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Writing strategies to develop literacy skills for Spanish heritage language learners

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Writing Strategies to Develop Literacy Skills for Advanced Spanish Heritage Language Learners

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Abstract

Heritage language learners (HLLs) need to be exposed to different genres of academic texts (Chevalier, 2004; Correa, 2016) and instructors need to find resources to maximize HLLs' learning experiences. There are multiple gains in improving HLLs' writing to create an awareness of the power of the HL through the use of authentic resources with a meaningful goal. Since HLLs should be able to distinguish between registers and genres (Chevalier, 2004), writing chronicles is an effective way to master their communicative competence (Fuentes, 2018). Finally, HLLs' writing is assessed holistically through rubrics moving from a focus on content to language.

Keywords: *genres, literacy skills, assessment*

Introduction

It is well known that one of the main learning goals for Spanish heritage language learners (HLLs) is the transfer of their literacy skills from English to Spanish. According to Kagan and Dillon (2008), HLLs entering Spanish language programs are often characterized as not having literacy skills developed beyond basic levels in their HL. However, they can develop them quickly. Other desirable outcomes are promoting the development of Spanish in three areas: grammatical competence, the acquisition of the academic register, and the extension of textual functions (Belpoliti & Gironzetti, 2018). These outcomes can be reached through reading and writing activities. Nonetheless, mastering orthographic and grammatical conventions is not enough to become good writers; HLLs need to be taught stylistic discourse conventions as well (Chevalier, 2004). This article attempts to shed light on how educators can maximize and assess HLLs' writing performance to advanced levels of proficiency.

Background

Spanish for HLLs courses are crucial whenever possible so that students can work on their academic writing and reading abilities in language courses that serve as a bridge to content courses such as literature or linguistics. Thus, writing and reading become a real challenge for these learners, many of whom have not acquired these skills in Spanish yet. These skills are a challenge for instructors too due to the complexity of teaching writing (Beaudrie, Ducar, & Potowski, 2014). Nevertheless, as

these authors claim, instructors should keep in mind that the fact that HLLs do not display a high proficiency in academic literacy skills does not mean that they do not have a good command of informal contexts such as social media. HLLs should be granted opportunities to practice their writing skills in their communities. In spite of their need to improve their writing, HLLs tend to perform better than their second language (L2) counterparts. For example, Potowski (2007) found that among dual immersion graduates, HLLs had higher ratings than L2 learners on a narrative exercise. HL learners have fewer difficulties when completing writing activities. What they have in common with L2 learners is that both student populations are in need of learning writing conventions like organization and transitions (Minor, 2017).

In the same vein, formal writing is usually a priority for HLLs, since their writing tends to mirror their speaking (Colombi, 1997); although students should be exposed to authentic materials of all varieties (Correa, 2016). Furthermore, successful academic writing is inevitably linked to spelling, so common errors should be addressed. In fact, HLLs' writing may sometimes be ungrammatical and show transfer errors from English (García, 2002). This is a consequence of their limited options to acquire writing proficiency (Callahan, 2010). As Beaudrie (2017) argues, poor spelling can affect HLLs' attitude and self-confidence towards writing because of its saliency. Thus, effective instructional approaches are crucial for correct accent placement.

One proposal to teach writing has been that of Chevalier (2004) with six writing modes from assorted discourses: conversation, description, narrative, evaluation, explanation, and argument (p.7). A common trend for HLLs is to develop a "backwards literacy" due to the transfer from English rhetoric (García, 2002). These learners write backwards in their heritage language (HL); that means, they use English structures when writing in Spanish. On the other hand, Spicer-Escalante (2005) argued that HLLs find their own path and their writing becomes influenced by English and their HL, showing a "forward literacy" since they create their own rhetorical space and find their own ways of expression using resources from English and Spanish.

Critical pedagogy may also play an important role in the teaching of writing in terms of literacy transfer. Loureiro-Rodriguez (2013) performed a case study with a first-year Spanish HL class in Canada using meaningful writing to encourage students to reflect upon their Latinx identity and the role of Spanish in Canada, beyond working on their writing skills. She used online discussions and compositions in the form of linguistic biographies to discuss cultural topics with the objective of making students aware that they are part of a bigger community. Writing biographies is especially challenging for HLLs since they move from the familiar (talking about their past experiences) to the abstract aspects of language; students work on the development of academic literacy practices through the deconstruction of biographies in Spanish (Gómez-Pereira, 2018). On the hand, another way of connecting the community with the school and narrowing the gap between them can be through the writing of newsletters as authentic resources with a meaningful goal (Lopes & Lopes, 1991).

One of the persistent challenges in HL pedagogy for writing instruction is that many world language instructors are not trained in teaching writing during the certification process (Lefkowich, 2011; Willis Allen, 2018). If educators intend to empower students to become good writers, they need to know how to do so, especially when grading with regard to assessment. It is key to leave behind a traditional

approach to error correction based on prescriptive grammar; above all since HLLs' local variety must be validated in the HL classroom, academic Spanish should be presented as an addition to their linguistic repertoires (Leeman, 2005). Furthermore, these students should be focused on the content and gradually move to working on spelling, grammar, and stylistics (Kagan & Dillon, 2001). Language should be seen as a continuum ranging from informal to formal settings (Colombi, 2009). In order to exemplify this, Colombi (2009) presents a project consisting of an interview of an older family member of the student and a transcription of the interview. The next step is writing an academic composition with multiple drafts based on the interview so that students can develop an awareness of the difference in registers. She uses a systemic-functional framework to promote the development of reading and writing skills through a genre-based pedagogy (Rose & Martin, 2012) and an intensive practice of these skills.

Regarding effective instructional strategies, Jegerski and Ponti (2014) conducted a classroom-based study on the efficiency of peer review in a Spanish HL class. Writing is considered a process in which writing drafts, revising, and editing are needed. As these authors argue, there are multiple benefits to this process if this peer-review is implemented along with the instructor's feedback, such as independent learning, problem-solving, self-awareness, and self-reflection. These benefits occur despite the linguistic limitations of the peer reviewers that are shown in the language they used in their feedback.

Concerning more innovative teaching strategies for writing, Martinez (2005) proposed the use of a succession of genres (thematically linked) to incorporate discursive practices of the Latinx community in the curriculum. What is more, due to the overemphasis on literacy skills in the courses for HLLs, there may be a lack of dedication to other skills such the improvement of oral competence (Beaudrie, 2011), which may be secondary especially with fluent speakers in the HL.

Proposals to Teach Writing Skills to HLLs

There have been major pedagogical concerns about how to improve HLLs' literacy skills. HLLs have basic skills; however, they may lack sophisticated academic or formal vocabulary that allows for accurate listening and written comprehension of formal Spanish. Therefore, Gutiérrez Spencer (1995) suggested using class time to gain confidence before completing reading and writing tasks. Practicing writing can provoke more anxiety than practicing other skills since HLLs feel insecure mainly about their grammar and orthography (Torres, Arrastia-Chisholm, & Tackett, 2018). Cheng (2002) suggested giving a positive emphasis on the perception that HLLs have about their writing and preparing their mindset before putting them to work on their task.

HLLs' instruction should be based on macro-teaching approaches where scaffolding can take place, building on their previous knowledge of the HL. The students can start with readings that include an integration of content, stylistics, grammar, and spelling (Carreira, 2014). Schwartz (2003) found that HLLs struggle through certain limitations: they lack writing strategies due to their lack of experience with academic writing, so they tend to do just surface editing; they have limited vocabulary; and above all, they lack linguistic confidence. Thus, she suggested four stages

in writing for Spanish HLLs to become more aware of how to write: (1) prewriting (organizing and brainstorming ideas), (2) composing (planning the order of ideas), (3) surface-level editing (grammar, mechanics, spelling), and (4) deep-level editing (altering the meaning of the text).

In addition to suggesting different proposals, a key question is how these learners will *use* their writing in Spanish, as Callahan (2010) argued. The HLLs in her study reported that they would use Spanish first for personal correspondence and translation to communicate and connect with their family. Those enrolled in Spanish courses had other goals in mind such as creative writing, but their use of written Spanish was fairly minimal. In this study, HLLs started presenting opinions orally and then they completed a written task as an extension which was discussed orally. Callahan (2010) found that HLLs do scaffolding of written work based on previous oral work to make the task more familiar. Explicit instruction is recommended by Gatti and O'Neill (2018) to treat issues in an abstract way, which seems hard for HLLs. Consequently, Parra, Llorente Bravo, and Polinski (2018) argued that a macro-based approach and explicit instruction on narrative genres would allow HLLs to narrate events in more complex ways.

On the other hand, Yanguas and Lado (2012) implemented think-alouds in the HL classroom and found benefits in their writing regarding fluency and accuracy. This strategy allowed HLLs to test their native intuitions about what sounded right or not. Language educators should be incorporating meaningful writing activities (culturally contextualized) as ACTFL (2015) recommends, mainly because they can use this opportunity to make HLLs feel like part of a bigger community, regardless of their families' country of origin (Loureiro-Rodriguez, 2013). Loureiro-Rodriguez (2013) suggested a social approach and used two writing assessments (online discussions and compositions) so that students could reflect on their own experiences and linguistic practices. This approach focuses on fostering student awareness and appreciation of their own language varieties and allows instructors to get to know their students better and accommodate the curriculum to them. Furthermore, Loureiro-Rodriguez (2013) mentioned four principles in the writing process: an autobiographical narrative to explore personal narratives, an emotional writing, a more personal stage, and finally bringing the writing to the social domain. She used online discussions and compositions to assess writing; the former of a more informal nature to interact with their peers, and the latter of a more introspective nature to reflect on a variety of topics.

In the same vein, Potowski (2005) understood writing as a step-by-step-guided process starting with content and ending with grammar. In fact, Beaudrie, Ducar, and Potowski (2014) suggested nine stages for instructors to teach writing to HLLs. The first stage consisted of moving from more simple to more complex discourse from beginning to more advanced levels, so students were presented with the kind of discourse that they were ready to understand at the right time. There were several proposals to do so, such as the use of *HelloTalk* and *Tandem* to produce output in short excerpts that would provide students with confidence in the HL (Vollmer Rivera & Teske, 2018). HLLs were able to work on their spelling errors or any other difficulties they may find when writing (Beaudrie, 2011). The second stage focused on designing writing tasks and prewriting activities based on context, with a commu-

nicative goal in mind. During the third stage, students were able to obtain feedback from their peers following a rubric. The next stage detailed the selection of a good rubric. According to these authors, rubrics should be holistic and analytical. Regarding error correction, based on Williams (2012), instructors should correct what is not understood, errors that can be fixed by the student, and what has been studied in class. In the specific case of HLLs, Beaudrie et al. (2014) made a relevant point about the importance of distinguishing between errors and non-standard uses in the community. Guiding students to writing via reading is also a crucial stage to improve their proficiency in literacy skills. In order to do so, explicit teaching is required so that students understand writing as a process: planning, composing, revising, and editing. The connection between reading and writing should be promoted so that HLLs can further develop their linguistics skills in Spanish (Mikulski & Elola, 2011). The next stage focused on vocabulary instruction and its importance in developing writing skills, above all since HLLs' vocabulary tends to be limited. Finally, engaging students in multiple literacies facilitated the enhancement of their writing skills. In fact, a proposal to teach writing through the study of literature is also an effective tool to expand the knowledge of Spanish, especially through the study of U.S. Latino literature to include their voices in the curriculum (Loza, 2017).

One issue that has not been mentioned so far is whether the use of code-switching with English is acceptable. Potowski (2005), Loureiro-Rodriguez (2013), and Camus and Adrada-Rafael (2015) have a positive view on this matter; they all agree that HLLs should use English when needed on the drafts of the composition so that their dominant language can have a positive impact on improving their writing skills in their HL.

Overall, there is a need to create new pedagogical materials to develop literacy. Torres, Pascual y Cabo, and Beusterien (2017) propose using task-based approaches centered on problem-solving communicative tasks to obligate HLLs to interact with different genres while making form-meaning connections.

Activities with a Focus on Writing

Aparicio (1983) proposed controlled activities for writing for HLLs with a low proficiency in Spanish; that is, substitution-transformation activities to compare and contrast oral and written Spanish. Additionally, self-editing exercises with the most common errors and writing dialogues are beneficial to develop composition skills along with free writing to practice the art of writing. HLLs can monitor their development through the writing of a journal as well and reflect upon what they have learned throughout the course. Similarly, Roca (2007) suggested some of the following activities for HLLs: a linguistic and cultural autobiography, oral interviews with a composition about the content of the interview, writing about being bilingual, their communities, topics of the textbook or preparing for a trip, and interviewing their grandparents and writing about it. Along with Roca's mentioning of the linguistic and cultural autobiography, one could add the importance of the "personal essay" or "self-person narratives". These strategies echo what Pennebaker (2004) called "the reconstruction of self" through the writing of life experiences. Furthermore, Reznicek-Parrado (2014) advocated for the use of journals or personal essays for academic writing to advance literacy of HLLs, not only to improve their linguistic skills, but

also to incorporate their voices in the curriculum as bilingual and bicultural. She suggested that the instructor could use the personal essay to connect the topics of readings by renowned authors to theirs so that there is a comparison between their own stories and those that they read in class; "storytelling through writing." Explicit pedagogical tasks should be used to scaffold students' writing skills that they need to develop to build these personal narratives. It is crucial that HLLs be encouraged to use their own language varieties to write their personal narratives to reflect their voice (Callahan, 2010). This approach is considered authentic writing and students can use it as a transformative act. These journals or diaries become a tool for the instructors through which they can get to know their students better, as well as their thoughts and feelings towards the language (Velásquez, 2015). Of particular note is the importance of focusing on academic registers when the ultimate goal is academic, or the incorporation of informal home registers when the goal is to advocate for the inclusion of the Spanish varieties of their own communities.

Since HLLs are expected to distinguish between registers and genres (Chevalier, 2004), writing chronicles is an effective activity because of its hybrid nature and the three modes of communication that are involved in this genre (interpersonal, interpretative, and exposition) to master their communicative competence, as Fuentes (2018) argued. Fuentes described multiple advantages of using the chronicle genre in the classroom; among them, the fact that it involves a critical reflection and an opportunity to become active participants in the construction of their own knowledge. In this study, most students reported learning gains in acquiring the formal register. To a lesser extent, they also appreciated improving their grammar, vocabulary, and orthography.

In a Spanish dual immersion program in Arizona called *Exito Bilingüe*, Smith and Arnot-Hopffer (1998) described how a literacy program can be implemented successfully. This program consisted of eight components: reading aloud to children, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing. Furthermore, oral history is also an effective tool to bring the community to the classroom through the HLLs' families' narratives. Foulis (2018) conducted a study in a service-learning course in which Latinx communities were seen as agents of social change.

Another strategy could be dictation, but this is better used at the intermediate level. Dictation can help HLLs to make the connection between speaking and writing. However, it might not be effective at the basic level since students may not be ready for this (Pyun & Lee-Smith, 2011).

On the other hand, Belpoliti and Fairclough (2016) proposed the use of projects centered on an inquiry-based model, since there are learning gains at many levels including writing, and it is a good model to measure individual progress. Regarding writing skills, students demonstrate analytical and critical skills when analyzing the data they collect and writing a report in academic Spanish based on this research. In order to do this, students go through a process of editing and reviewing while at the same integrating the linguistic and discourse knowledge that they have been covering in class.

Finally, another creative way of making students write is the proposal by Parra (2016). As a final project in one of her advanced courses, she asked students to create

an art object that reflected what they learned in class and to describe the connection between the object and the class in the form of an essay. At the same time, this project raised students' awareness of their HL varieties, their ideologies about language, and the role of their HL in their identities.

Writing as an Act of Resistance and Assessment

Writing in Spanish can play a role in fighting the hegemony of English versus the HL. According to Villa (2004), L1 literacy predicts the level of success in acquiring L2 literacy. Writing can serve an ulterior purpose beyond improving literacy, developing an awareness of the power of their HL. In a nutshell, instructors should be able to provide students with opportunities so that they know how to use their HL in ways that they had not done before. Students need to have an audience in mind and establish a social interaction between the writer and the reader (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2012). Gee (2002) considered writing a social practice where language, identity and the social context are interrelated.

Additionally, reading culturally relevant texts might be of better use for bilingual students. Flores-Dueñas (2004) reported that these students were more engaged with texts written by Mexican American authors; it was easier for them to identify with these culturally familiar texts, which made them produce higher-level writing. Concerning writing assessment for HLLs, there is not a parallel standardized assessment to that of L2 learners. However, Beaudrie et al. (2014) argue that HLLs manage interpersonal situations better than presentational modes, so the instructor's job is to help them to move from one to the other in writing. Writing is a difficult skill to acquire for both L2 and HLLs; however, it might even be perceived as harder for HLLs (Silva, 2011). Holistic assessment is recommended to improve the teaching of writing by helping teachers guide students to become better writers (Escamilla & Coady, 2001). According to Escamilla and Coady (2001), these rubrics should contain conventions such as spelling and accentuation. Spicer-Escalante (2005) found that HLLs' writing does not compare to that of native speakers or L2 learners; they have their own and unique way of written expression.

Conclusions

This article attempts to offer effective writing strategies to implement in the HL classroom while achieving the learning goals expected with the HL teaching pedagogy. Since HLLs' writing tends to imitate their speaking, they need to be exposed to assorted genres of academic texts, and instructors need to find the appropriate strategies to maximize their learning experiences using authentic resources whenever possible (for example, newsletters). As it is well known, instructors need to validate students' Spanish variety while at the same time helping them in the process of adding more registers. What is more, HLLs need to have a positive view about their use of code-switching with English (Camus & Adrada-Rafael, 2015; Loureiro-Rodriguez, 2013; & Potowski, 2005). Writing is a process where students have to work on different drafts, focusing on content first and then on language, and peer-review is an important part of the process (Jegerski & Ponti, 2014; Potowski, 2005; Rose & Martin, 2012).

On another note, a social approach is strongly encouraged so that students can use their writing to reflect upon their lives through personal narratives (self-narratives) or biographies (Roca, 2007). What is more, these narratives should be a transformative act through which HLLs can express their voice and be heard outside of their communities (Callahan, 2010). Finally, writing can play an activist role to push back against hegemonic perspectives and practices toward the HL (Villa, 2004). Ultimately, there are multiple gains in improving the writing in the HL, not only for the sake of acquiring literacy in Spanish, but also to create an awareness of the real power of students' HL. More research is needed regarding assessment, since it is hard to find a standardized test just for HLLs. Regardless, a holistic approach has been highly recommended (Escamilla & Coady, 2001). Furthermore, specific rubrics are needed with a focus on spelling and accents, and above all, it is important to conclude that HLLs' writing is unique and very much worthy of further study.

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