

AAUSC 2013 Volume – Issues in Language Program Direction

Individual Differences, L2 Development, and Language Program Administration: From Theory to Application

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2013948412

ISBN-13: 978-1-285-76058-2

ISBN-10: 1-285-76058-1

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Chapter 9

Exploring Individual Differences among Spanish Heritage Learners: Implications for TA Training and Program Development

María Luisa Parra, Harvard University

As the Latino population becomes more prominent in higher educational institutions (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provanski, 2007; Beaudrie, 2011), a greater number of Spanish heritage learners (SHLs) are enrolling in Spanish language classes. Their growing presence has motivated researchers and language program directors (LPDs) to study the characteristics of these students to better serve their needs and interests (Valdés, 2001; Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005; Potowski, 2002, among others) and help them reach their linguistic and cultural goals.

One of the most familiar challenges that language teachers face when working with SHLs is the broad range of individual differences that these students bring into the classroom, in particular the different degrees of “functional proficiency” (Valdés, 2005) in Spanish that SHLs already have. It is this previous knowledge of Spanish that differentiates SHLs from foreign language learners (FLLs), usually English-speaking monolingual students who have no previous family or cultural connection to the language. Due to the considerable number of heritage learners enrolling in Spanish language classes, it is imperative that LPDs and researchers address these issues as they design courses and programs (Beaudrie, 2011; Valdés, 2001; Carreira, 2004; Potowski, 2002). It is particularly important to reflect upon the theoretical and practical implications of these differences—both between SHLs and FLLs and individual differences among SHLs—for teaching and training graduate students who will work with heritage speakers as teaching assistants (TAs).

The main goal of this article is to highlight the importance of incorporating knowledge of SHLs’ individual differences in TA training. I will argue that the focus on the diversity of SHLs fundamentally differentiates the field of heritage language (HL) teaching from that of foreign language teaching. The main reason for the difference is that many SHLs study a language mainly to reconnect with a fundamental part of their personal, family, and cultural roots. Therefore, on top of learning the language itself (and studying various cultures of the target language’s populations), SHLs’ language learning goals are entangled with their own sometimes complicated cultural and ethnolinguistic identity.

This essay has four parts: First, building on previous work (Valdés, 1997, 2001; Carreira, 2004; Parra, 2011; Potowski, 2009), I present an overview of the constellation of variables behind the different family, linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds of SHLs. In the second part, I will reflect on the implications of this

diversity for defining who is considered a heritage learner. In part three, I will discuss how research from the fields of HL pedagogy and individual differences can contribute to current efforts to transform TA training into professional development programs. Finally, I summarize five main points that I and other scholars in the field of HLs consider vital for integration into training for TAs teaching SHLs.

Variables Behind the Individual Differences of SHLs

Although the term “Spanish heritage learner” helps us to identify a particular kind of student, by using such a term, we are generalizing or homogenizing what in reality is a very heterogeneous group with “a very wide variety of competencies and proficiencies in the Spanish language” (Valdés, 1997). LPDs and language teachers recognize this variety as their main challenge when designing programs, courses, and pedagogical practices for SHLs. This tension—between homogenizing SHLs and acknowledging their variety of experiences—is also evident in the label we use in reference to these students’ cultural identity: “Latino/a.” The description of “Latino/a” is a useful point of departure for understanding the factors behind students’ individual differences.

We know that “Latinos” in the United States include people with ties to different countries in Latin America, who have different historical and cultural backgrounds and practices, and who speak different varieties and registers of Spanish pertaining to the country’s specific regions and to their family’s socio economic status and educational levels.¹ Latinos also include different generations: newcomers of various ages, children of immigrant parents born in the United States, and second- and third-generation Latinos who maintain a cultural and community bond to their Latino ancestry. Furthermore, another central source of diversity among the Latinos in the United States is their educational experience, which plays a central role in shaping their linguistic abilities in Spanish and English.

The study of these linguistic abilities constitutes the field of Spanish as a HL. Within this field, Latinos are conceptualized as Spanish heritage speakers or heritage *learners*, that is to say, “heritage speakers who wish to regain, maintain or improve their home language through classroom instruction” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, p. 29). Valdés (2001) gives us the most cited definition of a heritage learner: “a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (p. 2). I take from this definition three core elements that shape the abilities of SHLs and help us to distinguish the commonalities and the differences within this group: (a) The student’s personal circumstances at the time of arrival (or birth) in the United States, (b) her home (family/community), and (c) her educational experiences.

¹According to Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci (1998), one’s social class can determine access to various registers of a language. Individuals from the upper middle class tend to have contact with a broader range of registers, including the more prestigious ones, while people from a lower social class have more limited exposure to the range of registers of the language, resulting in a narrower (and less prestigious) repertoire. I will come back to this point later in this chapter.

Before moving forward, it is important to mention that I use an ecological framework to conceptualize how these elements relate to each other and impact the student's social, emotional, linguistic, and academic experiences. I assume that the student's identity and her linguistic and cultural background are shaped by a complex system of interrelations among the student, her family, and the educational institutions she has attended throughout her life. Therefore, I concur with Hornberger and Wang (2008) when they state that:

[. . .] [Heritage language learners] do not learn or use one, two or more languages in isolation. Consequently, there is no single profile of [heritage language learners]. Taken from this perspective, these individuals, their interactions with the people around them, and their dynamic interface with the social, educational, cultural, economic and political institutions constitute an ecological system. In such system, individuals are the center of inquiry, but they are also always a part of a larger system which they shape and are shaped by various factors in the system. (p. 6)

With this framework in mind, I will describe each one of the three aforementioned elements (the student's immigration circumstances, her home, and her educational experiences). The interplay of these three main factors generates many of the individual differences that one finds in the language classroom.

The Student's Immigration Circumstances

The student's personal immigration circumstances are among the main variables that impact her Spanish development. We define personal immigration circumstances as: place of birth, age of immigration to the United States, educational opportunities in the country of origin, and educational opportunities in the United States. A student has a better chance of maintaining her Spanish development over time if she immigrated at an older age, established a relationship with her parents in the HL, and mastered literacy in Spanish at some level before immigrating. This situation changes if the student is born in the United States, and if her opportunities to interact in Spanish at home and in a formal school setting are limited. It is also known that as young people increasingly prefer using English for social and academic communication, second- and third-generation children are less likely to maintain their Spanish (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Alba, 2004).

Language Family Settings

We tend to think of a SHL's home as the place where a child can be "fully" exposed to Spanish. However, family language use(s) can be diverse and complex. The first step to understanding SHLs' strengths and needs is to become aware of this diversity.

Building on Suzane Romaine's (1995) work on bilingualism and my experience working with Latino families, I have described (Parra, 2011) different possible home settings where SHLs grow up. Two home settings are the most relevant to understanding Spanish language maintenance. In the first setting, both parents share the same non-dominant language (in this case Spanish) and speak it to the

child at home. The child is exposed to the mainstream language (English) outside of the home, mainly in school (Romaine, 1995). Nonetheless, even within this language family setting, we can find important variations, for example, when the child is exposed to two variants of Spanish. Potowski (2009) studied families living in Chicago in which children were exposed to Spanish from Puerto Rico through one parent and Spanish from Mexico through the other. She found that children tended to pick up their mothers' Spanish with its phonological and lexical features, while others developed hybridized dialects where phonological and lexical features did not coincide with one or the other variant. Potowski relates these results to the influence of mothers on their children's language development, and she also brings into the discussion other important influences, such as fathers, grandparents, and the neighborhood in which the child grows up. Moreover, Potowski reminds us of the complexities of being exposed to two linguistic and cultural "repertoires" (p. 217). Even though some children may speak their mothers' Spanish, for example Puerto Rican, they still identify with the Mexican culture of their fathers.

In the second setting, parents have different languages (e.g., Spanish and English), and each parent speaks his or her own language to the child. One parental language is dominant (English). The child is exposed to Spanish and English at home and English at school. In this case, the child has less chance of maintaining Spanish, because English is reinforced at home by the other parent, as well as in school and in the community. Another variation of this situation is when the child is exposed to two different languages at home, neither of them English (i.e., Spanish and Portuguese), and English at school. In this case, the child can develop the three languages, but the tendency is for the child to be more proficient in English, since it is the language used at school and with peers. Moreover, many times parents also choose English to communicate when they do not know each other's languages.

Romaine (1995) also mentions families with "mixed languages," in which both parents and some sectors of the community are bilingual and mix languages in their daily life practices and in their interactions with their children. We can relate this scenario to second- and third-generation Latino families, in which language mixing tends to be more common, or to Puerto Rican communities in, for instance, El Barrio in New York (Zentella, 1997) and Mexican-American communities in California.

Within these communities, family social class and levels of education become another important factor in the ecology of SHLs. As Valdés (2001) and Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci (1998) point out, the specific Spanish variant and range of registers² spoken by a family will have features that encode the family's social class and education. Valdés (2001) states:

Heritage language speakers in the United States, like their monolingual counterparts in their home countries, reflect the complexities of class and access. The linguistic repertoires of

²Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci (1998) use the term "register" "to refer to language varieties associated with situational uses." (p. 474)

upper-middle-class individuals include a broad range of registers including varieties appropriate for those situations (e.g., academia) in which oral language reflects the hyperliteracy of its speakers. The repertoires of individuals of lower-ranked groups, especially those who have had little access to formal education, are much narrower in range and do not normally include ease with hyperliterate discourse. (p. 9)

In addition, in bilingual communities, where the majority of the population is composed of immigrants from lower socio economic status, children are exposed not only to a narrow range of registers but also to registers that undergo significant linguistic changes once they are in contact with English (see Silva-Corvalán, 1994, for her extensive analysis of Spanish tense and mood changes in Los Angeles Spanish). Heritage speakers will learn their parents' Spanish with its specific markers of class (Valdés, 2001) and education, and of the bilingual community in which they grow up.

In contrast, a SHL from a higher class is likely to have the human and economic resources that enable her to return to her family's country of origin and reconnect with the language and culture, reinforcing her sense of linguistic and cultural identity.

The Impact of Schooling on Heritage Language Learning

Without a doubt, school is the most powerful setting in which the linguistic and cultural systems from a student's family and her host country interact and shape her linguistic and cultural profile. The degree of a student's bilingualism in both Spanish and English is directly connected to the interrelation of home language practices, school experiences, and the opportunities that the student encounters over time to use both languages. In this regard, Fishman (1991) has emphasized the role of schools, along with families' efforts, in promoting HL development and maintenance. The United States, unfortunately, does not have a history of language policies that support bilingual education, except as isolated efforts that are usually contested. (See Crawford, 1989, and Nieto, 2009, for an overview of the history of politics of bilingual education in the United States.) Therefore, SHLs usually lack the opportunity to acquire sophisticated oral and literacy skills in Spanish in school during their early years of education. (When schools do provide such opportunities, they usually provide them for only a few years.) Some students, however, can bring more literacy experience into our classrooms than others, depending once again on the educational opportunities they were provided in their home countries before immigration, as well as their family literacy practices (Reyes, 2011).

When we take into account the interplay among a student's immigration history, her linguistic home setting and the varieties of Spanish spoken at home, her schooling opportunities in Spanish, and her academic skills in English, we find that by the time SHLs enter college, they can typically be categorized in one of four groups identified by Valdés (1997, p. 14) as:

1. Newly arrived-Type A: Students well educated in Spanish-speaking country and speakers of the prestige variety of Spanish.

2. Bilingual-Type A: Students with access to bilingual instruction in the United States with basic academic skills in Spanish and good academic skills in English. Fluent functional speakers of the contact variety (which can include speakers of colloquial or stigmatized varieties of Spanish).
3. Bilingual-Type B: Students with no academic skills in Spanish. Good academic skills in English. Fluent but limited speakers of the contact variety.
4. Bilingual-Type C: Students with no academic skills in Spanish. Good academic skills in English. Fluent but limited speakers of the prestige variety of Spanish with some contact phenomena present.

These four degrees of Spanish proficiency form a continuum that ranges from students who are rather fluent speakers (who are able to sound almost like competent native speakers) to students who can barely speak their home language (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007).

In the last decade, researchers have conducted important research into the linguistic systems of heritage speakers. Major contributions on which LPDs can draw are, for example, the work of Silva-Corvalán (1994), and her comprehensive study of the use of Spanish by three generations of Mexican-Americans living in Los Angeles; Polinsky & Kagan (2007) on heritage speakers in “the wild” and in the classroom; and the work by Benmamoun, Montrul, and Polinsky (2010), where ample descriptions of these systems are laid out. Several characteristics of HLs (including Spanish) have been identified. For example, phonology is often cited as one of the advantages for heritage speakers, because they tend to sound like native speakers (Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001). However, Polinsky and Kagan (2007, p.17) mention anecdotal evidence from competent speakers of the language that suggest that heritage speakers have “a slight ‘accent’” or sound “funny”, “off”, and not like “real” speakers of the language.³ On the other hand, nominal and verbal inflectional morphology are vulnerable areas affected by overgeneralization and simplification. In Spanish in the nominal domain, for instance, heritage speakers tend to have difficulty with gender agreement (see Lynch, 2008; Montrul, 2002, 2004; and Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008), and irregular and infrequent verbal forms tend to be eliminated. In particular, tense, aspect, and mood are vulnerable areas to simplification. In this regard, Silva-Corvalán (1994) has described major changes in the Spanish verbal system that mainly affect the future perfect and conditional, uses of the preterit and the imperfect, and the loss of the present subjunctive.

In addition, lexical knowledge is usually less abundant in heritage speakers, which narrows the possibility of elaborate phrases and discourse. Syntax

³The authors also mentioned the work of Linda Godson on Western Amerindian that argues that heritage speakers have different phonological features from native speakers and Anglophone learners of the language, suggesting that, “Godson’s results clearly show that the heritage accent is a measurable reality” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, p. 18).

can be different regarding word order, passive constructions, and the comprehension of relative clauses (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2010). Finally, language contact phenomena like code-switching, transfers, calques, and interferences also become part of the linguistic characteristics and practices of heritage speakers. At the individual level, these *lects*—to use Silva-Corvalán’s terminology— “represent a wide range of dynamic levels of proficiency in the subordinate language, and speakers can be located at various points along this continuum depending on their level of dominance . . .” (Silva-Corvalán, 1994, p. 11).

A Definition that Includes Individual Differences Among Heritage Speakers

With the variety of linguistic, social, and cultural experiences presented above, how can we define who is a SHL? Which criteria should we use to place these students in our heritage courses, and at what level? Defining the term “heritage speaker” has become a “critical need” for HL professionals (Carreira, 2004, p. 2) in order to (1) differentiate heritage speakers from FLLs and native speakers and (2) be able to design a pedagogical “roadmap” (Carreira, 2004, p. 1) that meets the language learning goals and needs of SHLs.

The aforementioned experiences indicate that linguistic behavior serves as the first and most powerful criterion for defining a SHL. Such a criterion has filled the need for a “precise account” (Carreira, 2004, p. 2) of the term “Spanish heritage learner” (a heritage speaker motivated to study the HL in formal setting), and, in fact, usually serves as the traditional mechanism for placing students in HL courses. By relying on the linguistic behavior of SHLs, however, we encounter important restrictions to place these students in suitable courses.⁴ Linguistic criteria can actually work in favor of or against the student in interesting ways. For instance, a feature such as “native-like pronunciation” can be misleading, because although a student may sound almost like a native speaker, she may be closer to a FLL in other aspects of the language. On the other hand, third- or fourth-generation students with very limited Spanish proficiency may feel or have been told that they “are not good enough for the HLL [heritage language learner] track” (Carreira, 2004, p. 14) and are thus placed in a FL classroom, even when they may have a strong connection with the culture that is atypical of a FLL student.

⁴Accurate assessment of linguistic abilities and the placement of heritage learners in general is one of the most challenging areas, as well as one of the most important decisions with implications for both teaching and learning outcomes (Brown, 2005). Polinsky and Kagan (2007) have suggested a three-component testing procedure that includes (1) an oral test loosely based upon the ACTFL oral proficiency interview; (2) a short essay (if the learner is literate in the HL) and (3) a biographic questionnaire (Kagan, 2005). However, because LPDs in different institutions view heritage learners and HL education differently, Beaudrie (2012) proposes that: “Ultimately, each SHL program needs to adopt a definition that best meets their needs, resources, and beliefs about SHL education.” For a review of the latest work of Spanish assessment and placement for heritage learners, see the special issue of the *Heritage Language Journal on Spanish Assessment*, volume 9, no. 1, Spring 2012.

Defining a SHL solely by linguistic criteria discounts elements such as the student's motivation, her search for identity, and her interests and goals, all of which are fundamental to SHLs and differentiate them from FLLs.

For these reasons, Carreira (2004), among others, insists on the fact that "proficiency-based definitions of SHLs (or of heritage students of any other language) are the most restrictive, in the sense that they can exclude individuals with strong family or personal connections to the [heritage language]" (p. 32). Therefore, the author emphasizes the important distinction between "descriptive" and "explanatory" adequacy when defining HLLs. Carreira states: "a definition of HLL has descriptive adequacy if it correctly identifies all individuals who are HLLs. Such definition achieves explanatory adequacy only if it offers insight into the particular linguistic, cognitive, and affective needs of HLLs with regard to learning the HL" (Carreira, 2004, p. 8).

Following this logic, we can extend the defining factors of HLLs beyond linguistic proficiency to include (a) membership in a HL community and (b) personal connection through family background (see Carreira, 2004, for a detailed description of these factors). Students are motivated to study the language as part of their search for identity. In fact, for authors like Hornberger and Wang (2008) and Van Deusen-Scholl (2003), motivation and agency to study the HL to seek one's identity is a defining trait of heritage learners.

In sum, there are two conceptions of HLLs: narrow and broad (Carreira, 2004; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). The narrow conception is centered on the linguistic profile of the student. The broad conception includes the student's ties with the culture, as well as her linguistic identity and affective factors behind her motivation to study the HL. It is crucial to consider the broad definition, since it can provide us with the "roadmap" (Carreira, 2004, p. 1) that we need in order to select meaningful classroom materials and design and implement effective pedagogy for SHLs.

Moreover, the broad definition provides LPDs with an informed perspective for designing training programs for TAs that focus on SHLs' individual differences. Within these broad definitions and perspectives, it is also vital to consider the fact that there are exceptions to every definition (even broad definitions), and that LPDs will find that each student has unique experiences and motivations (Wiley, 2001; Hornberger & Wang, 2008). One interesting example of such an exception is the variation in SHLs' attitudes about choosing to enroll or not to enroll in a course intended for SHLs. While some students look for the specific connection with their heritage culture, Potowski (2002), Lynch (2008), and Pino and Pino (2000) describe situations in which SHLs feel marginalized by the possibility of taking HL courses and choose to enroll in foreign language courses instead.⁵ This is the point at which teacher training on individual differences

⁵Other students might also weigh other factors when enrolling in heritage language courses, such as simpler ways to fulfill the language requirement with what they hope will be an easier work load. This attitude can lead to new frustrations for students when they discover the substantial tasks of the course. In some cases, this surprise can trigger issues of plummeting linguistic self-esteem, and uncomfortable feelings around unfamiliar registers learned in class. This could be the beginning of a negative relationship between the student and her language (B. Lado, personal communication, April 4, 2013).

becomes crucial. We need to engage TAs in a new process of reflection so they can draw on their SHLs' attitudes, expectations, and goals to fine tune their attitudes and lesson plans, making the classroom learning experience productive and successful for everyone.

SHLs' Individual Differences and Their Implications for Teacher Training

What is the significance of heritage students' individual differences for training the future professoriate? Why is this body of research relevant? These questions are of central importance given the fact that, as Allen and Maxim (2011) remind us, teacher training in the field of second language teaching must still incorporate the re-conceptualizations of theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that have emerged over the last twenty years—mainly the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (ACTFL, 1996), the Modern Language Association push for developing students' translingual and transcultural competence (MLA, 2007), and literacy- and multiliteracies-based language teaching (Kern, 2000). They explain that currently, “[training] is not consistent with recent developments in the profession that have resulted in different priorities, objectives and approaches” (p. xv). Given the large number of SHLs in our classrooms, TA training must also incorporate the new theoretical and pedagogical advances that have been made in the field of HL teaching, particularly with respect to the challenges of considering individual differences when assessing SHLs' goals, motivations, needs, and strengths.

In this section, I will address questions such as: “How do we integrate training TAs to teach heritage speakers into foreign language programs?” “How does teaching heritage speakers differ from teaching traditional FL students?” and “What is the place of SHLs' individual differences in this training?” My point of departure will be the proposals by Richard Kern and Heidi Byrnes that appear in the AAUSC 2011 volume, because these authors address main points related to the training of TAs that are also areas being developed by LPDs in the training of TAs teaching HLs. These areas are conceptualizations about language, language awareness, the goals and meaning of our teaching, and the deeper question of the foundation of our profession. In this regard, I will argue that taking into account individual differences along with the personal, family, and cultural connection SHLs have with Spanish provides interesting theoretical and practical implications for TA training.

TA Training Goals in Foreign and Heritage Language Teaching

A current and central concern in the field of foreign language pedagogy is how to shift from discussions about teacher *training* to designing and implementing a *professional development* program. As Allen and Maxim (2011, p. vxiii) outline in

their introduction to the AAUSC 2011 volume, LPDs envision such a program as an opportunity to expose TAs to “activities and tools” that will help them to: (1) identify and learn the pedagogical approaches that can bridge the gap between the study of language and literature-cultural content; (2) implement reforms advocated in the MLA report; (3) establish connections between theoretical knowledge and classroom practices; and (4) explore ways in which other departmental colleagues and constituencies (beyond LPDs) could contribute their expertise, fostering sustained collaboration among all groups. The agenda to strengthen graduate student training also includes mentoring and co-teaching (Kern, 2011, p. 10).

Kern (2011) proposes three concrete areas for LPDs to work on with graduate students in order to provide them with better tools for teaching foreign languages:

1. The understanding of what language teaching is all about. Kern proposes that our goal should be to teach new ways of *thinking and seeing*—new ways of *being and acting* in the world (p. 8).
2. A less hermetically “monolingual” approach to foreign languages (Kern, p. 9) to develop “multicompetence” (a concept that Kern takes from Cook, 1996). Interestingly, Kern mentions the importance of including “the positive role that the attention to the students’ native language might play in the teaching of the foreign language, including the use of translation and the sociopragmatic and cultural issues it brings to light” (p. 9).
3. The development of language awareness. Kern encourages us to “. . . think about how explicit knowledge about language relates to language learning and teaching and how teachers can approach fostering such knowledge” (p. 9). Kern also suggests that language awareness training should include “thinking more broadly about relations between language and thought, language and culture, language and identity, language and emotion, language and power,” (p. 9) as well as help TAs discover the aesthetics and literary use of language.

To expand on Kern’s proposal, I add Byrnes’ (2011) research, which takes a more theoretical approach, stating:

In order to develop the kinds of professional virtues that will be essential for the future professoriate, we too must (re)discover our foundational beliefs. That means *how* we educate the future professoriate requires us first to specify *what* constitutes the foundation of our field. Only then will we be able to lay out appropriate proposals to be implemented in various educational contexts (Byrnes, 2011, p. 18, original emphasis).

For Byrnes, this foundation is our *knowledge about language*. She believes that it is “an insufficient theory of language” (p. 19) that has hindered the profession in the main areas of the construal of relations among language, culture, and textual literacy; TA education in graduate programs; and the construction of undergraduate curricula toward advanced ability levels (p. 19). Byrnes proposes, then, that teacher training should be framed within a systemic

functional approach to language given the fact that it “is well nigh unique in theoretical circles for its commitment to educational concerns (see Halliday, 2007) and, as a functional theory of language, “it is unique for its textual and meaning orientation” (p.22).

In the field of HL teaching, LPDs are also developing new frameworks for TA training. Interestingly enough, because the teaching of HLs has drawn some of its principles from the fields of general linguistics, sociolinguistics (languages in contact), and first language acquisition, some of the current proposals for TA training are moving (or have already moved) in the direction pitched by the foreign language field (i.e., Kern’s and Byrnes’s proposals).

For example, in HL teaching, communicative competence has already been conceptualized within a “less hermetically monolingual approach,” as Kern (2011) calls it. To begin with, the heritage or bilingual student is not considered to be two monolinguals within one person. A SHL is considered to be an individual who has communicative competence that is situated within a complex continuum of oral and written abilities. This is to say that students’ language abilities are placed within a “bilingual range,” which Valdés (1997) defines as “the continuum of linguistic abilities and communicative strategies that these individuals may access in one or the other of two languages at a specific moment” (p. 30). Such a range includes not only grammatical and textual competencies, but also includes illocutionary and sociolinguistic competencies (Bachman, 1990, as cited in Valdés, 1997, p. 30), all of which are in continuous interaction (Valdés, 1994). A central point to keep in mind, however, is that given SHLs’ different opportunities for language exposure and formal instruction, these competencies often develop unevenly, resulting in a classroom of students with a variety of abilities. Nonetheless, students use a repertoire of communicative strategies in order to function in their communities, including the use of both languages to different degrees.

This conception of communicative competence and bilingual range entails a functional conception of language. As Byrnes (2011) proposes, a functional theory of language should be at the foundation of our work in FL teaching. The notion of “genre” is particularly important; Byrnes describes genre as “the most compelling construct” within the functional theory, which “devotes considerable attention to the intricate relationship between lexicogrammatical resources that are being deployed in particular genres and their multifunctional qualities for meaning-making in oral and written texts” (p. 23).

Byrnes’s proposal coincides with the work that scholars such as Hornberger (2003) and Colombi (1994, 2003) have been carrying out in the HL teaching field for decades. The functional theory of language has initiated a broader understanding of bilingual development in which heritage students’ existing language abilities and strategies can be conceptualized within a “biliteracy continuum” (Hornberger, 2003) that incorporates the relationship between students’ oral and written abilities in both languages (Colombi, 1994). Researchers have placed special emphasis on helping practitioners in the field to differentiate between linguistic competency and academic development (Cummins, 1981; Colombi, 1994).

As for training foreign language teachers, LPDs have developed new and valuable initiatives to incorporate language awareness into the field of HLs, particularly regarding the sociolinguistic construct of languages in contact. In HL teaching, this area is crucial in helping TAs become familiar and knowledgeable in two main areas: the different linguistic phenomena that result from languages being in contact (such as code-switching, transfer, calques, and the complexities of translation and brokering; see Potowski, 2001, 2002; Potowski & Carreira, 2004; Leslie, 2012); and the importance of questioning the teaching of *standard* Spanish as the primary goal of our classes (Valdés, 1981; García-Moya, 1981).

When LPDs include topics related to languages in contact in TA training, to be later incorporated into classes for SHLs, we not only open up an area of knowledge for both TAs and students, but we also validate language practices that are familiar to heritage learners. On the other hand (and in contrast to foreign language teaching), in HL classrooms, teachers have used language awareness and sociolinguistics to support the importance of and the need for a broader perspective on our goals beyond the teaching and learning of *standard* Spanish (Valdés, 1981; García-Moya, 1981). Scholars in the field of Spanish as a HL have tried to raise “an awareness that classroom activities must be based on knowledge about how Spanish is used in a variety of communities and about the attitudes brought by the students” (Valdés, 1981, p. xi), instead of focusing only on the Spanish found in textbooks. Therefore, we need to acknowledge the fact that even when SHLs do not know the “grammatical rules” of the prestigious varieties of Spanish, they do bring to the classroom a richness of vocabulary that is not found in the textbooks that use standard versions of Spanish (Valdés, 1997).

We also need to incorporate into this discussion the dimension of power involved in language teaching and how this power is played out in TAs’ relationships with their students. TAs who lack this awareness will likely stigmatize, almost automatically, students who demonstrate any variation from the standard.

When the student–teacher relationship is jeopardized by notions of power from the linguistic norm and by assumptions that SHLs are deficient and in need of remediation, then the personal relationship that a TA establishes with her students can become especially detrimental to the students’ progress; TAs become more than just facilitators who guide students to speak. For heritage learners, TAs become representative of the powerful linguistic norm, a “language authority” (Potowski, 2002, p. 39). In her work with heritage students and TAs, and through interviews and focus groups, Potowski (2001) found three main themes relevant to this discussion: (1) heritage students tend to feel that their Spanish is not “good”; (2) they feel they are at a disadvantage; and (3) they have mixed views of their instructors. The students’ ambivalent feelings came from the fact that TAs tended to give “insensitive” and “insulting” feedback and had “unreasonable expectations” about their knowledge of Spanish. When interviewing TAs, Potowski found that the majority operated “within a framework of error correction when providing linguistic feedback to their heritage students” (Potowski, 2001, p. 94).

This frame of correction is not uncommon, and it is often well intended. In fact, many FLLs look to this kind of feedback in the hopes of advancing their language knowledge. However, correction implying that the heritage student is

“wrong” is not effective and ultimately diminishes both the student’s and the TA’s efforts. Scalera (2004) presents a much more productive approach: “Heritage students who are treated with respect for their linguistic and cultural knowledge and taught in ways that tap into their special linguistic competencies will excel in a foreign language class while students whose heritage knowledge is ignored or disdained are less likely to be successful” (p. 4).

Finally, the question that Kern asked—what is language teaching all about?—deserves special attention: Is the teaching of languages as understood by Kern to be teaching (“*thinking and seeing*—new ways of *being and acting* in the world”) relevant to addressing the individual needs and interests of SHLs? This question accompanies the question concerning the “foundation of our profession” as teachers of HLs, namely, whether *knowledge about language* is the sole foundation of our profession, as Byrnes proposes. I argue that embracing SHLs’ individual differences as one of the challenges to be addressed and incorporated into program design for SHLs and TA training represents a main difference between the foundations of the foreign language field and that of the HL field.

In the foreign language teaching field, knowledge about language is considered the foundation and focus of our work (Byrnes, 2011). Alternately, the basis of HL teaching should be knowledge of the individual strengths, needs, interests (Valdés, 1997), and unique motivations of our students to reconnect with the language they grew up with. Therefore, the role of the TA becomes more prominent for those teaching SHLs as they nurture the linguistic and cultural identities of their students. For this reason, in addition to incorporating language awareness, sociolinguistics, and the interaction of languages into TA training, it is crucial to include an emphasis on the emotional and psychological dimensions of the language learning experience, in which individual differences play a central role. TAs should understand that teaching HLs is linked not only to notions of linguistic competence, but also to students’ individual stories, identities, and self-determinations (Fishman, 1994; Wiley & Valdés, 2000), thus demanding a teaching approach that is significantly different than that used by TAs to teach foreign language students.

Final Remarks and Recommendations

In this article, I have reviewed the main variables that are at the base of SHLs’ individual differences: living in two cultures with a continuous interplay between a student’s immigration history, her linguistic home environment, and her school experience (which is mostly in English). The combination of these variables results in a broad range of linguistic abilities that form a continuum spanning from students who are nearly native speakers to those who have no knowledge of Spanish, but do have community and cultural connections. This diversity has important consequences for identifying who is a heritage learner, establishing our teaching goals, designing programs and courses, and training TAs to teach Spanish as a HL (Potowski & Carreira, 2004). In addition to the recommendations proposed by Kern and Byrnes (along with the rest of the compelling proposals in the AAUSC 2011 volume), I recommend that we

include the following issues in the discussion of SHLs and TA training for the twenty-first century.⁶

1. Incorporate an ecological understanding of our students. TAs would benefit from knowing that their students' linguistic abilities in Spanish and English are the result, not of individual choices, but of a complex *interplay* among the attitudes they have developed toward their community, home, and school environments throughout their lives. An ecological perspective also opens the door for TAs to learn the history of their students' families' countries of origin and the political, social, and cultural struggles with immigration and diaspora that the students' communities have faced.
2. Promote language and self-awareness in relation to Spanish variants spoken by TAs and students. It is fundamental that TAs understand and become aware of their own ideological positions *vis-à-vis* the Spanish variant they and their students speak. We need to move TAs beyond a framework of correction and the assumption that remediation "would help undo the damage that had been done at home" (Valdés, 1995, p. 9). In this sense, the necessity for TAs to explore their system of beliefs, which is crucial to successful teaching and learning experiences (Burns, 1992; Scalera, 2000), becomes particularly relevant when teaching heritage learners (Potowski, 2002; Roca, 1997; Romero, 2000). This exploration can be done through surveys and discussions among TAs and course supervisors (see Appendix A for questions that can guide this dialogue with TAs). If the TA becomes aware of her own beliefs, biases, and feelings in her relationship with her students, then she allows herself the possibility of learning from her students and engaging in a more cooperative learning experience, which is advocated by various scholars in the field (see Rodríguez Pino, 1997). This linguistic awareness should also take into account the different regional varieties of Spanish spoken by SHLs. Some varieties are more prestigious than others and can create tension among the SHLs. A "critical pedagogy" approach, in which students study and analyze different attitudes toward the use of Spanish and English, and toward different varieties of Spanish, could be a first step toward what Aparicio (1997, p. 225) calls the process of "decolonization" of SHLs. Developing this kind of sociolinguistic awareness is also beneficial for FLLs (Aparicio, 1997; Katz, 2003). Along the same lines is the need to help students become aware of the different registers of both written and spoken Spanish. A grasp of these differences is particularly important when trying to expand the bilingual range of SHLs and promoting our goals of the development of literacy and the cultivation of academic Spanish.

⁶The recommendations in this section would be better implemented and more effective in classes with only SHLs. TAs teaching Spanish to FLLs and SHLs in mixed classrooms, however, would benefit from these suggestions as well. There is ample research showing that both groups of students can benefit from each other if instructors can tap into the strengths of members of each group (Aparicio, 1997; Kagan & Dillon, 2004; Katz, 2003; Villa, 2004).

3. Integrate new approaches into teaching and learning. In this regard, here are the two main proposals in the field of HLs:
 - a. A functional approach to language and literacy (Hornberger, 2003; Colombi, 1994, 2003) is a central notion to incorporate into TA training. In particular, TAs should recognize that both modalities—the oral and the written—are intertwined to different degrees in the different genres (in any language).
 - b. Differentiated teaching (Tomlinson, 1999). Already proposed by Potowski and Carreira (2004), these authors summarize the benefits of differentiated teaching as follows (p.19):
 - i. Differences between students shape the curriculum.
 - ii. On-going assessment of students is built into the curriculum.
 - iii. Multiple learning materials are available.
 - iv. There is variable pacing.
 - v. Students play a part in setting goals and standards.
 - vi. Varied grading criteria are used.
 - vii. Work is assigned to students by virtue of their level of readiness.

In sum, and in the words of one of the main proponents of this approach, “in differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student’s roadmap for learning is identical to anyone else’s” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2).⁷
4. Because many questions still need to be answered in order to have a full body of pedagogical theories that would allow us to understand the paths of development and maintenance of HLs outside and inside the classroom (Valdés, 2001), I believe that TA training should incorporate a research component. That is to say, LPDs should guide TAs as to how to observe and assess students’ performance in the classroom; how to ask the right questions about the linguistic behavior they observe in class and how to design and evaluate activities that facilitate language development. Including a basic research component in TA training could be a start in giving TAs the tools that they need not only to be good teachers, but also to become good researchers who can contribute to the field. By emphasizing the importance and meaning of individual differences in our teaching and TA training, we can make the language classroom experience a richer learning opportunity for everyone.
5. Finally, although the field had made significant progress in training TAs to teach HLs in terms of making TAs aware of language and power relationships in the classroom, I believe that in order to advance TA training into *professional development* we need to conceptualize it beyond

⁷LPDs and TAs might benefit from the website http://startalk.nhlrc.ucla.edu/default_startalk.aspx, which contains many resources for teaching heritage languages.

“an opportunity to expose TAs to ‘activities and tools’” (Allen & Maxim, 2011, p. vxiii) and to emphasize, even more, the importance of the *relationship* between the TA and her individual students. What really makes a language class effective is not just the students’ capacities or the TAs’ teaching techniques as separate entities, but the *relationship* between a TA and each student. Although this is also true for teaching FLLs (and in fact, this relationship is an essential part of any learning process), I believe that there are two main aspects that TAs should consider when teaching SHLs: (1) understanding where students’ individual characteristics come from, and how these characteristics shape their goals and motivations to study the language (I have attempted above to give an overview of the multiple possibilities) and (2) the psychological and emotional investment that reconnecting with Spanish in an academic setting implies for SHLs. This last point is central, since foreign language students do not have the affective ties to the language that heritage students have. When TAs correct the variants that their SHLs bring into their classrooms, many heritage students translate these corrections as judgments of their families, their cultures, and their own identities. The result can be bringing into the classrooms feelings of resistance that will hinder the learning process.

Therefore, I believe that the goals for training TAs to teach SHLs are two-fold. As in the traditional FL classroom, it is important to help students master the target language in a variety of settings and to expand their knowledge of the target culture(s). In addition, the focus for HL teaching is to validate and expand the speaker’s bilingual range and abilities in order to promote deeper connections to her community, culture, and identity. I suggest that taking into account individual differences and the emotional component implied in the (re)learning of HLs gives our guiding principle of teaching “how, when, and what to say to whom” (ACTFL, 1996) a different but meaningful nuance. “Who is teaching what to whom and what for?” is a more relevant question that is better suited to heritage learners in the context of our classrooms. TAs need to tap into the resources that SHLs use to function in their community and then nurture them to help guide them in the expansion of their bilingual range. In this regard, TAs’ flexibility to adjust and guide SHLs through an affective connection can make a difference in motivation and attitudes toward the (re)learning process. This motivation is important not only for SHLs’ academic life, but also for their future incentive to continue their studies in the language and open up the possibility of language maintenance for future generations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the careful reading and insightful suggestions to improve the manuscript, and to Dr. Stacey Katz-Bourns and Dr. Nicole Mills for their valuable comments and encouragement throughout the process of writing this article. All errors and shortcomings are mine alone.

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Appendix A

Questions for LPDs to explore TAs' previous experiences and beliefs regarding the teaching of Heritage Learners

Understanding and knowledge of HLLs: Who are they?

1. Have you ever had heritage learners in your classes?
2. How would you define the term "heritage speaker"?
3. Please, mention three (or more) characteristics that help you identify a language student as HL.
4. What do you think are HLs' motivations for enrolling in a formal language course?
5. Please, mention three things that differentiate HLs from typical foreign language learners.

Methods and approaches to teaching HLLs: How do we teach HLs?

1. Have you ever taught a course designed specifically for heritage learners (HLs)?
2. Have you ever attended any formal training for teaching HLs?
3. Mention three things that you think you need to do as a language teacher in order to create a productive and successful heritage language course.

4. Organize in order of importance to you the following statements regarding teaching goals for HLs (1 is the most important):
 - a. Teaching correct grammar so students can speak and write the language properly.
 - b. Teaching students about different registers of language (formal vs. informal; written vs. oral) and regional differences among speakers of the same language so that students can understand and validate their own way of speaking.
 - c. Teaching students literary texts of the target language so they can access the best works of their native language and culture.
 - d. Exposing students to different genres of texts to broaden their literacy skills.
 - e. Getting through the material included in the textbook. It covers the main topics for HLs.
5. Do you think HLs can enrich the class if they are mixed with the general population of language learners? If so, how?
6. Which statement do you agree more with?
 - a. Because heritage languages are a part of students' lives, it is important to take into account the role that affective factors (anxiety, emotional indicators, etc.) play in the learning process of the language.
 - b. Because heritage languages are already a part of students' lives, it is not necessary to emphasize the affective component as part of the learning process.
7. What would you expect to be the biggest challenge of teaching HLs?