Towards a National Strategy for Capacity-building in Heritage Languages and Spanish: A Response to *America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century*

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The year 2017 saw the publication of one of the strongest endorsements of language education on record: America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century (henceforth America’s Languages). Commissioned by a bipartisan group of members of Congress and authored by the Commission on Language Learning of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, this report advocates for building foreign language capacity and outlines a national strategy for expanding language education so as to “improve access to as many languages as possible for people of every region, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background” (viii). At a time when foreign language enrollments are down, foreign languages are being devalued, and federal funding is uncertain, this ringing endorsement of language learning by one of the nation’s oldest and most respected learned societies could not have made a more opportune arrival.

America’s Languages details both the substantial benefits of language learning as well as the serious consequences of the nation’s persistent foreign language deficit. Putting language education on par with English and math education, this report makes a persuasive case for languages to prospective students, parents, school administrators, policy makers, and publishers of educational materials. In terms of an investment strategy for the twenty-first century, it recommends building capacity in five areas: 1) teacher training; 2) public-private educational partnerships; 3) heritage languages; 4) Native American languages; and 5) study abroad.

The Commission’s findings and recommendations find support in a wide range of publications on the state of language education. Heritage languages (HLs), in particular, have been a longstanding fixture of such publications, including a 2002 ERIC Digest by Ingrid Pufahl Nancy Rhodes, and Donna Christian, which examined successful capacity-building practices in other countries, a 2007 report by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages on the changing structure of language education, a 2012 report by the US Senate identifying the language needs of the Federal Government (Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia), and ACTFL’s 2017 Lead with Languages, a campaign to make language learning a national priority.

Though produced at different times, by different authors, and for different audiences, these reports as well as America’s Languages make similar points about HLs, namely, that: 1) the United States has a pressing need for multilingual individuals; 2) HL learners can help fill that need by building on their home-based bilingualism and biculturalism through formal instruction and community-based initiatives; and 3) educational settings should provide more language learning opportunities for HL learners.

Originally drafted to make the case for HL education when the field was first establishing itself, these points hark back to a 1998 position paper by Richard Brecht and Catherine Ingold.
that was published in connection with the launch of the Heritage Language Initiative by the National Foreign Language Center and the Center for Applied Linguistics. The study and teaching of HLs, however, predates this initiative and has its roots in Spanish as a heritage language (SHL), particularly in the work of Guadalupe Valdés starting in the 1970s (Carreira 2012).

The Current State of HL Education

Much has happened in the twenty years since the publication of Brecht and Ingold’s (1998) seminal paper. Linguistic research has greatly expanded our understanding of HL grammars and the factors behind language maintenance and loss, both in individuals and society. Informed by this research, a signature HL pedagogy has come into existence focused on expanding HL learners’ functional skills and linguistic repertoires, attending to their aspirations and relational needs, targeting vulnerable aspects of linguistic knowledge, and attending to issues of diversity through differentiated instruction (e.g., Carreira 2016; Carreira and Hitchins Chik, in press; Carreira, Hitchins Chik, and Kagan 2017).

With these foundations in place, the field of HL education is now positioned for the next stage of development: institutionalization. Ekholm and Trier (1987) define institutionalization as “a process through which an organization assimilates an innovation into its structure” (13). Key markers of institutionalization are listed below. Notably, recognition of the legitimacy and value of the innovation—the main function served by the points made in the aforementioned publications, including America’s Languages—is one of several factors contributing to institutionalization:

1. Acceptance by relevant participants who see the innovation as valuable and as legitimately belonging;
2. Widespread use of the innovation throughout the institution, organization, school district, etc.;
3. Firm expectation that use of the practice and/or product will continue;
4. The innovation is stable and routinized in the sense that:
   a. Continuation does not depend on the actions or motivations of specific individuals but on the culture or structure of the organization or on procedures that have been put in place to support the innovation; and
   b. Time, space, personnel, funding, and other resources are routinely allocated.

(Adapted from Ekholm and Trier 1987: 17; Eiseman, Fleming, and Roody 1990: 12–13; Miles and Louis 1987: 26)

Just how institutionalized is HL education? All signs are that the answer is “not much.” Regarding 1. above, anecdotal evidence suggests that some parents and teachers see the HL as being an obstacle to learning English, which undermines the value and legitimacy of HL education in K–12 programs. Furthermore, in reference to 4., studies of language programs indicate that HL learning is not in widespread use, to say nothing of being stable and routinized (Kagan 2017). Fee, Rhoads, and Wiley (2014) note:

In selecting languages to teach, school districts need to be aware of the languages already spoken by the students and the cultural connections that the students bring with them to school. . . . Hundreds of thousands of children come to school speaking their families’ languages, but our schools do little to encourage the development of those languages. (13)

The post-secondary level offers a somewhat more encouraging outlook. In particular, Carreira’s (2017) national survey of 294 programs spanning 27 languages found that the large majority of programs (73%) offered some form of specialized instruction for HL learners, either in the form of HL courses or in alternative formats such as independent studies, internships, service
learning, etc. This suggests acceptance and widespread use of the innovation. However, for many programs, the availability of HL instruction appears to hinge on high levels of volunteerism by committed instructors rather than institutional support. This suggests that for the most part, HL instruction is neither stabilized nor routinized and the continuation of HL instruction from one term to the next is uncertain. (For research on the institutionalization of HL education around the world see Carreira, Hitchins Chik, and Kagan 2017, and for specific research on Spanish HL programs in the United States see Beaudrie 2012.)

Across educational levels and languages, including Spanish, three factors are particularly detrimental to institutionalization: 1) having few HL learners; 2) not having access to HL-specific pedagogical materials and curricula; and 3) not having instructors and administrators who are well versed in HL pedagogy (Kagan, Carreira, and Hitchins Chik 2017). The first of these factors prevents many language departments from offering HL courses, which leaves HL learners with no choice but to enroll in classes that are designed for L2 learners. This gives rise to a vicious cycle whereby HL learners lose interest in studying their language, which in turn further depresses the presence of HL learners in programs. A promising strategy for this situation is to develop specialized pedagogies and materials for mixed classes and the alternative formats that respond to the needs and aspirations of HL learners, in addition to those of L2 learners (Carreira 2016). On the other hand, in programs that offer HL courses, factors (2) and (3) undermine the quality of HL teaching and learning, which works against program growth by, for example, keeping students from pursuing more advanced coursework. Providing more training in HL pedagogy is key in this regard, but it is not enough. It is also important for programs to hire teachers and administrators with a commitment to institutionalizing HL education (Carreira 2017).

History shows that innovations in educational practices are fragile. Even well endorsed ones can go by the wayside without deliberate attention to keeping them in place. Thus, building capacity in HL education requires more than arguing the merits of HL instruction; it means systematically addressing issues on the critical path to institutionalization. Beyond that, any discussion about how to improve HL education and language education in general, must also take into consideration the different realities that characterize language education in the United States.

The Realities of Spanish

Among the 350 languages currently spoken in the United States (not including English), Spanish is in a class of its own. With over 40 million US speakers (18% of the US population), it is more widely spoken than all of the other languages combined. Remarkably, the United States is the second largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, after Mexico (US Census Bureau 2016). But it is a country like no other. Here, Latinos from every corner of the Spanish-speaking world are forging a new identity that blends the traditions of their home countries with those of the United States.

All of this adds up to unique opportunities and challenges for Spanish-language programs. Among the opportunities are the wide gamut of curricular options that present themselves. From professional-preparation courses, to experiential learning opportunities, these options offer promising pathways for expanding the boundaries of Spanish language instruction and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations at all levels. At the same time, however, they present challenges related to the uncharted nature of these pathways and what they might mean for teacher training (including required language proficiencies for teachers) and the design of methodologies, curricula, pedagogical materials, and assessment tools.

Further multiplying the challenges is the sheer number of students (heritage and non-heritage) that study Spanish across educational levels and geographical sites. In 2008, the most recent year for which figures are available for K–12, 88% of elementary schools and 97% of secondary school with language programs offered Spanish (Fee, Rhodes, and Wiley 2014).
In higher education, more than half of all language students study Spanish (Commission on Language Learning, American Academy of the Arts and Sciences 2017).

The scale of Spanish-language instruction raises the stakes in all capacity-building areas singled out by America’s Languages and presents unparalleled challenges of implementation that are all the more urgent and complicated: addressing teacher shortages; expanding offerings for heritage language speakers (both in Spanish and the indigenous languages of Latin America); building partnerships with a myriad of private sector endeavors that serve US Latinos; and expanding study abroad programs and opportunities to all corners of the Spanish-speaking world and in a wide range of educational/work contexts. High on the list of opportunities is Spanish HL education. One out every four students in K–12 and 17% of students in higher education is Latino (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). Though not all such students are HL speakers of Spanish, many are. With a potential to reach vast numbers of Latino students and a focus on developing literacy and engaging students in culturally meaningful ways, Spanish HL education is uniquely positioned to contribute solutions to two pressing national issues, namely improving educational outcomes for US Latinos and increasing the linguistic capacity of tomorrow’s workforce (Coulombe and Gil 2016).

Designed to offer a general overview of the big issues in language education, America’s Languages does not delve into these and other particularities of Spanish and what they might mean for instantiating the report’s recommendations. This task now falls to Spanish language specialists. Given the scale and scope of the field, one thing is for certain: What happens in Spanish will not stay in Spanish, but will impact language education as a whole. Just as Spanish laid the foundations for the field of HLs, so will it pave the way in the areas of recommendations of the report, as well as others, in the 21st century.

Conclusions

America’s Languages is both a powerful testament to the value of languages and a call to action to strengthen language education by investing in high-priority areas. In the area of HL education, such action must entail working towards the institutionalization of the field. Spanish, though not singled out as a high-priority area, is also a critical piece of any action plan to strengthen language education in the twenty-first century.

WORKS CITED


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