



How do heritage Spanish speakers' experiences in the Spanish classrooms influence the creation of their identities in terms of what they associate with the varieties of Spanish they use in class and in the community?

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Background:

Who are heritage language learners? These are students who have had experience with or exposure to a language other than English outside the formal education system (Hornberger, N. H., & Wang, S. C., 2008). In more simple terms, these are students who have learned a language other than English somewhere other than school. These students contribute to the diversity in our universities and K-12 public schools. Many of these students feel the need to compensate for what they lack in each of the languages they speak and in order to do this, they consider themselves bilingual (Urciuoli, B. 2008).

We studied how heritage Spanish speakers' experiences in the Spanish classrooms influence the creation of their identities in terms of what they associate with the varieties of Spanish they use in class and in the community. Knowledge of heritage speakers is important in foreign language classrooms when teachers are designing curriculum and lesson plans because heritage speakers have different needs than their Anglo classmates and because their classroom experiences influence how they see themselves.



Method:

Along with our faculty mentor, we gathered information about heritage Spanish speakers in Arcadia, a city with a large Latino/a population.

Over a period of 3 weeks, we conducted:

- **Focus group interviews with students.**
- **Individual interviews with Spanish and ESL teachers.**
- **Individual interviews with students' parents.**

We asked the students:

1. Outside of class, when and with whom do you most often speak or hear Spanish?
2. Do you consider yourself bilingual?
3. How comfortable do you feel speaking Spanish in class with your teacher and your classmates?
4. Do you ever feel like your teacher speaks a different kind of Spanish than you do?
5. What kind of person do you see as a bilingual Spanish speaker?
6. Did you ever feel like you had an advantage over others as a bilingual Spanish speaker?
7. Did you ever feel like you were at a disadvantage?
8. After taking Spanish classes, have you noticed yourself changing the way you speak Spanish?
9. What advice would you give to a new Spanish instructor with bilingual Spanish speaking students?

Parents and teachers were asked similar questions but they were modified in order to ask about the students.

Conclusions:

- We noticed that teachers and parents associated the varieties of Spanish spoken in the community with social and ethnic groups.
- Classroom Spanish was consistently associated with Spain: One individual noted that Spanish from Spain is right and that "Spanish from Mexico is not how you say it 'the right way'".
- The parents and teachers associate the type of Spanish that was being learned in the classroom as less useful in the community but there was no common agreement if either academic or at home Spanish was more valid over the other.
- Students had different opinions than their parents and teachers. Students generally showed an opinion that the Spanish learned in the classroom, while it may not be more legitimate, it is more formal and respected.
- For example, one student stated, "Every book that I've seen, it's always really formal, and that's the right way to say it. Like, that's how they put it in the books." In other words, this student gives authority to what is written in the textbooks.
- Another student uses the more formal Spanish she learned in class to gain respect from her elders. She said, "In my family, [...] getting respect from [...] your elders, showing them that you do respect them, is important."
- In summation, heritage speakers in Arcadia differentiate the Spanish spoken in the classroom from the Spanish they speak at home, and tend to express conflicting views about the legitimacy or value of the variations of Spanish that they speak in terms of potential use in the future, the workplace, or both.

A limitation in this study is the sample size of the students we interviewed. Although the school district that we interviewed has a significant and increasing Latino population, there was a limited number of students that had previously taken a Spanish class. Along with the sample size of the students, we also had a small sample size of parents and teachers that we interviewed. We hope to be able to continue this research and increase the number of participants by potentially including a few more school districts and having a larger pool of students to interview.

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