

SPANISH IN CHICAGO: WRITING AN ONLINE PLACEMENT EXAM FOR SPANISH HERITAGE SPEAKERS

Clara Burgo
DePaul University

ABSTRACT. United States is the third country in the world with the largest Hispanic population (over 45 million of Spanish speaking people). As Fairclough (2003) claims, the national, ethnic and socioeconomic differences of Hispanic immigrants provide a heterogeneous community whose unifying element is the Spanish language. Chicago is third largest city in the country with a significant Hispanic population. In the latest years, Spanish for Heritage speakers' programs in higher education have developed and effective placement tests are needed.

Keywords. heterogeneous community, Spanish for Heritage Speakers, placement tests

RESUMEN. Estados Unidos es el tercer país del mundo con la población hispana más grande (más de 45 millones de hispanohablantes). Como afirma Fairclough (2003), las diferencias nacionales, étnicas y socioeconómicas de los inmigrantes hispanos caracterizan a una comunidad heterogénea cuyo elemento unificador es la lengua española. Chicago es la tercera ciudad más grande del país con una población hispana significativa. En los últimos años, los programas de español para hispanohablantes en la educación universitaria se han desarrollado enormemente y se necesitan exámenes de colocación viables.

Palabras clave. comunidad heterogénea, español para hispanohablantes, exámenes de colocación

1. Introduction

According to www.census.gov, there were over fifty million Hispanics in the US in 2010. This is a sixteen percent of the whole population. As we know, this population is very diverse being Mexicans more than half of this group (sixty three percent), Others (mainly South American, Central American and Spaniards) are over twenty four percent of the Hispanic population, Puerto Ricans the third largest group with over four million people (nine percent) and Cubans the fourth group with almost two million (over three percent).

These numbers are the proof that the Spanish spoken in the United States is by no means homogeneous.

2. Demographics

We can identify four big linguistic groups in the Spanish in the US¹:

- 1) Mexican American or Chicano Spanish
- 2) Caribbean Spanish (Cuban, Puerto Rican and Dominican)
- 3) Spanish from other regions of Latin America

¹ Due to space limitations, I will just describe here the demographics of these four linguistic groups and not their linguistic characteristics; these latter will just be mentioned in the next section.

- 4) The speech of limited areas (New Mexican, Colorado, Louisiana, Texas Spanish and Judeo-Spanish)

2.1. Chicano Spanish

The term *chicano* has become an indicator of ethnic identity. *Chicano* Spanish is a variety of Mexican Spanish with lexical loans from English (Schwegler et al., 2010).

2.2. Caribbean Spanish

This dialect is represented by three groups: Puerto Rican, Cuban American and Dominican Spanish. The presence of a significant Puerto Rican community is due to the political situation of the island that was a Spanish colony until it became part of the US. In fact, over two million Puerto Rican live in continental US. The frequent travels between the Island and the continent and their need to learn English in order to have a better future contribute to their bilingualism (Schwegler et al. 2010).

The Cuban American community is mainly concentrated in Miami but there are other significant concentrations in New York and New Jersey. There is an elevated degree of bilingualism with a tendency to use Spanish less frequently among young people.

The Dominican community began growing with a flow of immigrants from the 60s on. Fifty three percent live in New York. Contrary to the case of Cubans, Dominicans keep the hope to eventually come back to the Dominican Republic.

2.3. Spanish from other regions of Latin America

There are immigrants from all Latin American countries in the US from a diverse linguistic and social background. Despite this dialect variability, there is a dialectal convergence with the predominance of the most frequent characteristics. According to Silva-Corvalán (2004), there is evidence of accommodation to the Mexican lexicon by South Americans. There are some psychological factors that have to do with this such as ethnic identification or positive attitudes towards this dialect.

2.4. The speech of limited areas

These communities are bilingual and maintain Spanish as the domestic language with influence of English. The speech of these areas is the result of a process of substitution of Spanish with English. That is the case of the traditional Spanish of New Mexico (rural Hispanic communities that remained isolated until the beginning of the 20th century), Hispanic dialects of Louisiana and Texas (*Isleño*, *Bruli*, Sabine River) and Judeo-Spanish (in regression).

3. Variation in the Spanish spoken in the US

The variation in the Spanish spoken in the US can be explained by at least two important factors: a socioeconomic factor and a generational one (Schwegler et al. 2010).

Many people think that the Spanish spoken in the US is a stigmatized dialect since many immigrants that come to this country come from a low socio-economic situation in their birth countries. However, this is not always the case. Before 1898, there was a flow of immigrants that were intellectual Cubans. Later on, after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, there was a wave of Cuban professionals from the upper middle classes that had to leave Cuba for political reasons. In the 80s, Fidel Castro allowed the Mariel boatlift and the lowest social classes were able to emigrate and leave Cuba. Cuba is just a micro example of the kind of emigration coming to the

United States from the Hispanic countries in the sense of the variety of social backgrounds. Therefore, there is a correlation between social class and dialect so the Spanish spoken in the US is very diverse in terms of origin and social class.

This dialect is what represents what it is commonly known as the Spanish of the United States or Spanglish. It is the result of two languages in contact: Spanish and English and it can be easily recognized by the following characteristics: code switching, borrowings, semantic extensions and calques. I will define now in few words these concepts applied to the Spanish in the US:

Code-switching is the simultaneous use of both languages inter or intra-sententially:

- (1) That's okay. *Yo lo puedo hacer.* (I can do it)

Contrary to what some people may think, the code-switching is the norm for bilinguals, not the exception. There are many linguistic communities where it takes places on a daily basis since multilingualism is the norm around the world (Myers-Scotton, 2006). It is the result of their knowledge of both languages and is influenced by the topic of the conversation or an emotional motivation. There are many complex factors that rule this form of speech so it is not possible to switch from one language to another at any part of the discourse. This is a natural phenomenon that will continue characterizing the multilingual speech of the US due to the accelerated Hispanic immigration into this country.

Loans are words taken from another language adapted (or not) to the phonology and morphology of Spanish in this case:

- (2) *Esa troca es nueva* (That truck is new)

Semantic extensions are words that already exist in Spanish but whose meaning is extended adopting the English meaning too:

- (3) *Mi apartamento tiene² carpeta* (My apartment has carpet)

Calques are literal translations from idiomatic expressions of English:

- (4) *Te llamo pa'trás* (I will call you back)

Since these phenomena are characteristic of the Spanish of the United States due to the language contact situation of English and Spanish, these expressions or words might not be understood by other Hispanic speakers outside of the US.

The negative attitudes consider Spanglish to endanger the Hispanic culture, a slang identified with illiteracy and the misery in which some Hispanic communities live in the US or a grotesque hybrid (Prada, 2002). The positive attitudes towards it have to do with a natural linguistic process that cannot be imposed or stopped. (Fairclough, 2003).

Despite many negative reactions towards it from the more purist ideologies, this is the response that we linguists offer from our teaching philosophy:

² Notice that *carpeta* has a complete different meaning in Standard Spanish ('folder')

1. All languages evolve and that is precisely the sign of their vitality.
2. All dialects have equal value.
3. The linguistic attitudes towards a dialect may change over time.
4. The future and the survival of Spanish depends on its speakers
5. Spanglish is a natural phenomenon that will continue characterizing the Spanish spoken in the US due to the continuous immigration of Hispanics to this country. Therefore, it is important to accept Spanglish as it is (Schwegler et al, 2010)

4. Spanish in Chicago

In 2000, twenty-six percent of the population of Chicago identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Mexicans are the largest group and Puerto Ricans the second largest one (<http://chicago.areaconnect.com/statistics.htm>).

Regarding the generational factor, there is variety too. In Chicago, most Hispanics are G1 (first generation) and G2 (second generation). Those of the first generation were born in a Hispanic country so they bring the dialect of their original country and are Spanish dominant. Actually, the maintenance of Spanish in the US lies in their hands since English tends to dominate through generations in detriment of Spanish (in many cases, after three generations they become monolingual in English). In fact, G2 Hispanics are English dominant like most of the heritage students whom we teach in our universities. In fact, these heritage students will be the focus of an important part of this article.

These demographic data are reflected also in the universities where we teach. Therefore, many universities in the US offer specific Spanish programs for Spanish Heritage Speakers.

5. The importance of Spanish Heritage Programs for a city like Chicago

One of the most important steps towards creating a program like this is specifying clear placement criteria and objectives. Our students usually come from a Hispanic heritage and have been exposed to Spanish to a lesser or greater degree. The criteria we use are exclusively linguistic so we also include in this program students who have been immersed in the language even though they are not of a Hispanic heritage.

In Chicago, Spanish Heritage Programs usually receive new students every year from diverse Hispanic backgrounds (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Ecuadorians, Guatemalans, Colombians, Cubans, etc). Due to the large amount of students, these programs offer courses at several levels: one hundred, two hundred and even three hundred level (content courses).

As of a placement method for the language levels, before establishing a placement exam, institutions usually use a placement questionnaire based on several criteria: family language background, family residence background or/and Spanish language skills. Regarding the first criterion, students who did not speak at home but had been exposed to it tend to be placed at the most basic levels; those who did were automatically placed at more advanced levels. In terms of residence background, those that are G2 (born in the US but with Hispanic parents) usually go to one hundred but those that were born in Hispanic countries (G1) went to two hundred. Finally, what I personally consider the most determinant factor: the Spanish language skills: if they were just exposed to Spanish at home or school would take the one hundred courses but if they studied in Spanish before, they would take the two hundred ones.

As it was mentioned before, setting clear objectives is crucial for a solid program.

One hundred courses are for heritage speakers who understand Spanish but have very little conversational practice and are insecure about their speaking abilities and linguistic and cultural heritage. These courses would have as a goal to explore and foster an appreciation of the Latino culture and heritage. With a dual focus on language and culture, these classes explore the Latino world through fiction, nonfiction readings, documentaries and movies.

Two hundred courses are for students who use Spanish at home or with relatives and friends who are fairly secure in their Spanish speaking abilities but still need to improve their writing abilities – spelling, accent marks, and grammar. These courses offer a comprehensive, structural review of the Spanish language for heritage learners of Spanish with the purpose of increasing the student's knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in Spanish. Also, these courses attempt to help them appreciate dialectal variations in Spanish, to increase their cultural proficiency, to improve reading and writing skills through short stories, essays and compositions focusing on grammar and last but not least, to improve oral proficiency through oral presentations, discussion on topics that affect Heritage Learners and readings.

Three hundred level courses are content courses, not language ones. Then, their objectives are more complex: To encourage maintenance of the heritage language by raising consciousness on issues of identity and language, to expand the bilingual range of students by raising awareness of sociolinguistic concepts such as register and by discussing academic texts in Spanish, to learn critical history of media representations of Latinos in the US and to increase their understanding of Latino cultures, practices and perspectives of the Spanish speaking world through the study of cultural topics.

Because of the size of the heritage speakers' population in higher education in Chicago, it is important writing a placement exam that might offer more accurate results than a survey or a questionnaire.

6. Placement exams in some universities in the United States

At the University of Illinois at Chicago, there is an online placement exam for both L2 learners and Heritage Speakers (Potowski, Parada and Morgan-Short, forthcoming). At the University of Texas, El Paso, they created PASS (Parisi assessment system for Spanish). Other institutions use ACTFL, OPI, or/and the Web S-CAPE standardized exam by Brigham Young University. Finally, others use interviews, questionnaires or self-placement tests.

5.1. Limitations of Self-Placement Tests

According to Potowski (2002), there are four important reasons behind students' decisions:

- 1) They are unaware of the Spanish Heritage Language track
- 2) Students want to get a good grade
- 3) Students' scheduling conflicts
- 4) Students do not feel their Spanish is good enough

Some heritage speakers and their advisors might not be familiar with the Spanish Heritage Language Program so these students usually get enrolled in regular Spanish courses. Also, many students do not feel really confident with their Spanish since they do not have a lot of experience with academic Spanish and they prefer to choose Spanish over other languages because of their familiarity with it. Lastly, one

important factor that I found in my students is that since there are few sections of Spanish heritage courses, it is harder for them to fit in their schedules.

7. An Online Placement Exam for Spanish Heritage Speakers

I had the opportunity of co-writing an online placement exam for Spanish Heritage Speakers at a university level. We designed a one hundred points exam with three main components: Grammar/ Spelling/Accent Marks, Vocabulary/Register and Reading/Writing. We selected these skills since they are the main focus of our Spanish Heritage Speakers' Program.

The first section is multiple-choice and computer-graded. It covers the total of fifty points (half of the exam). Grammatically speaking, the focus of the questions was on the use of the gerund/ infinitive/ participle, indicative vs. subjunctive, prepositions, the gender of articles, verbs and pronouns. Here are some examples of this section:

(Adapted version)

- (5) 1. _____ es bueno para la salud.
 a. Comer bien b. Comiendo bien c. Se come bien
 2. No entiendo lo que me _____.
 a. hicistes b. hiciste c. haciste
 3. Este examen consiste _____ dos partes.
 a. a b. de c. en

The other two sections are instructor-graded: for Vocabulary and Register, the task is rewriting some sentences typically used in the Spanish of the US into a more standard/ universal Spanish (five points). This is an example of this section:

- (6) Reescribe las siguientes oraciones en un español más formal.
 Ojo: Se puede tener que cambiar más de una palabra.
- Barack Obama está corriendo para presidente.
 - Ellos tuvieron un buen tiempo en la pari.

Finally, the Reading and Writing section is the remaining forty five points: there is a small component of reading comprehension open-ended questions (five points) and an argumentative a hundred and fifty to two hundred word-composition on the topic of the reading with a value of forty points. This composition is assessed on content, organization, grammar and vocabulary.

This was the scoring we prepared for this exam:

If student's total score is:

- 91-100 → 300-level courses
- 75-90 → 200-level courses
- 20-74 → 100-level courses
- Below 20 → consider placing in SSL courses

Some of the advantages of creating an online written placement exam are the following: it is based on purely linguistic criteria (Potowski, Parada and Morgan-Short, forthcoming), we would be able to offer an equivalent placement test as L2 learners, this exam would mean less burden for students and advisors, we added

place-out scoring: to 300-level or to L2 classes and last but not least, it would offer more reliability than a questionnaire. It seemed only a questionnaire would be efficient to determine whether they were heritage speakers or not but would not be able to place them at the right level (intermediate or advanced).

Before taking the placement test, there was a brief questionnaire where students had to answer three yes-no questions about their family language background. They had to respond to three questions: if they grew up around Spanish, if they heard Spanish at home or around them and if they speak it at home or with family or friends. If they did not grow up around Spanish, they would have take the Spanish Placement Exam for Second Language Learners, if they responded yes to any of the questions, they would need to take the Spanish Heritage Placement Exam.

However, there are some limitations too: half of the exam is computer-graded (multiple-choice section) and half instructor-graded (writing section) but the whole exam was planned to be taken online, scoring cannot be more specific due to course availability, the lack of oral assessment (oral skills are one of the strengths of most heritage speakers, specifically for G1 and G2 students, Fairclough et al. 2010).

8. Revisited Online Placement Exam for Heritage Speakers

As it was mentioned before, one limitation of the test might be the instructor-graded sections. Ideally, the whole test would be computer-graded. Because of this, we can only use this section for the moment until we can find a better solution. Therefore, we are currently using the multiple choice section testing for Grammar/ Spelling /Accent Marks (the most common challenges for our Spanish Heritage Speakers) with the following scoring scale:

TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE: 50

If student's total score is:

27-50 → 200-level courses

13-26 → 100-level courses

Below 13 → consider placing in SSL courses

Regarding the written portion, instructors ask students to write a paragraph describing themselves the first day of class to corroborate that they are placed in the right level (100 or 200 courses) according to their linguistic domain in terms of uses of tenses, complex sentence structures, agreement errors or appropriate vocabulary.

There are several reasons why we considered this revisited version would be more efficient than the previous one:

1. We decided to exclude the 300 level courses since these are content courses instead of language courses. The placement test was intended to place students regarding their linguistic competence: intermediate or advanced level
2. We would still keep testing their grammatical/ vocabulary/ spelling skills through the computer-graded multiple choice test and the written section would be graded by the instructor to select the appropriate level depending on their writing skills when describing themselves (e.g. domain of complex syntactic structures, use of the subjunctive, appropriate register and vocabulary).
3. Since there is usually one intermediate course and maximum two advanced courses at a time, it is easy to handle by the trained and experienced instructors of these courses.

9. How to teach a Spanish Class for Heritage Speakers

Heritage speakers are those students of language that “are raised in a home 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” (Valdés, 2000, p. 1).

Colombi (2009) proposes a curriculum that builds on thematic clusters of texts where instruction explicitly focuses on language by a relationship between the text and how the lexicogrammatical features of the text help in the realization of the content. All texts are authentic and show different Spanish dialects as the representation of the diverse Hispanic world.

There are some characteristics that are common with the second language learners: neither of them are monolinguals so they make the same English transfer errors. However, manner and context of acquisition are different so heritage learners may require less instructional time than second language learners to develop the same skills (Correa, 2011). Regarding Spanish literacy skills, heritage learners have less experience with it.

Heritage Learners are usually confused with the grammatical terminology but some focus on form might be beneficial for them (Anderson, 2008). However, the goal of grammar instruction should not be learning a foreign language. Grammar lessons empowered these students to reconsider their feelings for the language (Mikulski, 2006). They are considered tools for reflection, awareness and empowerment. Potowski (2005) proposes that these classes for heritage learners should be considered Language Art courses instead of Foreign Language ones, centered on literacy development and grammatical knowledge.

10. Conclusion

The use of Spanglish has been a very controversial topic for a long time. There are still voices for and against it. However, it is undeniable that there is the dialect spoken by millions of Hispanics in the US. Therefore, it is an interesting object of study for many linguists that cannot be ignored. The purpose of this article is shedding some light over the dialect based on facts and not myths, its speakers and the linguistic characteristics that describe it. As a Spanish instructor having the privilege of working and having worked in institutions that offer a program of Spanish for Heritage Speakers, I consider crucial to have an effective placement test for these students in the same way that we offer one for non-native speakers. That is why we decided to create an online written exam taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of these particular students. This exam is working as a good assessment tool of students’ competence (intermediate or advanced level) but it has some limitations too such as creating an exam that can be completely computer-graded. Finally, there is a brief description of the teaching philosophy for these classes.

References

- Anderson, J. (2008). Towards an integrated second-language pedagogy for foreign and community/heritage languages in multilingual Britain. *Language Learning Journal* 36 (1), pp. 79-89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09571730801988553>
- Colombi, M.C. (2009). A Systemic Functional Approach to teaching Spanish for Heritage Speakers in the United States. *Linguistics and Education* 20 (1), pp. 39-49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2009.01.004>

- Correa, M. (2011). Advocating for critical pedagogical approaches to teaching Spanish as a heritage language: Some considerations. *Foreign Language Annals* 44 (2), pp. 308-320. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2011.01132.x>
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London, Longman.
- Fairclough, N., F. Belpoliti & E. Bermejo. "Developing an Electronic Placement Examination for Heritage Learners of Spanish: Challenges and Payoffs." *Hispania* 93:2, 270-289, 2010.
- Mikulski, A. (2006). Accentuating rules and relationships: Motivations, attitudes, and goals in a Spanish for native speakers class. *Foreign Language Annals* 39 (4), pp. 660-682.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (2006). *Multiple voices: An introduction to bilingualism*. Malden (Mass.), Blackwell Publishing.
- Potowski, K. (2005). *Fundamentos de la enseñanza del español a los hablantes nativos en los Estados Unidos (Foundations in teaching Spanish to native speakers in the United States)*. Madrid, Arco Libros.
- Potowski, K. (2002). Experiences of Spanish heritage speakers in university foreign language courses and implications for teacher training. *ADFL Bulletin* 33 (3), pp. 35-42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1632/adfl.33.3.35>
- Potowski, K., M. Parada, & K. Morgan-Short (forthcoming). Developing an online placement exam for Spanish heritage speakers and L2 students. *Heritage Language Journal*.
- Prada, J. M. de (2002). Quijote, 'spanglish' y 'Aserejé'. *Qué leer* 6.
- Schwegler, A., J. Kempff & A. Ameal-Guerra (2010). *Fonética y fonología españolas*, 4th ed. Hoboken (NJ), John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Silva Corvalán, C. (2004). Spanish in the Southwest, in E. Finegan and J. R. Rickford (eds.), *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 205-229. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511809880.013>
- Valdés, G. (2000). Bilingualism and Language Use among Mexican Americans, in Sandra Lee McKay & Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (orgs.), *New Immigrants in the United States. Readings for Second Language Educators*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 99-136.