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[To the
Editor](#)

[Search](#)



[Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Article](#)



[Next Article](#)

[Works Cited](#)

Retrospectives, Advances, and Current Needs in the Teaching of Spanish to United States Hispanic Bilingual Students

Ana Roca

DESPITE the damaging repercussions of the current anti-immigrant climate and of persistent state legislative initiatives to make English the official language, I nevertheless have a deeper optimism today about advances made by the foreign language profession in teaching Spanish as a heritage language, more commonly known as Spanish for native speakers. That statement does not mean that I overlook either the sociopolitical atmosphere affecting instruction or the pedagogical problems that teachers and learners have faced and continue to face.

To illustrate some of these problems, let me tell you a little about Oscar, Stella, and David, three of twenty-some students in the Intermediate Spanish for Native Speakers class I taught recently. Oscar, a victim of the civil unrest that plagued his homeland, El Salvador, came to Miami after a long and arduous journey, experiencing much hardship as a political refugee. Even though he only completed seventh grade in Spanish, he continues to speak Spanish at home, and his oral fluency and writing abilities are noticeably more advanced than Stella's and David's.

Stella, originally from Argentina, vividly remembers leaving her homeland with her family at an early age during the so-called Dirty War. She has maintained a distinct Buenos Aires accent and speaks fluent Spanish, but because her schooling has taken place in the United States, she will need to improve her writing in Spanish through more experience and more exposure to a variety of reading

materials.

Born of Cuban American parents and raised in the United States, David understands everyday Spanish well, but unlike Oscar and Stella he often speaks haltingly and is sometimes at a loss for vocabulary. He has a difficult time keeping to Spanish; he switches back and forth between English and Spanish in informal conversation with his bilingual classmates and in his brief oral presentations. He is the only one of the three who has two home languages, Spanish and English, instead of Spanish alone. He can read and understand the intermediate-level readings, but his experience writing in Spanish, like his experience speaking, has been fairly limited to informal use of the language at home and with bilingual friends. This Spanish for native speakers course was the first he had ever taken.

Oscar, Stella, and David are only three of thousands of Spanish-speaking United States Hispanics who enroll in college-level Spanish language courses designated for native speakers, but they are indicative of the tremendous variation in these students' linguistic Spanish proficiency levels, as well as in students' cultural backgrounds.

Logically, we find more students of Mexican background in the West and the Southwest (in states like California—which has the largest number of Hispanics in its school population—Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico). Likewise, we have a greater percentage of Puerto Rican students in New York and Massachusetts and Cuban students in Florida. However, the student population cannot be so simply divided or described. We also have Hispanic students whose ancestors spoke Spanish here years before English was ever spoken in what is now the United States. We also have more recent arrivals, thousands of Central American immigrants—like Oscar and his family—who became displaced and uprooted and fled their homelands to avoid civil war, poverty, hunger, political or ethnic persecution, and even death. Of course, not all recently arrived Hispanics are political refugees or economic immigrants. There is also an increasing number of Latin Americans who maintain homes in both the United States and Latin America or who come to the United States part of the year, conduct business here, and often send their children to school and college here. At the same time, in Miami, for example, ties with Spain appear to get closer every year; the number of airlines with flights between Miami and Spain is growing, as is the number of public cultural, educational, and social activities related to Ibero-Spanish culture. While most of the students we seek to serve in Spanish for native speakers courses have Spanish surnames, they are by no means a homogeneous group.

I would like to outline briefly some of the pedagogical progress in Spanish for native speakers, address issues of instruction and teacher training, and propose research-and-practice orientations. As we review the development of college-level Spanish for native speakers instruction, we observe that research related to the field has increased (Valdés and Teschner, *Español, Spanish*; Valdés, Lozano, and García-Moya; Valdés, *Con Respeto*; Sánchez, “Spanish”; Teschner, “Second-Language Acquisition”; Aparicio, “Diversification,” “La enseñanza,” “Teaching”; Roca, “El español,” “Teaching”; Roca and Lipski; Lipski, “En busca,” “Patterns”; Hidalgo, “Question,” “Teaching”; Merino, Trueba, and Samaniego; Colombi and Alarcón) as has scholarship on practice (Barker; Mejías and Garza-Swan; Burunat and Starcevic Marqués; Samaniego, Alarcón, and Rojas). There is also a slowly growing number of textbooks at various levels of instruction.

The importance of teaching Spanish to native speakers began to gain currency in the early 1970s. Back then, the academic community's verbal sparring was not just over the role of Black English in the English-language classroom. In Spanish, education, and linguistic circles there was a similar uproar as teachers, linguists, activist students, politicians, and others pondered how the Hispanic students could best be served in the Spanish class. A politically charged word—*dialect*—was being bandied about, not in a sociolinguistic sense but in a pejorative fashion, causing Joshua Fishman to suggest in 1972 that we use *language variety* in its place. It was a time of a growing popular awareness of the power and importance of language among the various minority groups in the United States.

In 1972 the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) adopted a firm political stance when it recommended to the Spanish teaching profession that

whenever in the United States there are pupils or students for whom Spanish is the native tongue, at whatever level from kindergarten to the baccalaureate, there be established in the schools and colleges special sections for developing literacy in Spanish and using it to reinforce or complement other areas of the curriculum, with correspondingly specialized materials, methods, and teachers.

Now, over two decades later, we have witnessed the Hispanic population grow tremendously in the 1980s and 1990s, becoming the fastest-growing ethnic minority group in the United States and the largest linguistic minority.

The effects of such growth have become more evident on our campuses today. Not only are there a greater number of colleges regularly offering courses for bilinguals, but there are also an ever-growing number of universities that have been developing courses for native speakers. Particularly at large universities that already have Spanish for native speakers courses in their curricula, sections often fill to capacity with bilingual students who, for professional or personal reasons, enroll to improve their language skills and learn more about their linguistic, literary, and cultural heritage.

The Spanish language teaching profession has made significant progress in research, practice, and professional awareness. “Now, many years later,” as Guadalupe Valdés points out in a 1989 article, “most members of our profession are aware of the fact that special approaches are needed for teaching Spanish to Hispanic bilinguals” (“Teaching Spanish” 392). However, although that awareness is a positive factor and a step in the right direction, it has never been enough. As we get closer to the new century, the profession has begun to move beyond awareness and toward a proactive stance on fulfilling the needs of native speakers struggling to become fully bilingual and biliterate.

A National Foreign Language Center report suggests that what hinders us from creating a more foreign language—proficient America “is not poor classroom instruction, but inefficiency in the organization of foreign language instruction....The problems we have identified arise not so much in individual classrooms, but in the way the parts fit together” (Lambert 3). The report, of course, refers to foreign language instruction and pedagogy, not specifically to instruction for bilinguals. But the comment could just as easily apply to Spanish instruction for these students. That there is evidence of

progress there is no doubt, but it seems that for us the “parts” also do not quite “fit together” properly yet; they lack perhaps an empirical basis as well as a professional agreement and cohesion concerning instructional objectives, theory, and approaches. Back in 1981 Valdés commented on problems that were as apparent then as they are today: “Teaching attitudes concerning the new programs, their basic purpose, the nature of the instructional process, and the ordering of principal objectives are currently in a state of flux” (Valdés, Lozano, and García-Moya 4).

In a 1995 article Valdés raises pedagogical questions about the practice of teaching minority languages as academic subjects in multilingual settings. Having followed closely the trends and developments in Spanish for native speakers, she points out that often members of the Spanish teaching faculty are not “quite sure what to do with the ‘bilingual’ track now that they have it. The range and background of students who have been grouped together as ‘native speakers’ is quite broad. Some students in the ‘bilingual track’ understand, speak, read, and write in Spanish, while others understand the language well but have limited productive skills” (“Teaching of Minority Languages” 299–300). The new national standards in foreign language education, prepared with input from the foreign language teaching community, indicate that heritage learners have finally been recognized.¹

Whether we refer to the teaching of Spanish to native speakers in the schools (K-12) or at the college level, one problem definitely has to do with the diversity of the cultural background and linguistic proficiency of the students. Other problems persist in teacher training, curriculum development, assessment, administrative support for Spanish for native speakers (SNS) programs, and appropriate coordination and integration of the native speakers' track into the foreign language track. As Valdés also notes, “the same question of how to teach bilingual native speakers of a language and how to incorporate them into language departments is also very much present” (“Teaching of Minority Languages” 300). The truth of the matter is that even today—as important as we consider second language acquisition and pedagogical concerns—most K-12 Spanish teachers and college professors have traditionally received little or no graduate training in teaching Spanish as a second or foreign language. Even fewer have received training in teaching Spanish to United States Hispanic bilingual students at any level of instruction.

Since the 1970s, there have been many discoveries in second language acquisition and teaching. Our profession has invented and experimented with a number of methodologies—some of which have come and gone while others have remained. We have refined these newer ways of thinking about learning and teaching as our knowledge of language acquisition and formal instruction has expanded, providing us with a better idea of what is more likely to work well in our classrooms. If we look back at the literature on second language acquisition and language teaching, we find that these intertwined disciplines have traditionally offered mostly anecdotal and descriptive insights. Only in the last twenty years has the second language teaching field begun attempts to establish a more solid scientific foundation by empirically studying the claims of practitioners and theoreticians in second language acquisition and related areas.

Today we have shifted from a rule of grammar-based pedagogy to a communicative orientation in which the role and the needs of the learners become central. We concern ourselves with optimal conditions and crucial factors in language learning, such as the importance of the language

environment and the role of the learners them-selves in the language learning process. As teachers we are aware of the need to use and interpret authentic materials in our teaching; to better understand individual learning strategies and learning styles; to reexamine Stephen Krashen's input-versus-intake constructs, the learning-versus-acquisition hypothesis, and much more (*Fundamentals; Principles*). Yet while this research renaissance appears to be well under way in second language acquisition theory and second language teaching (particularly in English as a second language and slightly less commonly in Spanish as a foreign language), we have much to do in the area of heritage language education in the United States. In the case of Spanish, the language spoken by the fastest-growing minority, we must also note its deep historical roots. After all, it was the first European language spoken in the United States and is a major world language used by approximately 360 million speakers. Nonetheless, some people in the United States have traditionally associated Spanish with negatives: marginality, poverty, illiteracy, economic immigration, and so on. The negative views today, however, need to contend with the changing face of America as positive images of Hispanics increase, the population of Hispanics grows, and the minority group perseveres in maintaining its Spanish language and cultural roots. ²

Historically, Spanish has been taught as a foreign language in the United States, and insufficient attention has been placed on developing and coordinating well-designed and well-articulated programs that can meet the educational needs of the varied Hispanic bilingual college-student population. Although we have seen a significant increase in scholarship and textbooks on the subject, college-level instruction for Hispanic bilingual students as well as instructors has many challenges to confront in years to come.

Here are some questions I feel the profession needs to consider: (1) What sort of progress have we made? For example, how far have we come as a profession in shaping coherent theoretical paradigms on which to base the special teaching approaches that we have continuously called for and occasionally demanded? (2) In the last twenty-some years, how much have we influenced professional organizations such as the MLA, the AATSP, and ACTFL on Spanish for native speakers instruction and other heritage language instruction?

Though the AATSP acted admirably in the early 1970s by publicizing the need for SNS instruction, that report was not followed up formally for over twenty years. However, the AATSP has taken a much more proactive role in recent years. On 7–8 July 1995 the AATSP, together with ACTFL, the embassy of Spain, and other professional groups, held a forum, cosponsored by the National Foreign Language Center, in Washington, DC. The meeting's purpose was to bring together directors of principal professional language associations and representative specialists in the field to discuss issues and problems and formulate recommendations about teaching Spanish as a heritage language in the United States. The think tank represented progress, but the efforts started there need to continue.

What about the MLA? In the past the association had not paid much attention to SNS instruction. *PMLA* continues to be primarily a journal about literature for literature professors at the university level. During the 1989 Linguistic Society of America Linguistic Institute, held at the University of Arizona along with the MLA Professional Development Workshop, no formal instruction or training on SNS instruction was planned, even though there were in attendance several professor-students,

MLA fellows, who were quite anxious about having to teach Spanish to bilinguals for the first time that year; they were unfamiliar with that kind of teaching and untrained to do it.

Today the MLA is not only paying more attention to SNS instruction but also seriously looking at issues related to heritage language instruction in general. At the 1996 ADFL Summer Seminars, held at the University of San Diego and at Ohio State University, special sessions on the heritage learner included presentations given to department chairs from all over the country on teaching Spanish to native speakers. A special ADFL session at the December 1996 MLA convention honored Valdés, the most active scholar in the field; she also received a most-deserved professional achievement award at the convention. This recognition is evidence of the ADFL's and the MLA's acceptance of a proactive role regarding heritage languages and it also represents great progress.

New incisive contributions in the area have been published. In 1981 Valdés, Anthony Lozano, and Rodolfo García-Moya gave the profession one of the first coedited collections of research on the subject, *Teaching Spanish to the Hispanic Bilingual: Issues, Aims, and Methods*. Two recent collections that contribute to the field must be noted. The first, *Language and Culture in Learning: Teaching Spanish to Native Speakers of Spanish*, edited by Barbara J. Merino, Henry Trueba, and Fabian Samaniego, appeared in 1993. The second, *La enseñanza del español a hispanohablantes: Praxis y teoría* (1997), edited by Cecilia Colombi and Francisco Alarcón, includes papers based on presentations at a national conference on teaching Spanish to native speakers, organized at the University of California, Davis, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is clear that publishers are now more open to such works, once thought not to have a significant enough market. Journal articles and conference papers on the topic now appear more consistently, and Valdés's voice continues to be heard on this subject and related fields in bilingualism. Clearly, those of us who are involved in research and practice in this area have been working persistently to make organizations like the MLA, the AATSP, and ACTFL address not only the pedagogical issues of teaching Spanish to bilingual speakers but also institutional and policy issues, as well as societal and attitudinal problems.

The ACTFL Spanish for Native Speakers Special Interest Group, originally organized by Lucía Caycedo Garner and me, with support from ACTFL and interested colleagues, is in its third year, and its membership is growing. The AATSP now also has a special committee in this area; additionally, as an offshoot of the ACTFL group and thanks to David Cruz and Cornell University's computer server, we enjoy public access to an electronic discussion list on Spanish for native speakers instruction, in which we can list announcements, exchange ideas, and communicate with one another about professional issues.

What other questions might we as part of the profession wish to consider? What are our needs? We lack basic information and surveys. We need to ask how much progress we have really achieved or not achieved in assessing the bilingual student's language proficiency for placement purposes. How can we possibly create a placement test or tests for hundreds of incoming freshmen—native and normative speakers of Spanish—who arrive with a wide range of proficiency levels? Do we know how major universities are dealing with this situation? Since Richard Teschner's article on the topic years ago, I have not seen any publications specifically discussing solutions to placement concerns. Cecilia Pino and I are conducting a survey with support from the AATSP, but the number of responses has been smaller than expected.

We need to address placement and curricular problems, such as the relation of the curriculum to placement in our colleges and universities. What's the point of placement testing if there are no courses developed to place students in? That is, if there is no native-speaker curriculum to speak of, where do we place the Hispanic bilingual students of such wide-ranging linguistic levels? How do we work with classes containing students of different levels in colleges that cannot afford a separate track? Where there is a curriculum for the bilingual student, how has the larger curriculum been adapted to guarantee the smoothest articulation of levels and the eventual coming together of Hispanic bilinguals and students of Spanish as a foreign language who have continued their study? In other words, what are faculty members and institutions doing to better serve what the profession now calls heritage learners of Spanish?

We need to take into account the possibility of negative attitudes or lack of understanding among some administrators and faculty members. Given the general gap in teaching experience and pedagogical training in this area, how well do colleagues and administrators receive this kind of curriculum within a Spanish program and what are the prevalent attitudes toward the use of nonstandard forms of Spanish by bilingual students? What are our own attitudes and expectations toward such instruction and toward students' particular language varieties and abilities? How do the Hispanic community and the political climate in Florida, in New York, and in California, for example, differ and affect the teaching of Spanish to native speakers at the college level? Are students taking SNS courses as part of a "foreign" language requirement, or are they taking the courses as electives? What motivates them? What are the academic expectations of students and instructors in such courses? And are the expectations too high or too low? Are they realistic, given the constraints of such instruction as it exists today?

The lack of a variety in instructional materials has been a topic of concern in the past. We continuously asked how well the handful of available textbooks served a Hispanic bilingual population of such various linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, and others). The materials we have today—although they offer us a much wider selection than we had in the 1970s—do not offer a truly wide choice. Still, there has been progress: there are a number of college-level texts, including several new ones, and others are in preparation. Publishers that once did not want to risk publishing textbooks for this smaller market are committing staff and financial resources to SNS instruction and coming out with fresh materials.

We must, though, continue addressing persistent concerns along with newer ones, now also in the light of major findings in first and second language acquisition research. Much of the research in language learning and teaching of the last thirty-some years has been, to a great extent, anecdotal and descriptive—such as my presentation here. Historically, with some exceptions, this has also been true of the research on Spanish for bilingual students. However, I believe there is now a point of departure in the research. As I mention above, as a profession we have invented, experimented with, and written about methodologies for second-language teaching. We now need to make more of a special effort to do the same in Spanish for bilingual students, taking into consideration what we are learning about language acquisition and bilingualism. In the academic world in general and not just in foreign languages, we often search for answers to educational problems and attempt to carry out professional goals through committees, workshops, conferences, dissertations, task forces, commissions, and

professional organizations. In 1983 Valters Nollendorfs wryly made that point:

When everything else fails—try a task force or two. That seems to have been the solution of various organizations and agencies concerned with foreign language studies in the United States in the last few years.

(1)

As a result of these numerous efforts, many valuable recommendations have indeed been formulated, published, and disseminated (e.g., remember the MLA Commission on the Future of the Profession and the President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies). The difficulties the profession continues to encounter, however, are partly rooted in the general lack of coordination and integration of research and language planning (and I would apply this comment to SNS instruction as well):

The leading professional organizations in the field, including the Modern Language Association, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the constituent members of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, and the Center for Applied Linguistics, should inaugurate a continuing and regular dialogue for the purpose of creating mechanisms for achieving functional unity within the foreign language teaching profession.

(Nollendorfs 5)

The good news is that communication has improved quite a bit since the early 1980s. Teaching Spanish to Hispanic bilingual college students calls for a greater emphasis on planning, coordination, and integration of what in essence has developed into an interdisciplinary research area—the field overlaps first and second language acquisition paradigms, bilingualism, approaches to teaching, and psychosociolinguistic issues—as well as teacher training and the formulation and development of policies concerning bilingual students.

My experience as a teacher and as a former coordinator of a Spanish language program (a position I held for over ten years) has led me to believe that the following areas most need the focus of our attention in research and practice:

1. Practical problems encountered in Spanish language placement testing of Hispanic bilingual students.
2. The improvement and development of pedagogically sound textbooks and new-technology materials designed to meet the Hispanic bilingual student's linguistic needs. These resources should be on a par with the excellent materials available for teaching Spanish as a foreign language in the United States.
3. Reexamination and applicable incorporation and integration of current first and second language acquisition paradigms and teaching strategies that reflect the best practice of both. What will work best for bilingual students? What reading topics interest them most and will get them excited about developing their use of Spanish and their knowledge of their heritage?

4. Curricular changes in graduate programs in Spanish that would require future college instructors to take, at a minimum, an applied linguistics course in which they would review theory, practice, and issues in teaching Spanish to normative speakers as well as to native speakers in the United States. This preparation would better equip future instructors to deal with the reality facing many new professors who will likely encounter SNS instruction needs.
5. Continuing improvement in effective means of communication, dissemination of research, teacher training, and professional collaboration at local, regional, and national levels through:
 - Local schools, community colleges, and universities as well as through a model similar to that of academic alliances, popularized in the 1980s. There is a need for articulation among instructional levels (from elementary school to high school and from high school to college).
 - The development of a newsletter or journal dedicated to the teaching of Spanish to the Hispanic bilingual student in the United States (K-16). If this is not possible, an alternative might be a special regular section of a journal like *Hispania* dedicated to this topic. We might encourage use of the SNS electronic discussion list.
 - Charging an ad hoc group, organization, or interest group (through the MLA, the AATSP, ACTFL, or the National Foreign Language Center) with serving as a base to help publicize the importance of Spanish language literacy skills and educate members of the profession as well as those outside of it about the issue.
 - Following up on the work started at the July 1995 meeting on Spanish for native speakers. The meeting involved major foreign language, bilingual education, and applied linguistics professional organizations that must remain active in this area.

And finally, we must touch on the thorny question of language variety. What linguistic reasons can we, as teachers, come up with to defend the teaching of one language variety over another? Scholars such as François Grosjean, Valdés (“A Comprehensive Approach”; “Pedagogical Implications”), and Fishman have long indicated that the varieties of language developed by bilinguals have their own norms. Grosjean tells us, in fact, that “with time, a bilingual community will develop several varieties of language, each with its own domains of use and norms of correctness” (330). Therefore, we cannot defend the teaching of the standard variety on linguistic grounds. As Fishman points out, “Basically, there is no way to distinguish between a dialect and a language on the basis of objective linguistic discriminanda alone, whether phonological, lexical, or morpho-syntactic. There is no linguistic ‘tattletale gray’ that gives the dialect away” (13).

Why, then, would we choose to teach the standard? We teach it simply because it is the most socially acceptable form of the language, the variety commonly associated with a higher degree of formal schooling and of literacy. Therefore, we should continue to use a bidialectical approach in future textbooks for bilinguals. Most of these books already claim such an approach, but many improvements can be made in materials as well as in teacher training.

The author is Associate Professor of Spanish and Linguistics at Florida International University. This article is based on her presentation at a session honoring Guadalupe Valdés at the 1996 MLA

convention in Washington, DC.

Appendix: Selected College-Level Textbooks for Teaching Spanish to Native Speakers

Alonso-Lyrintzis, Deana, Brandon Zaslow, and Hidelbrando Villareal. *Entre mundos* . Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1996.

Blanco, George, Victoria Contreras, and Judith Márquez. *¡Ahora si!* Boston: Heinle, 1995.

Burunat, Silvia, and Elizabeth Starcevic. *El español y su estructura: Lectura y escritura para bilingües* . New York: Holt, 1983.

De la Portilla, Marta, and Beatriz Varela. *Mejora su español. Lectura y redacción para bilingües* . New York: Regents, 1979.

Lequerica de la Vega, Sara, and Carmen Salazar Parr. *Avanzando. Gramática española y lectura. Cuaderno B*. 3rd ed. New York: Wiley, 1994.

Marqués, Sarah. *La lengua que heredamos: Curso de español para bilingües* . 3rd ed. New York: Wiley, 1996.

Mejías, Hugo A., and Gloria Garza-Swan. *Nuestro español: Curso para estudiantes bilingües* . New York: Macmillan, 1981.

Miguélez, Armando, and Maria Sandoval. *Jauja. Método integral de español para bilingües* . Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1987.

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Samaniego, Fabian A., Francisco X. Alarcón, and N. Rojas. *Mundo 21* . Lexington: Heath, 1995.

Valdés, Guadalupe, and Richard V. Teschner. *Español escrito. Curso para hispanohablantes bilingües* . 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1993.

Notes

¹ Vaté, a member of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Division of Language, Literacy, and Culture within the School of Education at Stanford University, was a key participant in the board of reviewers that helped develop, seek opinions on, and fine-tune the national standards in foreign language education. Given the historical significance and growth of the heritage-learner population in our schools and colleges, the establishment of generic guidelines drafted with the culture and language of linguistic minorities in mind is a major step in perceiving linguistic diversity as a resource to be cherished and developed rather than as a problem.

² A great change is evident in Dade County, Florida. After the great Mariel wave of refugees in 1980, when Fidel Castro allowed approximately 125,000 people to leave the island, the Dade County Commission, an all-white, non-Hispanic group, passed a county ordinance prohibiting the government from conducting business in any language other than English or “promoting any culture other than that of the United States” (qtd. in Castro, Haun, and Roca 151), although a great number of the county residents speak a language other than English. The county later elected a commission that better reflected the members of the community, and the English-only ordinance was repealed. Despite the great number of speakers of Spanish and other minority languages in Dade (particularly in Miami, where there is also a significant French-speaking Haitian American population), Florida's constitution has an English-only article, passed in the late 1980s, that remains in effect as of this writing.

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ADFL Bulletin 29, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 37-43



[Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Article](#)



[Next Article](#)



[Works Cited](#)
