



The Vitality of Spanish Language Programs in the US Higher Education System

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Abstract

Current trends have seen a decline in student enrollment in higher education (Crum & Kivik, 2023), as well as a shortage in world language instructors (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022), creating the need to rethink language programs. Therefore, this article advocates for the creation and development of heritage language (HL) programs within a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies focused on meeting the linguistic and cultural needs of local Latinx (and Hispanic) communities to contribute to language maintenance and the emergence of courses for specific purposes that may attract students with a clear professional goal. Areas for curricular innovation such as Teaching Assistant (TA) training in second and HL acquisition are provided, as well as pedagogical strategies such as offering online, professional, linguistics, writing, and interdisciplinary courses. Indeed, language programs should reflect the mission of the program and the university to recruit students, as well as work on the clear benefits of learning a second language (L2) or a HL on a professional and personal level, while providing opportunities for continuous professional development for instructors.

Keywords: Language vitality, curriculum development, student recruitment, language ideologies

Introduction

Recently, there has been a significant decrease in student enrollment across world language programs in higher education in the US, most likely due to lack of motivation (Crum & Kivik, 2023). At the same time, there is an additional challenge which is the shortage of world language instructors (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022). As educators or language program directors, what can we do to revamp our programs and make them more marketable?

There is relative invisibility of world language programs in the US education system as a reflection of the lack of world language use in the public conversation: a small number of students taking a world language in K-12 leads to an even smaller number of students interested in it in college (Stein-Smith, 2021).

First of all, we must advocate for a perspective that identifies language as an immersion tool in international contexts within the framework of a culturally informed pedagogy (Bono & Bilbao-Terreros, 2018). This is an opportunity for us to re-envision and revamp the curriculum through the creation and development of new courses that can serve local communities and to align the mission of social justice of our programs with our learning goals. Culturally sustaining pedagogies maintain the cultural identities of marginalized students (Paris, 2012). Instructors should then be informed on culturally responsive pedagogies to know how to work with a culturally heterogeneous student population, since these pedagogies encourage instructors to empower students to contribute to their communities. There are three implications of teaching within this framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies: inclusion of all students' communities, examination of instructors' beliefs, and advocacy and activism (Soli, 2024).

On the other hand, the language curriculum should not reproduce stereotypes but promote democratic forms of social life (Daniels, 2021). The way students perceive second language (L2) courses has an impact on student enrollment decreasing, which becomes detrimental to student recruitment (Knouse et al., 2021). As Lord (2020) argues, it is time for us to better connect with our students' expectations and to make our curriculum relevant in higher education.

Finally, Teaching Assistant (TA) training is key, since they teach most of the basic language courses in many universities—that is, the foreign language requirement. Nevertheless, many faculty members who teach the teaching methods course and train and supervise TAs are not on tenure-track lines, so they lack the power to implement change and innovation, especially in the case of the lack of training in teaching culture and the incorporation of technology. Unfortunately, there is a palpable lack of representation of second language acquisition (SLA) experts training future language professors, and the consequences of this are the perpetuation of myths on language acquisition (VanPatten, 2015). This results in traditional teaching practices that are not conducive to language acquisition. In order to revamp the curriculum within a culturally sustaining pedagogy and to make it relevant for students, instructors need to receive adequate training in SLA and sociolinguistics.

Background

The decline in enrollments, specifically in Spanish, has been over 18% since 2009 (Parma, 2021), and in world languages over 15% in general (Looney & Lusin, 2018). With the US being a country of immigrants, this world language decline is a paradox (Stein-Smith, 2017). There are some reasons behind this situation such as a reduction in language requirements, competition with other disciplines, or a lack of institutional support (Lacorte, 2017). Learning an additional language

involves the development of several skills such as speaking and writing. Lack of speaking proficiency may be a huge challenge for L2 learners since, as Aski and Weintritt (2020) claim, speaking proficiency is wrongly perceived as a predictor of success. Thus, there is a lot of frustration surrounding the study of an L2 since it is so hard to achieve a command of this skill. Instead, the authors suggest focusing on the development of intercultural competence that students can acquire through full immersion courses. Self-awareness makes students approach intercultural competence with empathy by being open to cultural differences (Oberste-Berghaus, 2024). In this context, the language instructor should serve as a “bridge, liaison, and cultural interpreter” (Daniels, 2021, p. 54).

The Role of Program Directors

Program directors are the key to revamping their programs to attract more students. This student enrollment decline—and the small size of language departments in general—have generated a fear of being a target of elimination (Blattner & White, 2017). This is especially true at the advanced levels of instruction where enrollment may be so low that instructors must justify the connection to the university mission to maintain their courses and programs (Paesani & Allen, 2012); hence the importance of investing in administrative positions that allow programs to grow and meet student needs. Beyond all these challenges, we cannot ignore L2 teacher attrition. This may be due to heavy workloads, limited resources, few opportunities for promotion, or a salary that may not match their responsibilities (Mason, 2017).

Areas for Curricular Innovation

The classroom should be a safe space that promotes language maintenance and revolves around a curriculum that addresses student needs. Instead, curriculum design is still a challenge and lacks a real appreciation for the dialects of heritage language (HL) learners. Taking this into account, their dialects should be at the center of the curriculum (Beaudrie, 2015). To implement changes, there is a dire need for professional development opportunities and pedagogical training for faculty (Nagano et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many HL learners must enroll in Spanish as an L2 classes in higher education, where US Spanish is ignored and even devalued. This is mainly due to the fact that racialized ideologies influence beliefs about language and the legitimacy of instructors (Kissau et al., 2019). Even though L2 Spanish programs shouldn't be treated as foreign language programs but as learning a world language that is a local language as well, it is important to develop HL programs to move towards challenging existing monolingual ideologies. In the same vein, HL learners should be encouraged to use their local varieties and to embrace their language and culture. In fact, in the last decades, universities have been investing in Spanish HL programs that become a tool of resistance against English-only ideologies to reverse language shift (Beaudrie & Loza, 2020). As Beaudrie (2020) claims, for these programs to succeed, a full-time administrator must be appointed in the form of a director, coordinator, or assistant coordinator. This position would require instructor training and would involve curriculum development. Tenure-track lines of SLA and HL learner experts are needed to take on leadership positions such as language program directors (LPDs) to implement all these changes and train TAs and instructors on best teaching practices. At the same time, representation matters, so Latinx representation should occur at all levels within the faculty, and US Spanish should be incorporated in the curriculum with the

important role of enthusiastic mentorship (Zentella, 2018). As a required component of the TA training, graduate students should receive preparation in teaching both Spanish as an L2 and as a HL.

Not only should undergraduate programs offer a HL track, but graduate programs should also include it to make HL learners the future professors and mentors of other HL learners. The creation of these leadership positions will ultimately reflect on the communities as well (Lafford, 2017). In the same vein, these programs should also include service-learning opportunities that foster connections with the communities, since these are some of the main motivations for these students to enroll in Spanish courses in the first place. Service-learning opportunities can become a real motivation to learn an additional language. This cultural component is key since the MLA has suggested that language majors should have a specific outcome: to acquire transcultural and translanguingual competence (Modern Language Association, 2007).

Teaching a language in the US is a political act (Hooks, 2014), and as educators, we must address complex and controversial issues in our curriculum. In fact, the independent scholar can become a world language advocate since they can serve as a bridge between the community and academia, and they have a key role as public intellectuals (Stein-Smith, 2020). In short, developing critical cultural competence within a culturally sustained pedagogical framework will be helpful to make informed decisions on fighting against stereotypes and in favor of social justice (Granda, 2021).

Pedagogical Innovations

Linguistics Courses

A background in linguistics integrated into language courses may help students understand how languages work and how they are acquired; this could increase their motivation to study a world language (Pountain, 2017). Making a sociolinguistics course a requirement for the Spanish major or offering linguistics courses as electives could be viable options. Additionally, the introduction of world language content in English-taught core courses may be a good way to attract students to study additional languages. Self-reflection assignments can also be included in the language classroom so that students can freely write about their learning experiences and about how they can use the language outside of the classroom (Williams, 2019).

Online Courses

Opening more online courses is another pedagogical innovation to recruit a diverse population such as professionals or graduating seniors with a busy schedule. King de Ramírez (2017) argued we should also offer online language courses, which would boost enrollment, even at the post-graduate level for professionals. She also stated that, unfortunately, it is hard to find qualified faculty who are interested in teaching these kinds of courses, even though this may have changed due to the pandemic and the emergency remote teaching that all educators were forced to do. Therefore, departments should invest in workshops and professional development to support these initiatives in collaboration with other disciplines beyond the humanities for the sake of the survival of world language programs (Shook, 2021).

Interdisciplinary Courses

Interdisciplinarity is key in this global world. Another initiative along these lines would be dual-language programs to increase student enrollment while making languages applicable to other disciplines. These programs provide a deep immersion opportunity to become global citizens (Rambur, 2019). Language departments could also lead community-engaged activities that align with program objectives and community needs (Osa-Melero, 2021). In fact, Brigham Young University started an initiative to attract students majoring outside of the Humanities to continue with their study of languages. During their mission, many of the students lived abroad for two or three years, so students would have opportunities for immersion that were not easy to find in other institutions. The university routinely posted videos and blogs to inform students about the importance of a liberal arts education. Furthermore, they created a language certificate of three credits with advanced language, culture, and introduction to literature courses that would appear as a special note on their transcripts. This initiative greatly increased the enrollment and recruited many students for language majors and minors (Brown & Thompson, 2018).

Writing Courses

Even though Spanish programs try to offer a wide variety of courses and implement innovative approaches to teaching, writing courses are still required courses and the least popular among students, mainly because they are still taught in a traditional way (Borralló-Solís & Meador Smith, 2019). One way of overcoming this challenge would be through the design of communicative writing courses or creative writing courses. In the specific case of Spanish majors, there should be more writing-intensive courses with a focus on business (Enkin & Correa, 2018). Spanish courses with a social justice approach can include the writing of testimonials, digital stories, or reflections so students can express themselves in a way that is more accessible to them.

Making Spanish More Marketable

To make a major in Spanish more marketable, some programs have incorporated an e-portfolio requirement for graduation that could be presented to future employers so students can see the value of a Spanish major in the job market (Enkin & Correa, 2018). In the end, world language educators should create awareness and career pathways (Stein-Smith, 2017). In terms of career pathways, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) is a practical way of attracting students to study an L2 with a clear professional purpose. Many higher education institutions offer a few courses in Medical Spanish or Business Spanish. There are even cases in which a professional minor has been established to boost student enrollments. For example, Bayona (2019) claimed that a new Professional Spanish Minor in the college where she works is a path to validate HL learners' abilities.

Benefits

There should be a response to the interest of our students in terms of revamping our programs to adapt to their needs. In this specific case, HL learners can use their bilingualism as a professional asset. Beyond the academic benefits, world languages foster cultural appreciation and develop critical metalinguistic awareness; that is, positive attitudes towards other cultures and empathy (Ritz, 2021). World languages teacher candidates have other motivations besides the love

for the language such as making a social contribution (Kissau et al., 2019). Indeed, language learning can be a transformative experience in our worldview (Daniels, 2021).

Conclusions

There has been a national trend of decreasing student enrollment in world language programs in the last few decades (Modern Language Association, 2013). Therefore, leadership positions and Latinx representation are needed to abandon traditional trends in language education such as the lack of SLA experts. Educators must rethink and revamp language programs to make them more marketable by engaging students in language learning through passion and cultural awareness within a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies. There are areas for curricular innovation such as the requirement of TA training on both L2 and HL teaching methods, the development of HL and LSP courses, interdisciplinary efforts to forge alliances in other disciplines, and continuous professional development opportunities. It is recommended to offer L2 and HL tracks aligned with the mission of the department and with the commitment to serve local communities. With a transformative mission of developing critical awareness, these programs should be envisioned to serve our students' and local communities' needs and to offer theoretical and practical knowledge on language acquisition with the ultimate goal of understanding how languages are acquired.

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