



Spanish Heritage Language Schools in the United States

Celia Chomón Zamora
Georgetown University, Washington DC

With over 329 million speakers in approximately 44 countries, Spanish is the second-most spoken language in the world (Lewis, 2009). The United States is the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world after Mexico, Colombia, Spain, and Argentina (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008), with approximately 50.5 million speakers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Additionally, Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language in the United States (after English) and the most widely taught non-English language in high schools and postsecondary institutions (Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012; Potowski & Carreira, 2010; Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

More than half of the growth in the population of the United States from 2000 to 2010 is attributed to the increase in the Hispanic/Latino population. The highest number of Hispanics reside in three states: California (14 million), Texas (9.5 million), and Florida (4.2 million) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although Spanish speakers come from various Spanish-speaking countries, the majority have origins in Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

History of Spanish in the United States

Spanish was spoken in the United States long before Spanish-speaking immigrants entered the country (Potowski & Carreira, 2010). In 1513, Spanish explorer Ponce de León arrived in Florida to colonize it, thereby introducing the Spanish culture and language to what would one day become the United States. However, the largest increase of Spanish speakers occurred after the Mexican-American War in 1848, when the United States claimed California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Wyoming, which had been previously owned and inhabited by Mexican Spanish speakers (Potowski & Carreira, 2010). Since then the increase in Spanish speakers has been due to immigration and Spanish language maintenance by the 2nd and 3rd generation of immigrants.

Heritage Spanish Speakers

Approximately 70% of U.S. Latinos (28 of the 42 million Hispanics in the United States) speak Spanish at home (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007). However, due to exposure, education, and total immersion in the majority language, English, most Spanish speakers retain Spanish for the sole purpose of communicating with their families and in their communities. The absence of formal education settings in which young people can develop their language skills, and common negative misconceptions about those who speak languages other than English, contribute to the abandonment of Spanish among Spanish speakers (Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012; Montrul, 2004; Valdés, 2000). Thus, assimilation to the mainstream American culture often leads to language loss in the second and third generations. Some heritage Spanish speakers, however, develop their English language skills and also become fluent in their heritage language, Spanish.

Heritage Spanish Programs

This section describes the origins and current status of heritage Spanish programs in K-12 public schools and universities and in community-based programs.

Spanish for Native Speaker Classes in K-12 Public Schools and Universities

Since 1917, the [American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese](#) (AATSP) has supported and encouraged the study of Spanish and Portuguese in the United States. Special interest in teaching Spanish to Spanish speakers arose in the 1930's, when AATSP became interested in ways to teach Spanish to children who already spoke Spanish. Following AATSP's encouragement, textbooks and articles were published, including the first textbook for heritage speakers, Pauline Baker's *Español para los hispanos* (Baker, 1980); and George Blanco's dissertation, *Teaching Spanish as a standard dialect for grades 7-12* (Blanco, 1971).

As a result, heritage language programs were developed, as well as instructional materials for teaching Spanish to native speakers (SNS). (For a discussion of the origin and purposes of Spanish for Spanish speaker courses, see Lewelling & Peyton, 1999; for a list of materials used in these courses, see the Center for Applied Linguistics' [Materials for Spanish for Spanish Speaker Instruction: An Annotated Bibliography](#).)

Research shows the importance of providing separate classes for speakers of Spanish as a heritage language and learners of Spanish as a foreign (second) language (Beaudrie, 2011; Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012; Colombi & Roca, 2003; Montrul, 2004; Potowski & Carreira, 2010; Valdés, 2000). For example, Beaudrie (2011) argues,

Heritage language (HL) learners can expect very limited benefit from basic foreign language (FL) classes, because their areas of weakness do not, in most cases, coincide with those of FL learners. HL learners need to expand their often limited literacy skills, to acquire additional registers, and to gain metalinguistic awareness of the Spanish grammatical system, which they already have in place (p. 322).

However, despite considerable support in the academic community for separate classes for heritage and foreign language learners of Spanish, a survey conducted by the National Foreign Language Center and the AATSP found that a limited number of U.S. colleges and universities (18%) offered such classes (Ingold, Rivers, Tesser, & Ashby, 2002). In addition, surveys conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics show that the number of heritage language courses has been and continues to be limited at the high school level as well (7% in 1997 and 10% in 2008; Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). When high school students do learn Spanish, it is primarily in classes that focus on Spanish as a foreign language rather than as a native or heritage language. However, recent regional surveys show that heritage Spanish classes are more available in some regions of the country than in others (Beaudrie, 2011).

Community-based Spanish Programs

Community-based programs strive to foster the language and literacy skills of Spanish speakers with the support of the community and parents. They include programs such as [Escuela Bolivia](#) in Arlington, VA (now called [Edu-Futuro](#)), [Escuela Argentina](#) in Potomac, Maryland, and [En Nuestra Lengua](#) in Ann Arbor, MI. They also include after-school programs, such as the [Prospera Hispanic Leaders Program](#) in Virginia and Seattle, WA. These are held as after-school and weekend programs. What seems to be missing (which [Chinese](#), [Korean](#), and [German](#) communities have) is a system of community-based programs or Saturday schools, with an overarching umbrella organization. Major factors, such as time and monetary constraints and concern about children's English language development, may play a role in why so few community-based programs exist (Potowski & Carreira, 2010). It is hoped that growing research about and interest in heritage language education and development will result in more such programs being offered to heritage Spanish speakers.

Conclusion

Despite research on and support for heritage language programs in the United States, programs for Spanish speakers are still limited. However, as more [Spanish heritage language programs](#) emerge and develop across the country, the future of these courses and programs looks promising.

References

- Baker, P. (1980). *Español para los hispanos: A guide to Spanish for native speakers*. Lincolnwood, IL. NTC Publishing Group.
- Beaudrie, S. M. (2011). Spanish heritage language programs: A snapshot of current programs in the southwestern United States. *Foreign Language Annals*, 44(2), 321-337.
- Beaudrie, S. M., & Fairclough, M. (2012). *Spanish as a heritage language in the United States: The state of the field*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Blanco, G. M. (1971). *Teaching Spanish as a standard dialect in grades 7-12: A rationale for a fundamental-skills approach*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. University of Texas at Austin.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2008). *The world fact book*. Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>
- Colombi, C., & Roca, A. (2003). Insights from research and practice in Spanish as a heritage language. In A. Roca & C. Colombi (Eds.), *Mi lengua: Spanish as a heritage language in the United States* (pp. 1-21). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Ingold, C., Rivers, C., Tesser, E., & Ashby, E. (2002). Report on the NFLC/AATSP survey of Spanish language programs for native speakers. *Hispania*, 85, 324-329.
- Lewelling, V., & Peyton, J.K. (1999). *Spanish for Spanish speakers: Developing dual language proficiency*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. <http://www.ericdigests.org/2000-2/spanish.htm>
- Lewis, M. P. (2009). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world, Sixteenth Edition*. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Retrieved from <http://www.ethnologue.com/>
- Montrul, S. (2004). Subject and object expression in Spanish heritage speakers: A case of morphosyntactic convergence. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 7(2), 125-42.

Pew Hispanic Center. (2007). *English usage among Hispanics in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=82#OtherTitle>

Potowski, K. & Carreira, M. (2010). Spanish in the USA. In K. Potowski (Ed.), *Language diversity in the United States* (pp. 66-80). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Rhodes, N., & Pufahl, I. (2009). *Foreign language teaching in U.S. schools: Results of a national survey*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *The Hispanic population: 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>.

Valdés, G. (2000). Introduction. In P. Dobbins & J. Krieger (Eds.), *AATSP professional development series handbook for teachers K-16: Volume I, Spanish for Native Speakers* (pp. 1-20). Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

.....

This Heritage Brief was prepared by Celia Chomón Zamora for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC, and was reviewed by external reviewers with knowledge about Spanish heritage language instruction in the United States.

The Heritage Briefs Collection is designed to provide information on topics of interest. The information presented does not necessarily represent the views of the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages or the Center for Applied Linguistics.



Visit us online at www.cal.org/heritage