

Increasing Hispanic Heritage Language Learners' Motivation for Learning Spanish in a Foreign Language Classroom by Differentiating the Content and Validating their Identity

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Abstract: As there are an increasing number of Hispanic students entering the U.S. school system, middle and high school Spanish teachers have been presented with the issue of creating curriculums that challenge both Foreign Language Learners (FLLs) and Heritage Language Learners (HLLs). Hispanic students who enroll in FLL Spanish classes are categorized as HLLs and range from novice to native in their proficiency levels. If Spanish teachers are able to differentiate for their students and integrate them into the classroom in a way that is beneficial for both HLLs and FLLs then perhaps the HLLs will begin to see the benefits of maintaining both their Spanish and their English literacy skills.

Introduction

Imagine there are two Hispanic students in Mrs. Rosa's first year high school foreign language classroom who have both learned Spanish in their home. Lucia speaks Spanish fluently because it is her native language. She has two Hispanic parents who speak Spanish to her in the home. They both speak English, but her grandparents only speak Spanish. She speaks around 75% Spanish and 25% English when she is home. Mrs. Rosa looks to her as an expert in Spanish and asks her to help the students who are learning Spanish as a second language in group activities. Lucia often feels bored and disengaged during the lessons because she does not feel as if she is learning any new information or practicing any new skills. Consequently, Lucia does not feel motivated to continue studying Spanish in the classroom environment and does not plan to continue to study Spanish after her senior year. Camila, on the other hand, speaks English natively but since one of her parents is Hispanic and speaks Spanish natively, Camila learned to understand Spanish at a young age. She speaks 25% Spanish and 75% English in the home. All of her grandparents speak English, and she rarely communicates with them in Spanish. However, Camila feels a strong connection to her identity as a Hispanic person and takes pride in her ability to speak Spanish. She is able to quickly pick up new concepts and celebrates the Hispanic culture of the country her parent is from, but her proficiency level is at an intermediate low level. Mrs. Rosa often forgets to ask Camila to help the other students during group activities because her proficiency level is not as high as the Lucia's level. She also does not look to Camila as an expert in the language. Due to this, Camila feels like her identity is not being validated and she becomes more and more unmotivated as the year goes on. She wants to continue to study Spanish, but she feels like she is not a "good enough" Hispanic and does not want to embarrass herself by continuing to identify as a Hispanic student without being able to fluently speak Spanish. In order to assist both Lucia and Camila in feeling engaged and

motivated, could Mrs. Rosa differentiate her lesson based on proficiency level and learn to implement strategies that validate her Hispanic students' identities?

Spanish teachers need to prepare for the possibility that they will be expected to create lessons that will engage both Heritage Language Learners (HLLs) and Foreign Language Learners (FLLs). FLL students are students who are learning the target language as a second language. Throughout this paper I plan to point out the issues that lie behind teaching mixed HLL-FLL classrooms instead of classrooms that are focused on only one type of learner. I also plan to lay out feasible tactics that Spanish teachers can implement in their classrooms in order to achieve the goal of challenging and engaging their HLLs. If Spanish teachers are able to differentiate for their students and integrate them into the classroom in a way that is beneficial for both HLLs and FLLs, then perhaps the HLLs will begin to see the benefits of maintaining both their Spanish and their English literacy skills.

About Heritage Language Learners

Hispanic students may believe that foreign language Spanish classes will be easier for them to pass because their proficiency level in Spanish is often higher than their peers' proficiency levels or they have been exposed to the language before. When they enter school, many of them are required to take at least one foreign language class. Often, U.S. public schools will only offer a few foreign language options with Spanish being the most common class offered. Walls (2018) states that he has noticed an increase of HLLs enrolling in language classrooms and that mixed HLL-FLL classrooms are common in the U.S. Hispanic students who enroll in foreign language Spanish classes are categorized as Heritage Language Learners (HLL). Heritage Language Learners belong to a diverse category of language learners that range from basic to advanced proficiency levels in their heritage language and also include learners who are connected to or perceive a connection to the Hispanic community due to their heritage (Russel & Kuriscak, 2015). Currently about one quarter of all children in the United States are Hispanic and 89% of them are considered to be HLLs (Russell & Kuriscak, 2015).

The first and second generation HLLs often lack the motivation for learning the target language when they are placed in mixed classrooms. This lack of motivation can be due to a multitude of factors such as (1) unreasonable expectations of their knowledge of the target language and their involvement in classroom interaction; (2) believing that they are already perfectly fluent in the target language when they are not; (3) feeling disrespected by their teachers and peers when they make language mistakes and are publicly corrected; and (4) feeling like their identity is being challenged when they are told to speak in a dialect that is not their own (Lacorte & Canbal, 2003). Dialects are the local version of a language. In each Spanish dialect, the accent, grammatical structures, and jargon used will vary slightly from other regional dialects. HLLs may also feel isolated from the rest of the class due to the fact that they tend to sound more native-like than their FLL peers (Russell & Kuriscak, 2015). Second and third generation HLLs who have a low-proficiency level in their heritage language may feel a lack of motivation due to their inability to meet teacher expectations of an HLL.

Differentiation

Due to this increase of HLL enrollment in FLL classes in the U.S., teachers are presented with a new challenge. Just as some Hispanic HLLs are often not prepared to put in much work for their Spanish class because they believe that they will easily achieve high grades in the class, Spanish teachers are not always well equipped to differentiate their classroom material for their Hispanic students. Teachers of beginner Spanish classes are often unsure of how to create activities that will cater to both Hispanic HLLs who have an intermediate or advanced proficiency level (at least in terms of oral proficiency) and second language learners (L2), who often have a novice proficiency level or HLLs with little exposure to the target language. Due to the differences in linguistic abilities between fluent HLLs and non-fluent students and the delicate relationship between the two groups, “it is crucial to create a differentiated classroom and a flexible curriculum that takes into account where each student’s strengths and needs lie” (Mrak , 2020, p. 86). Without differentiation, teachers will act on the tendency to teach to the lowest proficiency level which in turn leads to a surplus of Hispanic students who are not challenged to better their literacy skills in Spanish but are required to engage in conversations that are well below their proficiency level. There are many forms of differentiation that teachers can use. One form that will be discussed in this paper is collaborative writing between HLL-HLL groups and HLL-FLL groups. Another form of differentiation that will be discussed is scaffolding by using corrective feedback that is appropriate to the learner. Scaffolding is providing a tool, structure, or extra resource that students can use to complete an activity that would have otherwise been too difficult for them to complete on their own. Both of these techniques help to validate the identity of the HLL student because the teacher is respectful of their past experiences by differentiating and scaffolding to their proficiency level.

Collaborative Writing

One way to engage fluent Spanish HLLs in a mixed language classroom is to teach them how to improve their literacy skills in aspects of their academic literacy that they do not practice in their home life, such as reading and writing. Many Hispanic HLLs do not write in Spanish at home, or if they do it is very informally, and therefore they are lacking formal written literacy skills. Students often need to be able to speak and write in a formal version of Spanish when they apply for jobs that require them to be bilingual and therefore it is beneficial for them to develop these skills in a mixed classroom. Although they will develop their written literacy skills faster than the FLLs, they will still need assistance in developing their writing style. Loureiro-Rodríguez (2013) found that writing activities can help them to focus on their language identity. Walls (2018) performed a study in a community college in southern California with 16 students from beginner and intermediate Spanish classes, half of whom were HLLs and half of whom were FLLs. Although Walls (2018) found the matched pairs of students with similar proficiency levels learned stronger literacy skills when working together when instructors used differentiated instruction to push them to perform at higher levels, she also noticed that HLLs and FLLs could also benefit from working together. When she grouped HLLs and

FLLs, she noticed that the FLLs exposed HLLs to the metalanguage that they were familiar with and HLLs exposed FLLs to their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Walls (2018) studied the dynamics of interactions between matched groups and mixed groups during collaborative writing tasks in mixed HLL-FLL introductory Spanish classrooms. Fernández-Dobao (2020) also concluded that the matched pairs worked more collaboratively to formulate language while mixed pairs assigned themselves roles in which the HLL was the expert in language production and the FLL helped to create the narrative in English. However, as stated earlier, there were benefits to both types of groups. It seems that, when paired together and given the correct scaffolding, FLLs are more accurate at written tasks and HLL perform better with oral tasks (Lynch, 2008). This symbiotic relationship between HLLs and FLLs is due to the fact that although HLLs have a stronger implicit grammatical knowledge, FLLs often have a stronger explicit grammar knowledge and may even display higher written literacy skills in areas such as spelling and metalinguistics.

As Lynch (2008), Fernández-Dobao (2020), and Walls (2018) concluded, it can be beneficial for HLLs and FLLs to be placed in mixed groups during collaborative learning assignments as long as the tasks do not only serve as language practice. Valentini-Rivera (2016) found that when the students share a measurable communicative goal, that goal can “facilitate more frequent instances of negotiation, particularly with respect to vocabulary development” (p. 631) which can expose HLLs to vocabulary that they would not learn in their home contexts. However, Valentini-Rivera (2016) sets limitations to the functionality of this method. Both she and Fernández-Dobao (2020) conclude that grammar used in classroom activities should challenge both groups of students in order for them to both benefit from the activity. One way to scaffold writing activities to make them fair for both groups is to give them each a few vocabulary words that they need to make sure are used in their writing activity. This type of activity fosters communication (Walls, 2018) and collaboration. In Fernández-Dobao’s (2020) study on collaborative writing in mixed classes, she studied how students’ perceptions and attitudes of working in mixed groups affected their cooperation in the groups. She took a survey of the students’ perceptions on collaborative writing in a mixed language classroom both before and after the activity took place. She noticed that once students observed an improvement in their own writing due to working in mixed groups, their perceptions of working together with the other group became more positive. Fernández-Dobao (2020) emphasized in her study that FLLs may not understand “what a valuable resource they can be for their [HLL] peers” (p. 65) and they often expect that they will learn more from their partner, the expert, than their partner will learn from them. However, with the help of their teachers, students can become “aware of their own and their peers’ strengths and weaknesses and understand the potential benefits of their mutual collaboration” (Fernández-Dobao, 2020, p. 65) and engage in true collaboration which has the potential to make them feel more accountable for their learning and prepare them with the skills they need to complete their personal and professional goals (Valentini-Rivera, 2016).

Scaffolding

When used correctly, Corrective Feedback (CF) can be used as a type of scaffolding. Valentini-Rivera (2016) specifically realized that indirect CF both motivates learners to negotiate meaning which allows students to co-construct and transfer their knowledge, encourages deeper engagement in the task, and assists learners in overcoming contradictions that the learners face when working together in groups. Using CF to make students aware of how to overcome contradictions in their group can help them to “better cope with linguistic and external issues (e.g., technology and time)” (Valentini-Rivera, 2016 p. 631). Scaffolding is important for the teacher to provide to both HLLs and FLLs because it pushes students to both complete their task and learn to self-regulate their learning (Valentini-Rivera, 2016). This process allows students to internalize the knowledge they are learning in the group activity and helps them to “establish an indirect, or mediated, relationship between [themselves] and the world” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1). Using CF as a scaffolding technique during both mixed and matched group writing activities promotes cooperative learning between FLLs and HLLs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to differentiate for HLLs so that they feel that their identity and background knowledge is being validated in the FLL classroom. Teachers should create differentiated tasks that are not isolating but allow for the HLLs and the FLLs to work together to co-construct knowledge. Also, HLLs and FLLs work together well on collaborative writing activities when their proficiency level is similar. However, when they are in a beginner level class and the proficiency levels are completely different, the mixed group members struggle to split the work equally and the HLLs becomes the experts that do the majority of the work when it comes to language production. In order to challenge those roles, teachers can differentiate the content to be challenging for both groups and use corrective feedback that helps them to co-construct knowledge. HLLs and FLLs in a mixed classroom should also be taught to understand their strengths and weaknesses so that they can confidently work on improving their language skills together.

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