



## Community-Based Program

### Background Information

**Institution:** Spanish for Young Heritage Speakers: Nuestra Lengua  
Department of Modern and Classical Languages, George Mason University

**Program address:** MSN 3E5 Fairfax, Virginia 22030

**Web address:** <http://mason.gmu.edu/~lrabin>

### Contact person

**Name:** Lisa Rabin

**Title:** Associate Professor of Spanish

**Email:** [lrabin@gmu.edu](mailto:lrabin@gmu.edu)

**Telephone:** (703) 200-5100

**Levels:** Pre K- grade 6

**Languages/dialects taught:** Spanish

### Program Description

**Purposes and goals of the program:** The program focuses on heritage learners of Spanish. We aim for children to enhance their literacy skills and oral fluency in Spanish as we encourage their pride in their heritage language and culture. We seek to build on intergenerational and community bonds, and a special part of our program is to create dialogue with family and community-based partners. We encourage Latino parents' participation in their children's education and in the use of their home language and culture. Moreover, parents are encouraged to use our program as a stepping stone to larger social advocacy, including in mainstream school units like the PTA and in organizations in the community like the Tenants and Workers' United organization.

**Type of program:** Heritage, content-based, exploratory, after-school program, extracurricular club.

**Program mission statement:** A solid body of research supports US Spanish speakers' maintenance of their home language. Beyond studies that show that young Spanish speakers benefit in their development of English literacy from instruction in Spanish,

sociologists have demonstrated the role that retention of intergenerational ties through language and culture has on immigrant children. A small movement of enrichment programs in the United States, like the “Saturday language school” model, has sought to counteract language loss that results from assimilation ideologies, but their survival depends on a large amount of social capital from the linguistic community. Latinos in the United States often lack material and social support to build these programs, especially in communities of recent immigrants like the Washington, DC metro area.

It is our intention that our program serve local communities in the concrete sense and also act as a model for other universities that seek to work with local communities to develop Spanish programs for Spanish speakers.

**Program origin:** Our program was funded on September 2005. Its genesis came in discussions between Professor Rabin and her colleagues in linguistics, Professors Jennifer Leeman and Esperanza Román–Mendoza, about the possibilities for Mason’s advocacy for heritage language preservation in our local communities. By the spring of 2005, several elementary schools in Arlington County were planning after-school programs for non-native Spanish speakers. The county even fully funded one program. But the value of enrichment programs for heritage learners of Spanish was unacknowledged in the local public discourse. Because heritage Spanish speakers make up 16% of the students in Arlington County, it was a good place to begin a heritage language preservation program. With the help of the school principal and an ESOL teacher, Professor Rabin initiated a book club for heritage learners of different grades that Mason students led at lunchtime every week for the fall semester of 2005. Enthusiasm for the book clubs among Mason students, children, and their parents led us to develop a free after school class in Spanish literacy for Arlington Traditional school (ATs) heritage Spanish speakers the following spring, which has continued to the present.

## **Parents**

**Parents’ expectations for the program:** Parents’ expectations focus on their children’s enjoyment of the class, their enhanced appreciation of their heritage language and culture, and their achievement of increased academic proficiency in Spanish.

## **Staff**

**Instructors’ and administration’s expectations for the program:** First, we aim for the program to increase the amount of the participants’ exposure to their heritage language and culture. Second, we wish to provide high quality, hands-on training in heritage language teaching and preservation to the advanced students of Spanish through their participation in the program. Finally, we expect for this program to facilitate parent involvement in their children’s education.

## **Students**

**Students:** First-generation immigrants: 100%

**Countries of origin:** Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Puerto Rico

**Total student enrollment:** 14 students

**How the program identifies heritage speakers:** Self-identification by students' parents

**How the program determines the language background and language proficiency of students:** Informal assessment by the head teacher

**Percentage of students who complete the program:** The children participating in our program are in elementary school.

**Percentage of students who continue to study the heritage language after completing the program:** 75% retention rate over the past two years

**Possible reasons for student withdrawal:** Distraction of other extracurricular activities, especially among the boys, combined with the low status of Spanish in the US K-12 system (and perhaps reified at the school, which places a large emphasis on English literacy). Two children withdrew because their parents wished for them to acquire more functional literacy in Spanish in a more traditional academic setting.

**Students' attitudes toward the language varieties they speak:** Students have a good attitude about the program in general. An informal questionnaire conducted recently found that boys in the class were less willing than girls to speak Spanish in public.

## **Instructors**

**Number of instructors in the program:** The class is currently taught by one principal teacher who is a student at George Mason University, and who receives a stipend funded by various units at the university. Every semester, between 3 and 5 advanced students of Spanish at Mason assist the head teacher in the classes and receive internship credit for their work.

**Languages in which instructors are proficient:** Spanish, Portuguese (the main teacher), and English

**Proficiency level:** This year's head teacher has near-native proficiency in Spanish. The assistants are usually half heritage speakers and half non-native speakers of Spanish.

**Professional development opportunities instructors have:** The head teacher receives informal training and support from the directors. The assistants receive ongoing support for their help through an online blog/wiki run by directors.

**Professional development opportunities instructors need:** We plan to offer intensive summer workshops in heritage language teaching in the community for our students in this program and for others in a few years.

## **Instruction**

**Total contact hours per week:** Two hours per week

**Times per week:** Twice weekly after school

**Student grouping:** Students participate in a large group and also in smaller groups divided by proficiency level or age level.

**Hours devoted to language teaching:** Language teaching occurs during the first 20 minutes of the class; 10 minutes is spent in group and individual games, inside and outside the classroom (weather permitting).

**Hours devoted to culture teaching:** 30 minutes is dedicated to exploration of language attitudes and learning about the cultures and peoples of Spanish-speaking countries, including the US.

## **Language skills**

**Heritage language skills developed by the program:**

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing
- Critical analysis of notions of culture (elite versus popular) and of language ideologies (attitudes towards Spanish in the US and towards language variation among Spanish speakers)

**Levels of language proficiency reached by the end of the program:** Students entering the program without reading or writing skills in Spanish generally finish the year having acquired these skills.

## **Culture**

**Aspects of culture taught:**

- Geography

- History
- Festivals
- Customs
- Traditions/Beliefs
- Folktales
- Arts and crafts
- Songs
- Rhymes
- Critical analysis of notions of culture and of language ideologies. A strong emphasis is placed on the children's acquaintance with indigenous cultures.

**Kind of student identity program fosters:** Positive self-identification with heritage language and cultures

## **Methodologies**

**Methodologies and instructional strategies used in the program:** Communicative instructional methodology; popular education methods

## **Materials**

**Materials used for instruction:**

- Primers from Spanish-speaking countries
- Read-aloud books and other media
- Children's games in Spanish

**Technology used for instruction:** E-mailing pen pals and relatives in different parts of the US is planned for this year's program. The head teacher, assistants and directors communicate with each other and share materials through a wiki.

## **Assessment**

**Assessments used to evaluate students' progress:** We evaluate our students through teacher observations, since this class is developed explicitly for identity building through the heritage language and cultures, and thus we do not focus on assessment.

## **Articulation**

**Connections with other institutions:** Our students continue their study at local middle schools. Some may choose to join the middle school immersion program at nearby Gunston in Arlington, Virginia.

**Credit or recognition students receive:** Our students do not receive credit or recognition from the formal educational system. Our goal is to increase their interest and pride in their heritage language and to provide them with the tools to continue using

it throughout their lives. In the long term, it may be appropriate to build connections with local middle schools so students can continue their study in a program with similar goals as this one.

**How the program develops home/school connections or promotes parent involvement:** Directors and teachers speak regularly with parents and invite their participation in class through guest lectures on home countries and cultures. Parent workshops on Spanish heritage language preservation are planned for this year.

**Opportunities for using the heritage language and developing cultural knowledge outside the program:** At home and in the community students have opportunities to develop their cultural knowledge learned at our school. We hope that our program will serve as a model for middle school and high school heritage language classes.

## **What the program has in place**

**Financial support the program receives:** We received foundation and department support. The first semester of the program, when we offered it as a book club in Spanish for the children, we received funding for the books from the Arlington Community Foundation and our department chair. We received a discount on the books from a local children's bookstore.

We receive funding from our department chair, the dean of the College of Human and Social Sciences, and the Provost at George Mason to pay the main teacher a stipend.

**Other support the program receives:** Financial support and publicity

**Solicitation of funding:** Professors Rabin and Román-Mendoza

**Assistance or funding the program would like to receive:** Because heritage language preservation in the US has historically been at risk and is a low priority for US institutions, it is often difficult to get funding for heritage programs. For this reason, we have developed a research program that situates Spanish heritage language preservation programs in the US as a basis for our creation of methodologies that ensure best practices for Spanish heritage language preservation at ATs and beyond.

**Continuing heritage language development:** Continuing development in the heritage language is planned for the future.

**Program research or evaluation:** Professors Leeman, Rabin, and Román-Mendoza are writing an article on the ATS program for *Modern Language Journal*.

## **Special challenges**

**Challenges the program has experienced:** Because there is a dearth of material, including textbooks, for K-6 heritage language teaching in the US, curricula needed to be developed.

In spite of correspondence to embassies of Spanish-speaking countries to request materials, not a single one has responded.

**Additional support the program would like to receive:** Embassy support for our programs, through publicity and material support, is needed.

**What are some insights that you would like to share with others who are interested in learning more about your program?** The success of this program is largely based on the close collaboration of all participants: school, parents, children, the community, university students, and professors. Adapting to new challenges and using creative ways to fund the program are also key elements of our program.