

Heritage Language Literacy Club: Developing Literacy in Two Languages

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"I always wanted to be a teacher, but it's hard. Sometimes they're not focused or it's the end of the day and they want to talk to their friends, but I like helping them understand Spanish." The sentiment expressed by this teacher is one many educators can empathize with. However, one thing that makes her different from others you may know is her age. She is a bilingual sixth grader at Glasgow Middle School in Falls Church, Virginia, who, along with over 50 other bilingual students from the fifth to ninth grades, volunteers as an after-school tutor in the Heritage Language Literacy Club at Bailey's Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences, also in Falls Church. Tutors meet once a week with students in second, third, fourth, and fifth grades to help them develop literacy in Spanish, the language most of the students speak at home.

Bailey's Elementary is emblematic of the country's growing diversity. The school's 900 students are from 45 countries and speak 20 different languages. Seventy-five percent of the students speak a language other than English; 55% are Hispanic. Approximately half of the students are eligible for English as a second language services. The school is frequently cited as a model, and visitors from around the country and the world come to observe its challenging, inquiry-based instructional approach.

Among the school's innovative offerings is a Spanish partial-immersion program, which begins in first grade. While some of Bailey's native Spanish speakers are enrolled in the program, Regla Armengol, a partial-immersion teacher, wanted to do more to promote biliteracy among those who were not able to participate. Armengol, a native speaker of Spanish, knew firsthand the personal and professional benefits of

bilingualism. She was also aware of research supporting the beneficial effects of native language development on the acquisition of literacy in English (Collier & Thomas, 1989). However, ninth grade, when most of these students would have their first opportunity to study Spanish at school, would be too late for them to fully realize the benefits of biliteracy. Armengol, a 1999 Virginia State Teacher of the Year, devised a creative solution. She used the \$2500 award from the State of Virginia as seed money, collaborating with a group of teachers from Bailey's, to found the Heritage Language Literacy Club.

Goals of the Club

The Heritage Language Literacy Club aims to promote the academic achievement of language minority students and empower them to continue on to higher education. Five goals guide the club:

1. To develop native language literacy as a bridge to biliteracy in both English and Spanish.
2. To increase awareness of foreign language and multilingual career options by mentoring young English language learners and their parents.
3. To develop leadership and academic skills in at-risk students to prepare them for college or for careers as multilingual professionals.
4. To raise awareness in the school community of the special needs of this student population.
5. To increase parental involvement in education.

Sample Activities

It is 3:30 in the afternoon, and most students at Bailey's are eager to head home and play with friends on this warm spring day. But the school day is not yet over for the second graders

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waiting to enter a sunny classroom covered from floor to ceiling with student artwork and charts and posters in Spanish. During the regular school day, the room is home to the Spanish partial-immersion program, but three afternoons a week, it provides a stimulating learning environment for Bailey's native Spanish speakers.

As the second-grade student readers take their seats, the tutors welcome them in Spanish, setting the tone for the next hour. Helen Arzola, a certified bilingual teacher, gathers the student readers in a circle and shows them the cover of a large illustrated book, *Saltarín y la primavera*. She asks them to guess what the story might be about, and how *Saltarín*, a rabbit, may have gotten his name. "¿Porque brinca," guesses one student. "¿Y qué significa brincar?" asks Arzola. "¡Saltar!" answers another student.¹ When Arzola begins her dramatic reading, they listen intently, captivated by the story. Afterwards, the student readers pair up with their tutors. Today they will play *Syllable Bingo*, designed to develop their awareness of final sounds and syllables, before they select books to read with their tutors.

Next door, Susan Yang, another of Bailey's bilingual teachers, has just finished reading *El Oso*, a story about bears, to another group of student readers. The students each have their own copy of the story to read aloud to

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each other and take home. In a third classroom, several students read a science magazine while tutors ask questions to check their comprehension. Other students are working in pairs and small groups on puzzles and games that require them to read and write in Spanish. The Literacy Club is entirely voluntary, and the fun and varied nature of the activities keeps the student readers and the tutors motivated to continue.

At the end of each session, student readers select a Spanish book to take home for the week. One of the keys to the program's success is a parent sign-off sheet that goes home with the book. Students may read the book to their parents; their parents may read the book to them; or they may read the book together. Yang says that encouraging students and parents to read together at home benefits everyone. No matter what their level of literacy, parents can still be involved in their children's education, and parents who have difficulty reading have the opportunity to improve their skills along with their children. But the real secret is communication between the teachers and parents. Literacy Club teachers talk with parents informally when they pick up their children at the end of the tutoring session. Armengol also frequently makes telephone calls to parents to discuss students' progress and encourage families to work together with the school. She has noticed that phone calls in Spanish are a much more effective way to communicate with parents than sending letters home.

Participants

Teachers and School Staff

Eight certified bilingual teachers from Bailey's participate in the Club. In addition to delivering instruction, teachers design curriculum and materials, recruit tutors and student readers, disseminate information to other staff, and communicate with parents and volunteers. A grant from a local private foundation allowed the Club to offer small stipends to the teachers and also funded a part-time salaried coordinator. Members of the PTA, the community, and other staff at Bailey's and the neighboring middle school have also contributed to the program's success by recruiting students, volunteering in the classroom, and offering positive feedback.

Student Readers

Bailey's staff and the program coordinator conduct extensive outreach to recruit students for the Club. Currently, there are approximately 150 student readers in Grades 2 through 5. While increased funding has allowed the program to serve more children, many more would like to participate. Club members represent a wide range of Spanish-language proficiency. Many of them have recently emigrated from Latin America and are fluent in Spanish, but some U. S.-born students have only a receptive understanding of the language; that is, they can understand it but are not able to speak it. Students' literacy in Spanish also spans a wide range.

Teachers report that the student readers are enthusiastic about the Club. Yang says students in her regular classroom have written journal entries about how excited they are to participate. Another teacher at Bailey's reports that her students have asked permission to read their Spanish books during independent reading time in the regular classroom.

Tutors

Over 50 students in Grades 5-9 volunteer as tutors. Some attend Bailey's, and others attend the neighboring middle school. Prospective tutors must participate in a rigorous selection process involving a job application, teacher recommendations, and an interview. They must also demonstrate an adequate level of literacy in Spanish. Once selected, tutors receive three afternoons of training where they learn about reading strategies, goal setting, and behavior management. The teachers and the program coordinator provide ongoing support to the tutors throughout the year. As an additional incentive, tutors receive a \$200 college scholarship in the form of a U.S. savings bond.

Parents

Increasing parental involvement in education is a major goal of the program, and parents are encouraged to play an active part by reading at home with their children. They are also invited to attend activities and become volunteers. As is often the case for immigrant families, many parents work long hours and are not available to participate in Club sessions; nevertheless, several parents do volunteer after school.

Benefits of the Club

The most obvious benefit of the Club has been the opportunity for Spanish-speaking children to develop literacy in their native language. From an academic perspective, native language development is important because it can serve as a bridge to literacy in English (August, Calderón, & Carlo, 2000). But biliteracy also confers personal, professional, and economic benefits that will continue long after the students leave school. Helping students maintain their home language averts the potentially devastating social consequences of native language loss (Fillmore, 1991). And building on students' oral fluency by developing literacy in Spanish will allow them to use their bilingualism to best advantage in the workplace and beyond. However, the student readers are not the only ones who benefit. The tutors find that their Spanish skills improve as well. One of the tutors' main responsibilities is to observe and diagnose their student readers' difficulties and devise strategies to help them. In the process, the tutors develop a heightened awareness of language and the process of reading and writing.

Not all of the Club's successes have been strictly academic. The mentoring component has had a significant positive effect on students' self-esteem and goals for the future. From the beginning, the tutors are treated as professionals, and they develop a collegial relationship with the participating teachers. They learn about educational and career options they may never have considered, and many express a desire to attend college. One tutor described how participating in the Club led him to reconsider his plans for the future:

Because this is my third year in the program, I now have about \$800 saved towards college and I want to know if I will be able to continue to earn more scholarship money. My father is a construction worker and I used to think that I wanted to grow up to be like him, but now I want to be an architect, and I know I will have to go to college.

Other students have expressed interest in pursuing careers in education, which the Club's founders find particularly gratifying.

The relationship that develops between the tutors and the student readers is also mutually beneficial. One tutor described what he likes best about the Club: "I like having fun with the other kids, and sometimes they become your friends." In fact, the tutors often become role models for the younger students, requiring the tutors to exercise a significant degree of responsibility and emotional maturity. Their contributions are valued and respected, which provides an additional boost to their self-esteem. Meanwhile the younger students gain a mentor who shares their language and understands the experience of growing up in two cultures.

Both the tutors and the student readers learn the value of persistence. Joining the Club is a year-long commitment, and students and tutors find they occasionally miss out on after-school activities with friends. Armengol counsels those who get discouraged and enlists the help of the their families to motivate them to continue. In fact, nearly all the turnover among participants is due to families moving in and out of the area, a testament to the students' commitment and ongoing communication with families.

The Club sends a clear message to parents that their language and culture are welcomed and valued by the school community. Parent participation in their children's education is both encouraged and confirmed by the frequent communication between teachers and parents. The weekly reading sign-off sheet provides further evidence that parents are reading at home with their children. Mutual understanding is fostered as the volunteer and school staff who support the Club learn about the special needs of immigrant families as well as the assets they bring to the school community.

The Heritage Language Literacy Club was developed as one school's attempt to better meet the needs of its Spanish-speaking students. The Club's founders hope it will serve as a model for other schools seeking to build on the strengths of language minority students. They welcome questions and comments at varmengol@compuserve.com.

Note

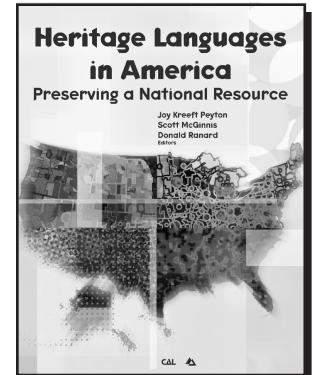
1. The English translation of the story *Saltarín y la primavera* is *Hopper Hunts for Spring*. *Brincar* and *saltar* are synonyms for "to hop" or "to jump."

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Heritages Languages in America

Joy Kreeft Peyton, Scott McGinnis, and Donald Ranard, Editors



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As a result of both immigration and birth patterns, the number of individuals in the United States who speak a language other than English is increasing dramatically. Multilingual and bilingual individuals are assets to their communities, as the globalism of the 21st century creates a tremendous need for bilingual individuals in all areas of the workforce.

This book describes the various populations of heritage language speakers in the United States and outlines what needs to be done to help them develop a high level of proficiency in their heritage languages for use in both the academic and professional arenas. This includes the development of materials, instructional strategies, and assessment tools for use in the context of high-quality heritage language programs that move smoothly and sequentially from early elementary through college levels. Also needed are teacher recruitment and training, and funding to develop and maintain heritage language programs. These challenges demand the attention and efforts of everyone involved in language education, research, and policy formation.

Heritages Languages in America will be available in November 2001 from Delta Publishing.

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news from cal

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Humanities Connections in the Teaching of Spanish to Native Speakers

Thomas M. Adams, National Endowment for the Humanities

One of the privileges of working at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is being able to look over the shoulders of scholars and teachers who are renewing the teaching of the humanities and its subject matter. The movement to articulate a methodology for teaching Spanish to native speakers (SNS), for example, responds to the growing presence of students of Hispanic heritage in classrooms all over the United States. The “big three” Hispanic communities that trace their recent or remote ancestry to Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico have spread throughout the country, while new waves of immigration from Central America have added to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Spanish-speaking community.

From my observations of a number of outstanding NEH-funded projects over the last decade, I am convinced that Spanish teachers can perform a key role as interdisciplinary “brokers” in curriculum design. The simplest way to make this point is to illustrate, from SNS projects funded by NEH, how the objectives, materials, and methods of teaching Spanish to native speakers can fulfill the “five Cs” of the National Foreign Language Standards: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. In particular, I focus on the *Connections* standard, which affords unique opportunities for SNS teachers to shine and for students in their classes to learn (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, 2000; Met, 1999).

NEH and SNS

NEH support for SNS projects has been provided primarily by its Division of Education through three types of grants: (1) major national projects, (2) local “humanities focus grants” limited to \$25,000 each, and (3) national summer seminars and institutes for school teachers. NEH has also provided support for the preservation of Spanish language through its Preservation and Access programs and has supported

related projects in its Research and Fellowships programs. Projects reaching beyond the academic community have been supported through NEH’s Public programs. I focus here on the seminars and institutes program, which I have observed most directly, while referring also to major national projects that provide resources for SNS teachers.

One of the lessons has been that even within the community of Spanish speakers, culture is diverse and evolving.

Preparing Teachers for SNS Classes

Spanish language teachers have made tremendous strides in identifying the needs of the more-or-less bilingual student who has some exposure to Spanish as a language of everyday *Communication*. Through its national projects, NEH has attempted to support this work. An early effort was a path-breaking conference, “Teaching Spanish to Native Speakers in the U.S.: Praxis and Theory,” at the University of California, Davis, in 1994 (Colombi & Alarcon, 1997). Cecilia Pino’s regional institute, “Teaching Spanish to Southwest Hispanic Students,” in 1993 at Mexico State University, Las Cruces, was a forerunner of this conference. The *Community* dimension of the national standards was the most immediately obvious in these efforts, since students’ language use was related to the language of historically defined communities. Teachers have become conscious of the importance of drawing upon community resources to engage students in the study of the cultures associated with their language and community.

The *Culture* rubric of the standards leads to “cultures” in the plural: One of

the lessons of SNS has been that even within the community of Spanish speakers, culture is diverse and evolving. This appreciation leads into the rubric of *Comparisons*, whether among the various communities of Spanish speakers or among the various ethnic and national communities that students encounter. It also leads to *Connections*, often through teachers’ collaborations with colleagues in other areas of the school curriculum.

Connections and the Converging Cultures of the Hispanic Southwest

The connections between SNS and the five Cs of the foreign language standards came home to me most vividly on a visit to a summer institute on the Hispanic Cultures of the Southwest, offered in 1997 by Columbia Teachers’ College. The host site was the campus of Saint John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in sight of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Northern New Mexico, in an area that is home to small towns and farms where Spanish has been heard for over 400 years. The emphasis on *Connections* was deliberate in this institute. Project director Mari Haas recruited elementary and high school teachers in teams that included one Spanish teacher and at least one colleague teaching another subject matter. These others were primarily social studies teachers, but there were also teachers of English, art, and even Latin. The program of the institute was also interdisciplinary, in that participants learned about the culture and history of the Southwest from specialists grounded in a variety of disciplines—history, literature, folklore—as well as learning about traditional crafts from today’s artisans.

Culture was woven throughout the institute’s interdisciplinary topics. Stories and folktales reflected the values and way of life of traditional communities, explaining, for example, the function of the traditional healers or *curanderas*. Visits to sites such as the restored colonial hacienda, *El Rancho de las Golondrinas*, told volumes about the culture. A writer and teller of stories and

a scholar who studies writings by Hispanic women of the Southwest were among the scholars, writers, and artists who spoke with the participants.

The theme of *Communities* emerged as participants discussed the place of native Spanish speakers in their own schools and communities. A teacher from the local community described the separation that prevailed until very recently between school culture and traditional Hispanic culture in the community. The theme of *Comparisons* was developed through pedagogical sessions in which a sequence of knowledge, skills, and supporting materials was developed around a day in the life of a child in a traditional Southwestern Hispanic community. As the familiar details of everyday life unfolded, opportunities for comparison with the lives of children elsewhere in the United States arose.

The encounter between Hispanic and indigenous cultures was the organizing theme of an institute held in 2000 at Arizona State University, on the edge of the Sonoran Desert, home to the Tohono O'odham people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. This institute focused on the theme of cultural convergence in the former Spanish empire, with special attention to the legacy of cultural contacts of all kinds in the immediate area of southern Arizona. The institute also demonstrated a convergence of interest, expertise, and teaching goals among teachers of Spanish and their colleagues in social studies and other subject areas. The theme of the institute generated myriad opportunities for teachers of Spanish to make connections with the study of history, literature, art, anthropology, architecture, and the use of land and the environment.

During my visit to this institute, the group visited the spectacular mission church of San Xavier del Bac outside Tucson, following a thorough introduction by art historian Emily Umberger. Local museums and sites, including the Heard and the Pueblo Grande Museum on the site of an ancient Hohokam irrigated settlement, yielded abundant resources for studying the pre-existing layers of culture that were encountered by early Spanish soldiers, missionaries, and settlers. Anthropologist Elizabeth Brandt was a key contributor to discus-

sions of these sites along with other host and visiting faculty. She and the project director also ensured the authenticity of a meal served during the last week of the institute that was representative of Hispanic and indigenous cultures in the 16th century. Cultures of the region under Mexican rule, then after these areas came under the control of the United States, constituted another important strand of the institute. Even those teachers who were from the region left the institute better prepared to see the legacy of Hispanic and other cultures as part of a very long history.

SNS and Connections with a Living Heritage

Also in 2000, the Center for Applied Linguistics sponsored an institute at UCLA that focused on the varieties of Spanish spoken in the United States today. Linguistic variations—their patterns, their origins, and how to deal with them in the language classroom—received sustained attention in a context that embraced culture, comparisons, community, and a web of interdisciplinary connections.

One of the strengths of the UCLA institute was that it offered multiple perspectives on Hispanic American cultures, starting with the Chicano/a culture so strongly represented in the immediate Los Angeles area and moving to a study of Central American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican immigrant cultures. When I arrived, Concepción Valadez of the UCLA School of Education had guided participants in preparing a series of classroom-related presentations on novels, poetry, and film that related not only to Mexican Americans, but to other Hispanic American communities as well. The room was full of books—novels and collections of poetry with titles like *Touching the Fire* (Gonzalez, 1998) and *Mother Tongue* (Martinez, 1996), and collections of essays and articles, including one on urban Latino culture (Davis, 2000). One of the presentations focused on the film “American Me,” and delved into memories of the World War II Zoot Suit Riots (Pagán, 2000). Presentations by Ana Roca on Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latino groups generated lively discussions that brought to the fore the distinctive viewpoints of these groups.

Connections and Comparisons: Mexico and Puerto Rico

Without describing in detail every seminar and institute, I cannot fail to mention the variety of NEH-funded projects on particular dimensions of Hispanic and Latino cultures, particularly in Mexico and in Mexican American communities in the United States. Visiting faculty at institutes held at the University of Oregon campus have included Mexican poet Emilio Pacheco and Mexican American author of children's books Francisco X. Alarcón. Numerous grants in all divisions of the NEH have focused on Mexican American history and culture, and a number of our National Humanities Council members have contributed to this body of research. SNS teachers will find that many of the materials produced for historians would also serve their needs. (See, e.g., Rochin & Valdés, 1990).

Caribbean writers and scholars have also given voice to a sense of an evolving identity, bilingual and open to a multiplicity of experience: Esmeralda Santiago powerfully evoked these themes in a plenary session at the annual meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in November 2000. The complexities of cultural identity came to life at an NEH institute held in Puerto Rico under the auspices of the University of Connecticut. Through readings, lectures, and field trips, participants studied the transformations of Hispanic Caribbean culture, weaving together four strands: history, land and environment, cultural diversity and continuity, and arts and literature. They also gained insight into the evolving cultural relationships among Puerto Rico's Caribbean neighbors and a fresh perspective on transplanted *Nuyoricans*.

Resources for SNS Teachers

By collaborating with their colleagues in history and other subjects, Spanish teachers can incorporate a vast amount of subject matter related to the Hispanic American experience into their teaching. One exemplary resource is the NEH-supported *Web de Anza* site (<http://anza.uoregon.edu>), which is based on a diary kept in Spanish in the 1770s by the commander of expeditions from Mexico to the current site of San

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Humanities Connections

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Francisco. The entire text of the diary has been translated and annotated, but Spanish teachers can also use the original Spanish version, an authentic historical document, to make a natural connection between the teaching of Spanish and social studies.

NEH is also supporting a project by the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) at the University of Maryland to develop a set of Web-based modules for SNS teachers. Developed with advice from experts, the modules will provide information on meeting the special linguistic needs and capitalizing on the assets of native Spanish speakers. They will also help teachers find and use materials for making connections with a variety of disciplines in the humanities and beyond. This project, which is a component of the NFLC's LANG-NET project (<http://www.nflc.org/activities/projects/langnet.htm>), and NEH's EDSITement gateway to the humanities (<http://edsitement.neh.gov>) offer Web-

based instructional materials and recommended teaching strategies.

NEH encourages you to bring us your ideas about teaching Spanish for native speakers. One of our programs may be able to help you reach your goals. Visit the NEH Web site (<http://www.neh.gov>). You can check out the summer seminars and institutes and contact the project director for details. We want you to think of NEH as your "Humanities Connection."

Note

While the encouragement to apply to NEH reflects official Endowment policy, the particular views expressed by the author are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the NEH.

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