insight into what heritage language pedagogy means for both the student and the teacher. SHL pedagogy includes the theoretical framework and approaches that unify teachers, students, parents, and community, working toward the same goals. The goals include language maintenance, transfer of skills between languages, acquisition of academic skills in Spanish, promotion of positive attitudes towards a variety of dialects and cultures, and acquisition and development of cultural knowledge (Aparicio, 1997; Beaudrie et al., 2014).

The most important part in accomplishing these goals is to approach the students, parents, and community with a sense of respect and appreciation for all they bring to this union. This paper presents the theoretical framework and approaches that have facilitated SHL/SNS language learning and instruction at New Mexico State University in accomplishing the goals of SHL/SNS pedagogy.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Framework behind the SHL/SNS Pedagogy*

The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), were originally designed to serve K-12 students and “to prepare learners to apply the skills and understandings measured by the Standards, to bring a global competence to their future careers and experiences” (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, p. 2). The Standards, along with their Goal Areas (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities), were created as guiding principles and later modified to serve different levels of language instruction. In searching to extend these standards to fit the needs of the SHL/SNS learning community, Trujillo (2009) has presented what is now known as the Five Cs + 1. The extra C is in reference to what Paulo Freire coined as *conscientização* in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Trujillo opted to expand the 5Cs to include *consciousness* in a way to foster student recognition of their position in their own language and culture within a system of privilege and oppression. By understanding their position in a society, heritage language learners are able to reclaim their agency as a speaker of the language, which leads to the promotion of equity and social justice (Trujillo, 2009).

One way educators can help our students reclaim their agency as a legitimate speaker of the language is by being cognizant of what the student brings to the classroom and to implement a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) instructional approach. CLR pedagogy uses students’ prior cultural knowledge and experiences to make their learning relevant and effective for their own needs (Gay, 2000). CLR pedagogy is effective because it validates and affirms students’ community and home language as well as the culture that students bring to the classroom. Some of the tools associated with a CLR instructional approach that have enhanced SHL instruction include providing culturally relevant literature, building a community based on learners’ cultural behaviors and learning styles, and expanding academic vocabulary through the use of the home language to create a learning environment that validates and affirms the student’s identity (Hollie, 2017).

The manner in which instructors can best integrate CLR instruction is by utilizing students’ funds of knowledge, “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being... pertaining to the social, economic and productive activities of people in a local region” (Moll et al., 1996, p. 133). Integrating learners’ funds of knowledge in the classroom can be easily accomplished by allowing teachers and students to become a cultural broker, “who thoroughly understands different cultural systems, is able to interpret cultural symbols from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and knows how to build bridges or

establish linkages across cultures that facilitate the instructional process” (Gay, 1993, p. 293). Previous knowledge, acquired by both educators and students, is the most important resource to supplement the course curriculum. Another way to integrate this knowledge into the classroom is by utilizing a Pueblo-based pedagogy, which provides an approach that will be more inclusive of the language and culture of the community since it focuses on real-life experiences and projects that are giving back to those same communities (Helmer, 2014). Activities which are representative of Pueblo-based pedagogy may include community projects like workshops and trainings that can be accessed by its members. Each of the activities described below are informed by these theoretical and pedagogical positions, thus taking into consideration the cultures and identities of our student population.

### *SHL/SNS Instruction at New Mexico State University*

The Spanish for Heritage Language and Native Speakers Program at New Mexico State University (NMSU) in its origins provided instruction in Spanish by proposing corrective measures to promote the maintenance of academic Spanish (Rodriguez Pino & Villa, 1994). SHL/SNS pedagogy at our institution has come a long way since then. Our instructors are now more inclined to create innovative approaches that draw from our students’ cultural richness and diversity. The last complete report on our student population presents that 59% of NMSU students identify as Hispanic, and 71% come from the state of New Mexico (Office of Institutional Analysis, 2017). These numbers might suggest homogeneity in our SHL/SNS program; however, our program enrolls a divergent student population. This diversity is influenced by students’ regions of origin within the state, linguistic ideologies, cultural and political differences, and the funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom. Interesting exchanges in and out of the classroom occur when you bring together Spanish heritage speakers from across the state whose families have ties to the North, Central and South of Mexico, and Central and South American countries. Moreover, heritage learners from African American, Asian American, and Anglo backgrounds also contribute to the diversity and richness of our program.

The pedagogy and methodology for SHL/SNS learners is relatively young and in constant evolution. About two decades ago, SHL pedagogy was still addressing the heritage languages learners as native speakers of Spanish and not targeting their individual ethnic and cultural profiles (Carreira et al., 2020). Today, the field still lacks in addressing key issues, such as the inclusion of academic contributions viewed through students’ backgrounds, languages, and connections with the community. This is specifically affecting the SHL learners, who in New Mexico, have suffered through language repression and courses meant to correct their use of their Spanish language (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2000; Rodriguez Pino & Villa, 1994).

As the SHL/SNS program coordinator at NMSU, I continuously work on evaluating the program in order to meet the needs of all of our learners. Most importantly, I strive to foster connections in the community to enhance classroom curriculum. I seek a pedagogy that goes from a mainstream orientation toward integrating diversity and considering some of the most important issues, like the ethnic background, home language, and class of our students (Au, 1998).

### *A CLR Approach in the Diverse Classroom*

A CLR approach is most effective when it involves the collaboration of teachers, students, parents, and the community. In order to meet the needs of our diverse student population, the CLR curriculum must be student-centered, without discouraging the presence of the community. Beyond building a network, the CLR approach is a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural and historic referents to convey knowledge to impart skills, and to change attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 382). This approach works most effectively when the student is taught to make academic, cultural and linguistic connections between the classroom and their community; specifically, because “when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interests appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). To achieve these goals, educators first need to present material that is relevant and comprehensible to students enrolled in their courses.

In order to understand students’ anxieties and prejudices about their language use, educators have to be self-reflective about their own ideologies, teaching methods, and style. A “conscious” teacher must meet the needs of the heritage language learner by validating and affirming the culture of the student and explore strategies that help in making students more conscious individuals (Hollie, 2017). For the teacher, this process entails doing some work in the community prior to beginning a course; the teacher needs to survey the community to find and provide sources that are aligned with students’ profiles and needs. Educators must be cognizant that the ways “people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures, and in order to maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice” (Villegas, 1991, p. 13). The instructional examples below demonstrate some ways to foster cultural awareness in students’ local and regional communities.

Once the role of the teacher, the goals, and the objectives of the course have been established, students should be invited to share their own culturally relevant information that is equally valuable to the content presented by instructor, thereby positioning the student role as agents and cultural brokers. Educators must highlight the importance of their students’ funds of knowledge by “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). One way to help students process new information in class is by scaffolding their comprehension of familiar authentic resources and materials, which allows information to be passed on in segments that are comprehensible and easily approachable to help the learner “move toward new skills, concepts; or levels of understanding” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 10). Everything presented should be contextualized and comprehensible to those participating in the exchange.

### **Teaching *Enamoramiento* through a Sociolinguistic Approach**

Every course in the SHL/SNS Program has been designed to engage students in a process of *enamoramiento*, or falling in love with their own language, literature,

and culture with materials and resources relevant to students' lives. For example, the curriculum includes local authors to bring light to issues affecting the Spanish-speaking communities in the region. Class discussions include topics that impact students' lives. Additionally, experts in the community that serve as role models and advocates are invited to share their experiences and stories with students. Useful classroom strategies include adjusting written text and spoken languages to meet the needs of the student, providing instructions that are clear and explicit, motivating the use of students' home varieties of Spanish, as well as presenting opportunities to interact with other speakers, and making efforts to minimize the potential for anxiety (Lucas et al., 2008). In this way, our curriculum strives to be inclusive by identifying the historically marginalized voices in the classroom community and working to bring them into the language classroom discourse (Pennycook, 2001).

As students learn the ways in which languages are used and the impact they have on society, they are more likely to understand the ways in which their voices may have become marginalized in their own communities. When applied in the classroom, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) demonstrates "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). Burns and Waugh (2018) believe that "...the classroom is a place in which the power of the dominant class is perpetuated through the kind of knowledge and discourse that are valued and those that are not, in areas such as curriculum development, instructional content, materials design, and language choice" (p. 4). The integration of reflective assignments and discussions about language ideologies can guide students back to their communities as observers and critics of their own cultures.

In my pedagogy courses, students often ask which variety of Spanish should be taught in the classroom. Herein, I emphasize the need to integrate critical sociolinguistic instruction to bring awareness of "the social, political, and ideological dimensions of language as well as the need for socially responsive pedagogies that incorporate students' experiences, promote equity both inside and outside the classroom, and foster student agency in making linguistic (and other) choices" (Lee-man & Serafini, 2016, p. 56). To meet these goals, educators should provide activities that help learners identify community languages along with language varieties that hold prestige in their region, as determined by students. For example, Burns and Waugh (2018) presented a model for Second Dialect Acquisition (SDA) in which both the standard and home varieties of students' languages are treated as overlapping but separate in an additive, rather than subtractive, process where "students use their home varieties as a starting point from which to acquire the standard through contrastive exercises and sociolinguistic information about ideology, power, and the development of standard language" (pp. 5-6). However, the risk in practicing a contrastive analysis in the classroom is that if not done correctly, it can oversimplify the richness and cultural diversity, essentializing and reducing a culture to simple stereotypes that create binaries between the self and the other. As noted by Guest (2002), creating categories that are static and stigmatized can promote cultural paralysis. Instructors must be aware of the dangers of linguistic discrimination, unconscious validation of a particular dialect, that can result in symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) such as students' self-defeating resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal,

2001) —seen in isolated performance strikes or mental and physical retraction that may confuse failure with not wanting to learn as a sign of protest (Helmer, 2014). Without taking into consideration the linguistic abilities, knowledge, metaculture, and community of the student, instructors can fail to present a curriculum that is not culturally sustainable or relevant to students.

Lastly, it is important that students be allowed to express their voice through their agency. They must be provided a safe place for self-expression, without fear of retaliation or judgement, a sort of refuge or sanctuary. This process is the hardest to accomplish for both student and teacher because it means that everyone must make themselves vulnerable to their insecurities, biases, and ideologies about their own culture and language use. Educators must keep in mind that this process of reflection and self-discovery is happening in tandem with a cultural focus which heightens students' sensitivity due to themes or topics that are sometimes considered too taboo for discussions with family members. Working on lowering students' affective filter is part of the process that eases students' introduction to a more expressive and collaborative space. This space can be created by implementing a *critical learning community* in which "ideas are probed that create discomfort and are worked through by critical dialogue... that disrupts and acknowledges tensions" (Lopez, 2011, p. 81). Teachers should not avoid a topic because of fear of confronting these tensions. Ignoring an important issue for students can cause them to alienate themselves from the rest of the class.

Topics addressed in the SHL/SNS courses at NMSU include family, gender roles, feminism, *machismo*, racism, sexism, labor force, language ideologies, and identity, none of which should be avoided. For this type of program to be successful, adjustments to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the students must be made. When educators do not understand the community of learners we serve, fostering the aforementioned environment becomes difficult. Hence, the connection between teacher and student has to be established at the start of the semester. Educators also need to foster a sense of community and camaraderie in the classroom. Furthermore, understanding the community inside and outside of the classroom creates "validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society" (Hollie, 2012, p. 23). Above all, students need to develop a sense of ownership for their own culture where it becomes a strength and not a deficit.

### **CLR Approach into Practice**

The SHL/SNS curriculum at NMSU highlights formal skills such as analyzing literature, formal writing, and developing vocabulary, orthography and grammar. Nevertheless, these elements are not the main focus for these courses. As mentioned in the previous section, the primary goal of the program is to help students fall in love with their language and culture. The manner in which all of the formal skills are developed or reinforced involves integrating literature and grammar into cultural topics and discussions. The following examples are some innovative ways to develop a more conscious curriculum, starting with making connections between the academic environment and the community.



### *Manifiestos*

In the advanced composition course for Spanish heritage speakers, students create *manifiestos*, which are graphic representations that express reflections, opinions and visions about the life of the student author. The topics of the *manifiestos* are chosen by the students, and they range from identity issues, culture, gender roles, citizenship, nationality, border, etc. The 5C+1 model, which proposes the integration of *conscientização* or consciousness (Trujillo, 2009), is used to help students reflect on issues affecting their communities. Integrating the notion of consciousness allows students to consider possible problems encountered in their community, expose these problems, prompt self-reflection and acquire a social, political and ideological understanding of their world, and take action to change any oppressive system that may be holding them or their communities from accomplishing their goals (Freire, 1970). Once students have chosen a topic to discuss, they create image and text manifestations. One of the most memorable *manifiestos* was a black and white image of women's faces with bruises around their eyes. The project was a critique of domestic violence in a student's community. These *manifiestos* provide students with an opportunity for self-expression in the language classroom. Additionally, the *manifiestos* encourage students to develop a plan of action by presenting a problem along with solutions to the problems (Moreno & MacGregor-Mendoza, 2019). The project goal is to help students situate their own experiences in relationship and connection to other members of their community.

### *Cuentos Infantiles*

The *cuentos infantiles* are original short stories written by SHL students in advanced composition courses. These short stories are centered on a topic that impacts the local/regional Hispanic community. Some of the most predominant topics addressed in the stories include immigrant rights, domestic abuse, bullying, cultural assimilation, and many others. Students collaborate in groups of three to write their *cuento*. All members of the group write, edit, and illustrate the project. This process is done throughout the semester and under the supervision of the professor. Once the *cuento* has been drafted, and subjected to several rounds of revisions, it is then approved to get illustrated. As part of their service learning, students must present their *cuento* at a local public school for children in the community to enjoy (Moreno & MacGregor-Mendoza, 2019). This particular project calls on the funds of knowledge as well as the 5C+1 because it allows the students to write and reflect about those stories and problems in their community.

### *Ode to Home*

Students in both the beginner and advanced courses write a poem about the place they feel most at home. This very personal assignment is inspired by the poem "De Donde Yo Soy" by New Mexican author, Levi Romero. The works by Romero were chosen because he inspires and serves as role model for our students. His writing is a reflection of our students' identity. Romero is able to write both in English and Spanish, while using different dialects and registers. He addresses topics that our students can easily identify with or they might feel as their own. The images presented in Romero's poetry are exemplary of the romance students have with their

New Mexican identity. Reading his poetry is like falling in love with themselves over and over again. Students read Romero's work in class, and based on his poem "De Donde Yo Soy," they write a very personal and intimate representation of their own identity. Students' poems are beautiful odes to their parents, hometowns, culture, food, and music. The poems tap into the students' funds of knowledge because they allow students to integrate their identity and their knowledge about their community into a literary masterpiece.

### *Community Heroes*

Making connections with the community allows students to self-reflect and acquire a social, political and ideological understanding of their own world. For this reason, students have to write about the life and impact of a non-family member community hero of their choosing. The only caveat is that they do not write about someone who is famous, featured or recognized publicly for their contributions in the community. Although students are discouraged from writing about their own family members, they are allowed to propose a family member to one of their classmates as an option. Students are motivated to find someone in their hometowns; hopefully someone who they have encountered sometime in their lives. The purpose of this project is to highlight the lives of community members who receive very little credit for their great contributions. I want the younger generations to find heroes in all of the people they encounter and, one day, become heroes themselves. For this project, students have to write an essay about the person of their choosing. They also have to create a one-page editorial piece of their *hero*, which includes a life narrative that highlights their accomplishments along with a picture. Students are encouraged to gift their *heroes* a framed copy of the editorial piece. All editorial pieces are exhibited on the walls of our department.

### *Community Projects*

Developing community projects is a class-wide effort. First, students have to brainstorm three problems affecting their community within their groups. Once students have discussed the importance of the three issues, they have to choose one of the problems for which they will propose a community project that includes three important steps: getting started, planning action, and taking action. The purpose of this project is not only to present a problem affecting the community, but to offer real solutions that could solve the problem. A tool that has helped in thinking about this project is the Purpose, Outcomes, and Process (POP) Model created by Leslie Sholl Jaffe and Randy Alford (Gass, 2013). The POP Model is helpful in focusing the planning and decision-making process by asking students to think about the projects' purpose, outcomes and process (POP). Thinking about the purpose allows students to reflect on why this project is important. The outcomes step allows students to think about what they need to accomplish, and the process phase permits a discussion on how they will accomplish the outcomes. Students are not allowed to propose a project that already exists; however, they can propose a similar, yet improved version of what is available in their community. This project motivates students to take their solutions back home and find ways to implement them in solving issues. If students are unable to implement their solutions, at least they have engaged in conversations about issues that impact their communities. With this particular



project, students see the value of language and literacy in our communities. They are able to analyze power relations, as well as deconstruct texts, along with learning how to write and implement projects that can be used in the fight for equity and social justice (Morrell, 2005).

### *Service-learning*

The effectiveness of a service-learning component in our SHL program, has facilitated integrating a Pueblo-based education in the curriculum for SHL instruction. A Pueblo-based education relies on projects in the community, is founded in the real world, reclaims and revalues community languages and cultures, while improving students' success and motivating students' control over their own education (Helmer, 2014; May, 1999). In 2012, our SHL program presented service-learning opportunities in which students engaged with the local community in a variety of ways. They participated as translators and interpreters for medical centers and public schools (MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2016). The service-learning project included a series of reflective exercises that encouraged students to address their experiences as well as make connections between the classroom and the community (MacGregor-Mendoza & Moreno, 2016). Some of the projects have included translation work for academic, legal, and medical purposes, outreach to the immigrant community, literacy programs, and aid to the homeless.

### *Formal Language Development.*

As previously mentioned, a primary goal of the SHL/SNS program at NMSU is to help students fall in love with Spanish and their own cultures. We do, however, focus on the development of formal/academic language through literary analysis, writing assignments, vocabulary expansion, and the exploration of norms present in academic orthography and grammar. Using students' prior cultural knowledge and experiences to make their learning relevant and effective for their own needs (Gay, 2000) validates and affirms students' communities and home languages as well as the culture that students bring to the classroom. The manner in which all of the formal skills are developed or reinforced involves meshing the examination of literature and grammar with cultural topics. One example involves analyzing cultural readings, where students are asked to identify grammatical concepts present within the reading. Drawing first from learners' funds of knowledge of their own home languages and cultures, SNS/SHL learners discuss and write about relevant topics and analyze language structures across diverse Spanish speaking communities, investigating the role of the language use and local power structures.

Developing a critical sociopolitical consciousness allows learners to criticize the linguistic norms, values and institutions that produce and maintain social inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As Freire (1970; 2005) proposes, by claiming agency, you acquire a social, political, and ideological understanding of the world; in turn, this allows you to take action to combat any oppressive element and empower yourself to live in a multicultural society. By understanding their position in a society, heritage language learners are able to reclaim their agency as a speaker of the language, which leads to the promotion of equity and social justice.

Conversational skills are different from academic skills and students must be given the opportunity to have comprehensible input as well as opportunities to prac-

tice conversations that are meaningful and have a purpose in their own lives (Lucas et al., 2008). In class, students learn to speak in public and the courses provide them with life strategies that help students build confidence in their abilities. The obligation for a teacher is to minimize judgements of students' language use, maximize compliments in order to motivate an appreciation and value of their contribution, provide opportunities for practice, advocate for language maintenance in the classroom and outside in the community, respect language varieties, create agents of their own language and be cultural brokers (Draper & Hicks, 2000).

## Conclusions

The inspiration for implementing a CLR, conscious curriculum stems from the desire to expand the diversity of materials and activities presented in class while combatting subtractive schooling that renders students' identities invisible and leaves them bored, unmotivated, ignored, lacking agency and not having their needs met. The SHL/SNS pedagogy and activities presented here are situated in theoretical frameworks and approaches that unify educators, students, parents, and community. The activities work toward goals that include language maintenance, promotion of positive attitudes towards a variety of dialects and cultures, acquisition of academic skills in Spanish, and acquisition and development of cultural knowledge (Aparicio, 1997; Beaudrie et al., 2014).

By utilizing a Pueblo-based pedagogy that focuses on real-life experiences and projects that are giving back to those same communities (Helmer, 2014), family and community are taking a front seat on this journey to self-discovery in the NMSU SHL/SNS curriculum. The activities presented here include *manifestos*, *cuentos infantiles* (short stories), writing about community heroes, developing a community project, and working on service-learning projects. Each of the activities has been carefully designed and selected to meet at least 3 of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. In addition, all activities have been designed to integrate the notion of *consciousness*, as part of the reflective nature of the curriculum (5C + 1) to foster student recognition of their position within their own language and culture within a system of privilege and oppression (Trujillo, 2009). Through this process, students are able to become cultural brokers and agents for themselves and their community, while taking responsibility for their own learning. These are easy and fun ways in which an educator can implement a CLR approach to teaching SHL.

All of us are responsible for creating a culturally and linguistically responsive approach to teaching because we care to see our students succeed both in and out of the classroom. This project presents a brief approach to a holistic and conscious methodology to teaching SHL through a CLR teaching lens. I present methodology that aligns with needs of SHL students which include funds of knowledge, Pueblo-based learning, and the 5C+1 in SHL instruction. Being conscientious about the needs and interests of the students is the first step to presenting a holistic approach to teaching students with diverse backgrounds. This type of approach allows any teacher to create a safe space where diverse students can claim their agency/brokers and become responsible for their own education. By presenting a diverse culturally and linguistically sensitive curriculum, teachers can renovate strategies, repre-

sent students, value their contributions, and help them make connections with their communities (Hollie, 2012). Providing a sanctuary for our students assures that they acquire the necessary knowledge to grow academically and personally and reap the benefits for generations to come.

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