

***Conceptos clave de la lingüística aplicada /
Key Concepts in Applied Linguistics***

HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEAKERS

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What do we know about heritage language speakers (HLSs)? The literature does not provide a definitive answer to this question; this is most likely as a result of their being a highly diverse population where no single linguistic, social, educational, or ethnic background emerges (Wang & Garcia, 2002). Valdés (2001, pp. 37-38) defines HLSs as “individuals who appear in a foreign language classroom, who are raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken; who speak or merely understand the heritage language; and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language.” What seems to be clear from this definition is that HLSs are also a heterogeneous population in terms of their language proficiency. In the United States, the largest community of HLSs consists of heritage *Spanish* speakers (HSSs). Thus, a great deal of research has focused on the situation of HSSs in particular.

A relevant question regarding the definition of HLSs, is the extent to which they are different from foreign- or second-language learners (F/SLLs). According to Potowski and Carreira (2004), these two populations differ in three main aspects: linguistic, affective, and academic aspects.

From the linguistic standpoint, HLSs do not generally have access to formal grammatical terminology or metalinguistic distinctions since they are rarely schooled in their heritage language, as F/SLLs would be in their respective second language. HLSs speak a language variety that is not necessarily a prestigious variety of the heritage language. For example, a heritage Spanish speaker would most likely say *aplicar para (un puesto)* rather than the normative, *solicitar (un puesto)*. As HLSs are not typically exposed to the skills of reading and writing during their formal education, they tend to write their heritage language phonetically. However, they are usually fluent in interacting and oral comprehension, quite the opposite of F/SLLs. HLSs are also aware of the sociolinguistic norms in their respective heritage language, and know how to *use* speech appropriately. Regarding terms of address, for instance, HSSs would use second-person pronouns (i.e., the formal *usted* as opposed to the informal *tú*) appropriately. The pronunciation of HLSs is native or native-like, and their productive lexical knowledge is considerably more extensive in areas such as daily activities, household objects, and culturally relevant events (e.g., weddings, birthday celebrations, funerals, etc.) rather than in academic matters.

In terms of the affective aspects, HLSs have a much more personal connection with their language than F/SLLs. HLSs usually speak the language at home, and share their experiences in their heritage language with their immediate relatives and communities. They also tend to be very aware of their linguistic limitations; although they speak the heritage language fluently, they are not familiar with its formal rules. Consequently, their linguistic insecurity tends to be high and their self-esteem tends to be low, in comparison with that of F/SLLs, for whom speaking a foreign or second language is an asset, opening doors to other cultures and other perspectives.

With regard to the academic aspects, most HLSs come from lower socioeconomic strata and their parents have often had limited access to formal education. Thus, these speakers are typically under-stimulated

concerning the skills of reading and writing, and grow up believing that they speak a stigmatized variety of their heritage language. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2011 report (see Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011), the high-school dropout rate for the Hispanic population is the highest in the United States, in comparison with other groups, such as White Non-Hispanics and Black Non-Hispanics. Hence, foreign language instruction must take into consideration the academic needs of HLSs (Espinoza Moore & Alonso Marks, in press). For example, both reading and writing activities need to be appropriately chosen not only in accordance with the HLSs' overall proficiency level, but also according to their academic level.

As we have seen, HLSs are distinctly different from F/SLLs. They make up a highly heterogeneous population. Although the majority of HLSs are born in the United States, 40% arrive at different ages and under very different circumstances. What could the school system do to accommodate the HLSs' academic needs? One possibility would be to separate HLSs from F/SLLs from the beginning, and then bring them together at more advanced levels of instruction. Another option would be to mix them together from the beginning. This is the more common alternative in practice (i.e., mixed-ability classrooms). However, these scenarios typically intimidate F/SLLs as well as HLSs, especially when they do not receive the "easy A" they were expecting. In this type of educational context, experienced instructors of classrooms with mixed groups would maximize the experience of both groups, offering them alternative activities, using their strengths and, at the same time, being sensitive to their respective weaknesses, thus implementing what is known in the literature as *differentiated instruction* (Tomlinson, 1999).

All too often, there is the unfortunate assumption that since HLSs are *fluent* in their heritage language, they must also be *literate* in that language and, consequently, there is nothing useful for them to learn. The truth of the matter is quite different. The HLS population poses a number of challenges for foreign-

language teachers, particularly what and how they should teach them. The fact that they are often “native” speakers of their heritage language does not mean that they do not need to become literate in it, increasing their reading and writing skills, and refreshing their knowledge of Hispanic societies and cultures. Some teachers believe—and insist—that their goal is to teach standard Spanish, a neutral and academically-prestigious variety. However, these teachers should know that there is no such thing in actual practice. Promoting the use of a “single standard” variety would not do justice to the rich tapestry of language varieties and cultural traditions within the Spanish-speaking world.

HLSs differ from F/SLLs in a variety of parameters. There may be a number of similar teaching techniques that foreign-language teachers could implement in their mixed-ability classes. Nevertheless, teachers should not lose sight of the distinct linguistic, academic, and affective needs of the HLSs in their classes. Teachers ought to select class materials that are meaningful and appropriate for their students’ levels (both linguistic and academic) and their lives. Classes should be more encompassing and center around the language arts curriculum, and not exclusively on the foreign language. Teachers should celebrate their HLSs’ language backgrounds, and incorporate their students’ language variety in class as a means to enrich the language learning experience of all students in the class. After all, we live in small microcosms that are expected to mirror our increasingly more diverse world.

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