

# Teacher Beliefs and Practices in Advanced Spanish Classrooms

Manel Lacorte, University of Maryland; Evelyn Canabal, Madeira School

## Abstract

The growing presence of Latino students in U.S. colleges and universities is evident in foreign language (FL) classrooms. Latino students with a high proficiency level in Spanish are usually placed in advanced language or content-based courses along with other non-Latino students. This paper examines university instructors' beliefs and practices concerning interaction in advanced Spanish courses with heritage and non-heritage students. The participants were 15 instructors of diverse academic and professional backgrounds teaching advanced Spanish courses at a large research-oriented public university. Following a process of selection, verification, and generalization of linguistic metaphors used to talk about the topic, this qualitative study analyzes data collected through a questionnaire, interviews, and non-participant observations. The discussion addresses the instructors' beliefs and perceptions with regard to: (1) the classroom environment; (2) their role as teachers of advanced-level courses; (3) the students enrolled in these courses; and (4) the contrast between what teachers consider to be the desired interaction in an advanced language classroom, and what actually happens.

## Introduction

Along with the remarkable growth of the U.S. Hispanic minority in the last 20 years (Pew Hispanic Center 2002), the increasing presence of Latinos in colleges and universities may also be related to the development of a sizeable Hispanic middle class with more resources and interest in providing its youth with some form of higher education. Once they set foot in college, many Latino students are quite aware of the importance of becoming fluent in another language. Besides fulfilling any possible language requirement for their field of studies (Teschner 1983), Latino university students may decide to take Spanish to (a) strengthen their relationship with members of their family with a limited competency in English (Mazzocco 1996), (b) reinforce the development of their own identity as members of a group with distinct cultural characteristics (Benjamin 1997), or (c) take advantage of the demand for graduates with professional-level skills in a FL (Brecht and Ingold 1998).

As they begin to look for the appropriate Spanish class, Latino students may need to go through some kind of placement test or interview, especially if they have a low level of proficiency in Spanish. A growing number of universities may offer the opportunity for

Latino students to take courses within a program for foreign language (FL) students, heritage learners (HL), bilingual students, Spanish Native Speakers (SNS), etc. However, students with a higher level of proficiency – or at institutions without these types of programs – are usually placed in language or content-based courses along with other non-Latino students<sup>1</sup>. At mid- or large- size universities, lower-level FL courses with emphasis on basic language skills are most often taught by teaching assistants (TAs), lecturers or adjuncts. Advanced undergraduate FL courses on grammar, business, translation, literature, culture, etc. are taught by both TAs and tenure-track or tenured faculty. Also, advanced courses tend to fall under the responsibility of the instructor who has designed, or has been asked to teach the course, in contrast to the multi-sectioned lower-level classes, where TAs and other instructors generally work under the supervision of a course supervisor or a language program coordinator (Gutiérrez 1990).

Several recent large-scale research projects have done the groundwork for training programs specifically intended to prepare FL instructors to work more effectively with Latino students (Potowski and Carreira 2004). Some of the suggestions resulting from these projects concern instructional practices, student attitudes toward FL learning, teacher knowledge and beliefs, and assessment and standards for Latino students. The usual audience for these recommendations tends to consist of teachers in elementary and secondary education, for whom pre- or in-service teacher training has progressively become part of their professional career. On the other hand, it remains to be seen the extent to which university instructors of advanced Spanish courses may be aware of the above areas, considering that overall they are not habitually under the supervision of a program coordinator, nor are they requested – or paid – to attend pedagogic workshops or seminars. This paper examines university instructors' beliefs and practices regarding interaction in advanced Spanish courses with heritage and non-heritage students. Our main argument is that a greater understanding of these issues could promote awareness of professional practice and of self-image among FL instructors in advanced courses with heritage and non-heritage learners, a more constructive classroom environment in which all participants could be more conscious about each others' individual and cultural qualities, and could have more confidence to engage in learning activities which have taken into account such characteristics.

## **Literature Review**

Teacher beliefs constitute one of the dimensions of teacher cognition, an inclusive concept for the complexity of teachers' mental lives (Borg 2003a) which has become a well-established area of analysis in second language (L2) teaching and learning. In particular, teacher cognition refers to the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching what teachers know, believe, and think (Borg 2003a: 81). Knowledge about teaching may be influenced by personal experience (personal, educational, and social background); experience with schooling and instruction; and experience with formal and pedagogic knowledge (Connelly et al. 1997). Teachers' beliefs result from the relationship between (a) the values, goals, and assumptions that teachers have about the content and development of teaching, and (b) the understanding of the social, cultural, and institutional context where teaching takes place. (Richards 1998). Finally, teacher thinking involves the guiding principles or assumptions that teachers articulate in relation to their classroom work (Breen et al. 2001).

Keeping in mind the extent to which the above areas within cognition are intertwined (Verloop et al. 2001), research on teachers' beliefs and practices has examined a number of issues, among them the nature of grammar teaching as teachers perceive it (Borg 2003b); thinking and actions of experienced teachers (Breen et al. 2001); different perceptions about communicative language teaching (Salomone 1998); influence of the social, psychological and environmental realities of the school and the classroom (Breen 2002); and the degree to which constructs such as the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996) may affect the beliefs and practices of FL teachers (Allen 2002). The analysis of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices has also received a fair level of attention in HL teaching and learning (see e.g. Clair and Adger 1999; Gutiérrez 1997; Leeman 2005; Roca 1997; Romero 2000; Scalera 1997; Sylvan 2000; Villa 2004). However, a remarkably fewer number of studies have incorporated into their discussions the results of research carried out in actual classrooms. Romero (2000) reports on the strategies developed by three FL teachers for courses with HL learners, with data coming from direct classroom observation, interviews with the teachers, and a group interview with selected students. The results underlined the relevance of the initial pedagogic and managerial goals set by teachers which would differ to some degree from those in the prescribed curriculum due to their interest in accommodating the needs of the HL learners, the ways in which language was used in class with a reference to the value given to dialectal varieties, and the interactional strategies to develop rapport with students inside and outside the classroom. In a follow-up to the same study, Sylvan (2000) lists several strategies shared by, in her words, teachers of HL learners: respect for students prior knowledge, consideration toward individual and cultural differences, effort to encourage and maintain students' locus of control over their own learning and language use, perception of the classroom as a safe and comfortable environment, respect for the cultural knowledge students have, and reflective thinking on their own teaching. Potowski (2002) also used qualitative research methods to elicit HL students and FL instructors' experiences with regard to their selection and participation in courses of Spanish as a FL at a large public university in the Midwest -- around 28,000 students. Here, the triangulation of collection techniques consisted of interviews with 25 bilingual students and 10 TAs, as well as a student focus group and questionnaire. Three major themes emerged from this group: (a) "I learned Ghetto Spanish" -- learners tend to consider their Spanish as bad due to their lack of formal schooling and literacy training in the language, or the educational level and socioeconomic status of their families. (b) "They Know All These Rules" -- HL learners compare themselves to their FL peers positively in oral fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension, but negatively in grammar knowledge. (c) "Just Because They Were TAs, I Thought Their Spanish Was Better than Mine" --TAs assume a role as language authority, but students may not unanimously accept such role, especially if the instructor was not Hispanic. From the TA interviews, the researcher draws attention to their reactions to heritage students' language. In particular, the TAs seemed more inclined to "say more about heritage Spanish speakers' linguistic weaknesses than about their strengths or how to meet their needs" (40). Moreover, Valdés et al. (2003) examine the acquisition and transmission of "linguistic culture" (Schiffman 1996) in five Spanish departments in U.S. universities. Through the analysis of long-term participant observation data and focused interviews, the authors point that FL departments in U.S. colleges and universities often work in line with long-established American ideologies about bilingualism and monolingualism, despite their initial involvement in "nonhegemonic practices," i.e., the teaching of non-English languages. With a similar qualitative approach, this study focuses on the instructors'

beliefs and practices concerning interaction in advanced Spanish classrooms with both HL and non-HL students. To this end, data from several sources were collected from a group of faculty members from the same university unit but with different academic ranks, and analyzed through a gradual process of selection, verification, and generalization of linguistic metaphors used to talk about the topic (Cameron and Low 1999).

## Method

This study implemented several levels of triangulation – different approaches to the same subject matter according to a longitudinal design, individual and collective level of analysis, and more than one researcher involved in the collection and analysis of data (Cohen et al. 2000). These procedures were meant to account for the intrinsic complexity of contextualized experience, and the essential tone of what the teachers wrote, said, and did. Specifically, the data came from a group of 15 instructors through a questionnaire (during the first days of the academic semester), an interview (halfway the semester), and one non-participant observation (approximately two weeks after the interviews). Rather than directing the participants' attention towards explicit distinctions between HL and non-HL students, or to pre-determined views of interaction in the advanced classroom, this study intended to assure the instructors' gradual exposure to some sensitive issues affecting different levels of classroom interaction with advanced students from diverse academic, social, and cultural backgrounds. To this end, the first two parts of the questionnaire ([Appendix A](#)) gathered information on the academic and professional experience of the participants. Next, the third part consisted of four open-ended prompts (adapted from Marchant 1992 and Zapata 2003): (1) "A typical advanced Spanish classroom is like/is ...". (2) "In an advanced Spanish classroom, an instructor is like/is ...". (3) "In an advanced Spanish classroom, a student is like/is ...". (4) "Successful interaction in the Spanish advanced classroom is like/is ...". After an opening phase with a few questions about the teachers' personal and professional experiences, the interviews observed a "semi-structured" design (Bauman and Sherzer 1974) in which a researcher asks open-questions about themes related to the initial purpose of the investigation. The participants' responses to these questions were oral, and dealt mainly with the following areas of interest:

- Considerations about course, unit and lesson planning for advanced-level classes, that is, courses beyond the initial development of language skills with emphasis on literature, culture, business, among other content areas.
- Perceptions about social interaction and environment in the advanced Spanish classroom.
- Views about the variety of proficiency levels and language varieties within the classroom.

Some sample questions within these areas were: "How do you manage the different levels of linguistic competence in your advanced classroom?" (native and non-native speakers, FL and non-FL students, intermediate and advanced learners, etc.), "How could these diverse levels affect the interaction between you and the students and the interaction between the students?", and "How do you and/or your students approach the issue of language varieties in the classroom?". Each researcher was responsible for interviewing and observing a group of participants. The observations consisted of extensive field notes during lessons taught by the instructors. As in the interviews, the

field notes followed a rather broad orientation toward two main items: (a) teachers' behavior during the instruction, and (b) teachers' personal and social interaction with the group and individual students in the classroom. Notes could address issues such as use of English/Spanish during the instruction and/or with certain individuals, physical position in the classroom, references about language varieties, individual and group participation, unexpected occurrences, etc. In general, our intention was to avoid pre-determined categories and to focus on what might possibly be interesting or important to the people we were observing, and to future readers (Emerson et al. 1995).

### **Institutional and Instructional Context**

Data for this study came from 15 instructors teaching advanced Spanish courses in the same department at a large research-oriented public university, in a metropolitan area in the Mid-Atlantic region. University records indicate that in 2004, 5.5% of the undergraduate student body was identified as Hispanic/Latino. However, this figure combines international students from Latin America and Spain, and "domestic" Latino students who are U.S. born and raised. Even though the university has not made public more data about their cultural and social background, it would be safe to mention that the majority of the Latino students come from surrounding communities of mostly Central American origin. In Fall 2004, the department had a total of 183 students with an undergraduate major in Spanish, 56 of them Hispanic –30%. The Department's undergraduate program enables students to pursue studies leading to a B.A. degree or minors in several tracks: Language and literature, Cultural Studies, Business, Translation, and Linguistics/Education. Three specific courses taught by the same full-time instructor are offered only for heritage and native speakers of Spanish: Spanish I and Spanish II for Native Speakers – a review of oral and written Spanish – and Oral Communication Skills for Native Speakers of Spanish – an introduction to rhetorical devices and practice in formal public speaking in Spanish.

Table 1 provides more information about the professional background of the instructors, including a reference to their previous experience teaching advanced courses, and the course they were teaching during the investigation:

**Table 1: Academic and Professional Background of Participants**

	<b>Pedagogic Training</b>	<b>Professional Status</b>	<b>Academic Experience</b>	<b>Experience with Advanced Spanish Courses</b>	<b>Course Taught during Research Project</b>
1	None	Associate Professor	15 years	Literature and civilization courses at School Z, several U.S. universities and other countries	Latin American literature
2	Methods course and workshops for TAs	Graduate Student (PhD)	3 years	Grammar, conversation and translation at School Z	Translation

3	None	Full Professor	35 years	Literature and civilization courses at School Z, several U.S. universities and other countries	Latin American literature
4	Methods course and workshops for TAs	Graduate Student (PhD)	10 years (3 in U.S.)	Language, literature and civilization courses at School Z and in Argentina	Advanced grammar and composition
5	Methods course and workshops for TAs	Graduate Student (PhD)	12 years (3 in U.S.)	Language, literature and civilization courses at School Z and in Argentina	Advanced grammar and composition
6	Methods course and workshops for TAs	Graduate Student (PhD)	6 years (3 in U.S.)	Advanced writing and linguistics in Ecuador; language and translation at School Z	Advanced grammar and composition
7	Methods course and workshops for TAs ESL workshops	Graduate Student (PhD)	6 years	English as a L2 in Uruguay; translation, grammar, conversation, and literature at School Z	Advanced grammar and composition
8	Methods course and workshops for TAs	Graduate Student (MA)	4 years	One course of advanced grammar	Advanced grammar and composition
9	Methods course and courses in general education	Adjunct Instructor	35 years	Translation, literature, business, grammar, civilization, etc. at School Z	Peninsular literature
10	Methods course and workshops for TAs	Graduate Student (PhD)	11 years (4 in U.S.)	Creative writing in Argentina; civilization, conversation, and literature at School Z	Spanish civilization and culture
11	None	Emeritus	55 years	Literature and civilization courses at School Z and several	Latin American literature

				other universities and countries	
12	Methods courses and workshops for TAs; courses in Spain	Graduate Student (MA)	2 years	One course of advanced grammar	Advanced grammar and composition
13	Methods courses and workshops for TAs; courses in Argentina	Assistant Professor	15 years (13 in U.S.)	Language, literature and civilization courses in Argentina, School Z and other universities in the U.S.	Latin American civilization and culture
14	Methods courses and workshops for TAs; workshops at ACTFL	Graduate Student (MA)	3 years	One course in advanced grammar, and one course in Spanish phonetics	Phonetics and phonology
15	Methods courses and workshops for TAs; workshops at ACTFL	Graduate Student (PhD)	4 years	Translation and Business	Translation

The researchers did not consider any specific procedure for the selection of participants beyond their role as instructors of advanced courses open to heritage and non-heritage students, and their voluntary commitment to the project (out of 18 instructors, 1 decided not to participate, and 2 did not complete the initial questionnaire on time for the subsequent research stage). In this way, the study examined an academic environment that can be easily found in other higher institutions in the U.S., i.e. a FL unit where instructors come from a wide variety of geographical, personal, and cultural backgrounds.

## Findings

Both researchers reviewed the open-ended answers to the prompts in the second section of the questionnaire to highlight a tentative cluster of relevant similes/metaphors. Next, these were contrasted by each researcher with the data from the interviews and the observations that s/he carried out. The first three areas focus on the beliefs and perceptions that instructors have about (1) the classroom environment; (2) their role as teachers of advanced-level courses; and (3) the students enrolled in these courses. Finally, we discuss (4) the contrast between what teachers consider to be the desired interaction in advanced Spanish classroom, and what actually happens. Keeping in mind that none of the above collection methods included a specific coding system, the

following descriptions include some indications of how many teachers expressed one view or another.

### 1. The Advanced Spanish Classroom as a “Space for Open Discussion” or a “Teenage Orchestra”

The teachers’ answers to the questionnaires included a number of metaphors regarding their views of the classrooms, from which the researchers outlined two main positions and an important consideration shared by most instructors:

<u><i>Position One:</i></u> "a space for open debate and discussion," "meeting point for explorers," etc.	<u><i>Common Consideration:</i></u> "a collage," "an irregular ground for teaching and learning," "a group of tourists taking a trip together," etc."	<u><i>Position Two:</i></u> "teenage orchestra," "a place for guidance and support," etc.
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On the one hand (*Position One*), several instructors considered the advanced classroom as a space built not from what “one” – the students – is to learn from the “other” – the instructor – but from what the whole group can contribute at an intellectual level. In this way, the development of both linguistic and cultural knowledge in this environment tends to be seen as a fluid process, not just as something to be “consumed” by a passive audience. As an illustration of how diverse literary and cultural items may be problematized by instructors within the first group, Teacher 13 used the same pictures used by her students in a previous oral presentation to explore seemingly opposing images of the peasant in art from the Mexican Revolution. On the other hand (*Position Two*), about the same number of instructors appeared more inclined to view the development of the advanced classroom as a more static process in terms of both its dynamics – the teacher selects the learning activities, determines the degree of participation, etc. – and its content – the course is based on a specific pedagogical or theoretical approach to the subject matter. For example, during a discussion about the concepts of *macho* and *machismo* in a literary text, Teacher 11 asks her students to focus on the text by itself, without considering any other contextual or historical interpretations. Prior to teaching at an advanced level, all the graduate teaching assistants in this group had taken part in courses or workshops based on a communicative approach to FL teaching that values learner-centeredness, learner needs and purposes, and meaningful processes of communication (Lynch 2003). However, while this training is generally geared towards lower-level FL courses with a majority of monolingual and – perhaps – monocultural students, instructors in *Position Two* may not often have the training nor the experience with advanced courses where needs, purposes, and interaction all seem much more heterogeneous.

Precisely, a significant consideration about the advanced Spanish classroom shared by all the instructors in the interviews focused on its disparity with regard to: (a) the organization of the language program, which results in having students with different academic and proficiency levels in the same advanced classroom, and (b) the background knowledge that students may have not only about the subject matter, but also its linguistic, cultural or historical references. For several instructors, the issue of background knowledge became particularly relevant in the case of Latino students. Specifically, these instructors seemed to confer a special relevance to the lack of

knowledge among these learners about key cultural and social aspects of the Spanish-speaking world in general: “The level of Spanish and lack of intellectual knowledge [of HL students] are perplexing” (Teacher 1), and “Lo que un latino debería saber como miembro de una cultura, de un imaginario panhispánico” (Teacher 13) (‘What a Latino should know as a member of a culture, of a panhispanic imaginary’).

## 2. The Instructor as a “Trouble-maker,” a “Facilitator” or an “Orchestra Conductor”

### Common consideration: disparities within the advanced Spanish classroom

Perception One:	Perception Two:	Perception Three:
"an intellectual trouble-maker," an agitator," "a <i>rompepelotas</i> " [ball-breaker], etc.	"a facilitator," "moderator," "a coordinator," etc.	"orchestra conductor," "mentor," "guide," "role-model," "provider" of knowledge," etc.

Here emphasis was given to three key perceptions which, contrary to the previous subsection, seemed to be rather exclusive, that is, each participant would tend to identify with a definite perception about himself or herself as an instructor of an advanced language course.

While the common denominator between these three perceptions would still be the disparity of academic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds among students, the key difference is based on the type of pedagogical process that teachers consider most appropriate in order to advance their students’ intellectual and academic skills. The instructor as a “trouble-maker” (Perception One) sees himself or herself as a thought-provoking agent that initiates discussion, critical analysis, and deconstruction of both linguistic and cultural items without having established obvious boundaries for such process. In these classrooms, the teachers’ expectations for the whole group entail going beyond an assumed passive ability to comprehend what the instructor says, and calls for participating actively in classroom interaction related to the subject matter. The on-site observations indicate that such calls for active participation could sometimes be irregular regarding the actual degree of attention that the instructors would give to the whole group or to certain individuals. In some cases – Teachers 1 and 13, for instance – participation was requested from everybody through different means – open questions followed by name-calling, requests for peer corrections or comments, etc. In other classrooms, the instructors seemed to center their calls for participation on certain individuals, while the others were “allowed” to maintain a more passive attitude toward interaction.

On the other end of the spectrum, a slightly larger number of teachers with a perception of themselves as “orchestra conductors,” “providers of knowledge,” or “guides” (Perception Three) seem inclined to assume that the knowledge of the areas under discussion belongs only to them. For this reason, they often feel responsible for an appropriate transfer of knowledge to learners through the memorization and imitation of linguistic and cultural items. For instance, Teacher 3 meticulously analyzes a poem both at a symbolic and structural levels while his students simply listen to the presentation and ask sporadic questions – often from the same individuals. Keeping in mind our

previous reference to the assumed lack of knowledge that Latino students have about key dimensions of the Spanish-speaking cultures outside the U.S., this episode illustrates how this perception might be a factor in the development of a burdensome pedagogic environment for some Latino students, who might not feel as keen as their FL peers to unquestionably accept the cultural and linguistic models provided by the instructor.

Finally, the image of the instructor as a “facilitator” or “moderator” (Perception Two) appears to derive from the influence of the above-mentioned a communicative approach to L2 teaching and learning (CLT). The classroom observations pointed to different ways or degrees to which instructors in this group implemented some of the pedagogical recommendations made by CLT, such as contextualization, classroom interaction with a realistic purpose, and students’ active engagement in their own learning process (Richards and Rodgers 2001). For example, in her course in Spanish phonetics and phonology, Teacher 14 combined her presentation of theoretical items through their functional expression with small-group work in which students were responsible for preparing new examples that could relate the new theoretical information to their immediate linguistic environment outside the classroom. On the other hand, Teacher 9’s unclear purpose and lack of awareness of the students’ diverse characteristics and attitudes in his use of small-group work after an overview of a writer’s life and creation could have contributed to the rather limited involvement and cooperation observed within most of the groups. As pointed in the previous section, this episode suggests again that acquaintance with CLT techniques and strategies for lower-level FL courses does not necessarily translate into effective practices in the advanced classroom.

### **3. The Advanced Student as an “Engaged Collaborator” or a “Dependent”**

Teachers’ perceptions about their students cannot be considered separately from their views about the advanced classroom in general. In the same way that instructors seem to maintain a common position with regard to the classroom as a disparate space – with different academic and proficiency levels, and different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds – they are also aware of their students’ individual characteristics and interests, but such knowledge may be articulated into a variety of classroom practices.

Similar to the distinction between instructors as “trouble-makers” and instructors as “orchestra conductors,” the majority of comments about students in advanced classrooms pointed to a contrast between perceptions of students as (1) full “engaged collaborators” in the course, and (2) “dependents” on the instructor’s knowledge about the content or the language. However, these perceptions should not be seen as exclusive as those described in the previous two sections, but as the furthest points of a continuum based on the teachers’ (a) assessment of the students’ individual differences and needs, and (b) understanding of the investment made by a student in his or her own learning process:

<b>Point One:</b>	<b>Key Factor:</b>	<b>Point Two:</b>
"a curious and responsible participant," "an individual with his or her own experience," "the main character in the	Students' individual differences and needs. Pedagogic investment in learning process.	"dependent on instructor's knowledge," "musician in need of a conductor," "teenagers who consider themselves as

movie,"  
"an impatient explorer," etc.

adults," "requirement  
students," etc.

The images closer to Point One portray the student as an individual with his or her own defined academic and personal interests, as an active participant of an educational environment which encourages autonomy and responsibility as far as intellectual production and academic behavior is concerned. Unlike the previous relationship found among some teachers between the role of “facilitator” and a particular methodological approach, the view of students as “engaged collaborators” was described by instructors from diverse professional backgrounds, with or without methodological training. In his class about Caribbean literature, Teacher 1 challenges his students to engage in a deeper analysis of the conventional meanings provided by the dictionary in the context of the literary text. Because of the greater degree of autonomy and responsibility offered by instructors with this perception, some Latino learners could find it more difficult to maintain a passive position toward the content and, as a result, assume a larger investment on their own learning, especially if they sense their instructor’s awareness of the pedagogical, cultural, and personal matters that may define the academic experience of many Latino students at a U.S. university.

On the other side of the continuum (Point Two), advanced students as “musicians in need of a conductor” become members of a group that depends mostly on the instructor’s control over course content and classroom dynamics. Here, individuality plays a more restricted role in contrast to the importance given to the instructor’s “truth”. Through an array of pedagogical and – very occasionally – disciplinary actions, students develop into “recipients” of academic information and cultural values about which they have little to say beyond simple repetition. In Teacher 2’s words: “Students are like adolescents who think they know enough to enter the fray, but they discover that things are more complex than what they seem at first, that there are a lot of exceptions to the rules, and therefore ask the teacher to rescue them from chaos”.

Like their L2 peers, Latino students in this context become part of a indistinct group of learners that are to be “educated” under the most traditional signification that such concept may have. But unlike their peers, Latino students may find such process even more alienating, first due to the distance between what the instructor presents as the “truth” and their own social and cultural realities, and secondly because of the greater expectations that the instructor could have for these students who “know Spanish well enough” to be put in that spot. To the extent allowed by the instructor, it is in this type of environment that some Latino learners may opt for a less stressful “invisibility”, while some others may attempt to take up the role of “gallito” (‘know-it-all’) that is, a student that seeks to stand out either in favor or against the teacher’s authority.

#### **4. A "Wish List" and a "Reality List" for Interaction in Advanced Spanish Classrooms"**

Unlike the previous subsections, here the instructors were purposely asked about a hypothetical condition in their classrooms, i.e. what they would define as "successful" interaction between the participants. This "wish list" from the questionnaires was then contrasted by the researchers with the transcriptions from the interviews and the field notes from the observations, with the intention to prepare another "reality list:"

### "Wish List"

- Two-way communication in Spanish
  - A challenging and demanding conversation between participants from which everybody benefits ("a great soccer game," "a good concert").
- Homogenous and steady levels of curiosity and enthusiasm elicited by the instructor.
  - Warm and comfortable classroom environment created by the instructor ("a party, with good food, good drinks, and good company").

### "Reality List"

- Common use of English between L2 students and HL students (no interest in having/ being linguistic models)
- "Unequal" meeting points based on instructor's beliefs and experience: (a) instructors with L2 students and (b) instructors with HL students
- Striking variety of personal, academic, and linguistic needs among participants
- A place of tension and conflict, which may result in segregated spaces.

#### **4a. Two-way Communication versus Use of English:**

The majority of instructors expect Spanish to be considered the exclusive language of communication, analysis, and reflection in the advanced classroom. To a lesser degree, some instructors also expect that students use Spanish in their interaction during small-group work. Furthermore, several comments were made about the possible role of Latino students as linguistic – not necessarily cultural, though – models for their L2 peers. This would be the case of Teacher 6, for example, who encourages students to take advantage of the linguistic abilities of a Latino student, as a resource for their upcoming presentations: “Los chicos a veces le preguntan en inglés y él también les responde en inglés. Entonces les digo ‘no pero, aprovechen que él habla español y hablen en español. Pero, sí, yo siento que si él ve que no le entienden, les cambia entonces al inglés” (‘Some kids sometimes ask him questions in English and he answers in English as well. Then I tell them to take advantage of him, because he speaks Spanish, you should all speak in Spanish. But yeah, I think that if he feels they don’t understand him, he switches into English’). The field notes taken by both researchers during their classroom observations suggested a strong inclination toward the use of English during group work, in the pedagogical and social interaction between Latino and non-Latino learners, and even in the communication between Latino students themselves about their academic work or any other personal and social matters.

#### **4b. Challenging Conversation versus “Unequal” Meeting Points with Specific Groups:**

Several instructors said that an advanced Spanish classroom should be a departure point for different types of challenging and demanding conversations between participants about both linguistic and cultural contents. However, some of our observations pointed to the creation by some teachers – especially those with less experience teaching at an advanced level – of “safe pedagogical zones” generally occupied by L2 students and based on what the instructors might consider as (a) “appropriate” interactional practices in an advanced Spanish classroom, and (b) “appropriate” intellectual and cultural parameters, which may or may not reflect the Latino students’ references. Perhaps the

most evident example of this position could be Teacher 11's remarks about certain words in Spanish that should be not used among "decent" people. Other instructors with experience teaching advanced courses with heritage and non-heritage seemed more willing to adjust their "pedagogical zones" according to the specific pedagogical and social conditions of the course they were teaching. As Teacher 7 points, "Me hago muchas preguntas antes de entrar, pero creo que una vez que llego y conozco a los estudiantes de ese semestre en particular, muchas cosas que yo he pensado antes de comenzar se mantienen y otras cambian" ('I ask myself a lot of questions before coming into the classroom, but once I am there and get to know the students of that specific semester, I keep in mind a lot of things I had thought about, while others change').

#### **4c. Curiosity and Enthusiasm versus Variety of Personal, Academic, and Linguistic Needs:**

Perhaps due to their overall academic and teaching experience, or to their unrealistic expectations about their role as instructors of an advanced course at the university level, some teachers assume that the ideal interaction in this context depends on their own capacity to generate continuous curiosity and enthusiasm among students. However, the influence of traditional methodological views on FL teaching and learning – CLT included – or the limited understanding of the students' diverse academic and sociocultural characteristics and perceptions about the Spanish classroom could prevent the (expected) involvement of specific individuals or groups with the learning activities. For example, Teacher 13 was able to generate interest and full participation from her anglo students while pockets of Latino students were scribbling or napping. For this reason, she had to continuously shift the focus to reach at least one sub-group at a time. In her interview, Teacher 10 also recalled her dismay (during the first weeks of classes) because her expectations did not match the students' linguistic abilities. In spite of having adapted the syllabus, she felt she had to struggle to keep students engaged: "No es que soy una payasa en la clase pero ¿cómo se enseña una clase sin el entusiasmo que das, sin tu propio interés. Porque si yo viniera a clase, abriera mi libro y dijera 'bueno, los procesos dialectales son [...]', la clase no se haría entretenida. Nadie tendría de verdad mucho interés en saber" ('It is not that I behave as a clown in the classroom, but how would you teach a course without your own enthusiasm, your own interest. Because if I came to class, opened my book and said 'OK, dialectal processes are [...]. The course would not be enjoyable. Nobody would really have much interest in learning').

#### **4d. Comfortable Classroom Environment versus a Place of Tension and Conflict:**

While the instructors may seek to establish a warm and comfortable classroom environment as a necessary condition for successful classroom interaction, several episodes during the observations and comments in the interviews indicate a concern about the development of "segregated" spaces, that is, the classroom divided into what a teacher described as separate "barrios" or, in other words, pockets of marginal speakers of Spanish. Specifically, some of our observations suggested that a likely cause for the development of these "barrios" could derive from the instructor's own lack of acceptance and legitimization of linguistic and cultural varieties that the Latino student brings into the classroom. As noted by Teacher 15: "Tienden a quedarse más callados y a pedir menos ayuda. Además, siempre, lamentablemente, dentro del gueto, su gueto [...] Desde un principio, se agrupan y se forman barrios, con excepción de las veces en

que tú, a la fuerza, formas grupos diferentes” (‘They tend to keep quiet, and to ask for assistance less often. Also, they always, unfortunately, remain within the ghetto, their own ghetto. From the very beginning, they stick together and make up “barrios”, except for those occasions when I ask them to work in groups with other people’).

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The main purpose of this study was to examine instructors’ beliefs and practices in advanced Spanish courses with heritage and non-heritage learners. Data from actual classrooms were collected and analyzed through a number of procedures, in order to reach a sufficient level of contextualization and credibility of any possible claims. The gradual implementation of these procedures was also intended to strengthen the value of comments and classroom episodes dealing with sensitive issues such as the teacher’s perceptions on specific student groups, language varieties, individual attitudes, etc. As other authors of recent qualitative studies in the same field (Pomerantz 2002; Potowski 2002; Valdés et al. 2003), we consider that the combination of various levels of analysis represents the best way to study not only beliefs and practices in advanced classrooms, but also a wide array of issues concerning the language background of members of FL departments, the beliefs about language that faculty and students may articulate in this context, and the perceptions that faculty have about the cultural and social environment of heritage learners enrolled in their courses, among others (Valdés 2003). Future research in this area could incorporate a more longitudinal perspective into the professional development of instructors – especially graduate teaching assistants from a variety of personal and cultural backgrounds – who, as they advance in their career, are asked to teach a variety of advanced courses in language, literature, culture, translation, business, etc.

The first – and, hopefully, obvious enough – general conclusion following this study concerns the relevance of the perceptions and attitudes that teachers bring with them into the advanced FL classroom. This awareness becomes especially important when the space is shared by students from a wide variety of personal and academic backgrounds – as observed in an increasing number of U.S. universities – who will certainly enter the classroom with quite different needs and attitudes towards the learning of Spanish as a foreign, second or even first language, all within the context of the advanced classroom. Directly related to this situation, our second general conclusion addresses the need for researchers and instructors to consider the influence of ideologies, identities, and power on language use, attitudes, and beliefs in both FL teaching and learning (e.g. Kubota et al. 2003; Ortega 1999; Osborn 2003; Reagan and Osborn 2002), and Spanish as a heritage language in the U.S. (e.g. Carreira 2000; Leeman 2005; Martínez 2003; Villa 2002, 2005) involving the linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of Spanish in the U.S.

But what does a critical perspective on interaction in advanced Spanish classrooms involve in practice? First, it allows the instructor to acknowledge and reconsider certain commonplace “ideal” visions of the Spanish-speaking languages, literatures, and cultures that may not apply to his or her actual teaching and learning environment <sup>2</sup>. Such visions could perhaps connect better with traditional FL students who have learned Spanish through standard pedagogical and cultural models – grammar-translation, audiolingual, communicative, task- or content-based, etc. However, those visions might not be as appropriate for heritage learners who come into the same

academic context with knowledge and experiences that the instructor, in a more or less unconscious way, does not accept as part of the overall learning process. In our study, we have sought to provide evidence of this lack of legitimization affecting HL students not only in terms of their language varieties – whether they “know” or they “think they know” Spanish – but also concerning the dynamics with their instructor and their peers.

The instructor’s awareness about the disparity of institutional, academic, linguistic, and cultural elements gathered in the advanced classroom should also involve a more precise understanding of what the term “heritage learner” actually means. As suggested in the discussion, a majority of instructors used the term “Latino” as equal to “Spanish speaker,” assuming that their cultural background does automatically entail some knowledge and regular usage of some kind of standardized variety. When these instructors realize that the language abilities of these “Latino” students do not match their expectations, the initial references to “collaboration” and “linguistic models” are replaced by perceptions concerning “deficiencies,” “arrogance,” “apathy,” etc., and maybe, as other authors have outlined, misconceptions such as the HL students’ interest in an easy “A” rather than to learn, or the placement of HL students in other courses due to their assumed lack of literacy (Kagan and Dillon 2004).

Finally, a critical perspective to interaction in advanced Spanish classrooms should constitute an essential component of any training sessions, workshops, or courses not only for TAs and adjuncts at medium- or large-size universities, but also for the tenure-track or tenured faculty generally responsible for teaching or supervising advanced-level courses. In addition to the recommendations made by some of the previously cited authors (Leeman 2005; Potowski 2002; Potowski and Carreira 2004), some modules in this kind of “critical” training could be:

- Assessment of authentic oral and written samples from by different groups of advanced FL and HL students.
- Exposure to authentic situations (segments from TV programs, films, radio shows, etc.) recorded in Spanish-speaking areas other than the U.S. involving a contrast between standard and non-standard, prestige and non-prestige varieties of Spanish.
- Analysis of authentic or role-played episodes of interaction within advanced Spanish classrooms showing the effect of typical perceptions or misconceptions towards HL students.
- Examination of textbooks and other teaching materials at the advanced level to appraise the treatment of linguistic and cultural varieties in the U.S. and other regions of the Spanish-speaking world.
- Opportunities to develop and discuss classroom activities and programmatic adjustments that call for tolerance of linguistic diversity, naturalness of language evolution in Spanish – as in any other languages – and the relatively few formal differences between prestige and non-prestige varieties of Spanish.
- Description of successful bilingual and heritage language teaching methodologies, in order to provide the instructor with alternative techniques and strategies for interaction in the advanced classroom.

These and other ideas could provide FL instructors of advanced courses with a greater awareness about the individual and cultural qualities of their heritage and non-heritage learners, the value of establishing a constructive environment in the advanced

classroom, and the positive effect that these pedagogical actions may have on their students' motivation and overall learning process.

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## Notes

1. In the introduction and literature review sections, the distinction between the notions of "Latino" and "heritage" is based on the students' linguistic background, that is, we consider a "Latino" student as a member of a community not necessarily defined by its use of Spanish, and a "heritage learner" as a student from homes where languages other than English are spoken, or who have had in-depth exposure to another language (Campbell 1996; UCLA Steering Committee 2000). However, the data analysis and discussion sections will first follow and then scrutinize the instructors' own perceptions of what they consider to be a "Latino," "heritage" and "non-heritage" student. ([back](#))

2. Del Valle and Gabriel-Stheeman (2002) provide a detailed discussion about the efforts made by some language institutions in the Spanish-speaking world in order to project a related image of "Pan-Hispanic" harmony and linguistic cooperation. ([back](#))

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**Appendix A: Questionnaire [\(back\)](#)**

This questionnaire has been designed to gather information about the interaction that takes place in advanced Spanish courses in language, literature, and culture. Our main objective is to address the needs and concerns of faculty and students in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese in the best way possible. Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions in as much detail as possible. You may write your answers in Spanish or English. There are no right or wrong answers, and your opinions would not be used in any administrative evaluation or assessment of your teaching. Once you have completed the questionnaire, please drop it in the mailbox of Author One or Author Two, or if you prefer to complete the electronic version, please email it to Author One (email address) or Author Two (email address) at your earliest convenience. Thank you very much for your cooperation! Muchas gracias.

---

**Part I: Biographical Data**

Date of birth:	Gender:
_____	_____
Nationality:	Native language:
_____	_____
Faculty or Graduate student:	Ph.D. or M.A. student:
_____	_____
Academic area(s) of interest: .....	
.....	
.....	

---

**Part II: Background and Experience**

1. How long have you been teaching Spanish?  
.....  
.....
2. *Where* have you taught and at what levels? Please describe your experience teaching Spanish or other subjects in the space below. Use the back of this page if you need more space.

Introductory-Intermediate (100-200 level)	Advanced language and courses (e.g., 221, 301, 311, etc.)	Other subjects (ESL, Education, History, etc.)

3. Have you had any formal (i.e., classes) or informal (i.e., in-service programs, workshops) training in foreign/second language instruction (in the US or in your country of origin)?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you answer “yes”, please describe your teaching training (e.g., duration, main theoretical and/or pedagogical issues addressed, etc.) Use the back of this page if you need more space.

.....  
 .....

4. Which best describes the type of undergraduate and graduate school(s) you attended?

Undergraduate studies _____	Graduate studies _____
US institution under 5,000 _____	US institution under 5,000 students _____
US institution 5,000-10,000 students _____	US institution 5,000-10,000 students _____
US institution over 10,000 students _____	US institution over 10,000 students _____
College or university not in the US _____	College or university not in the US _____

If you attended a college or university not in the US for your undergraduate or graduate studies, please describe the institution(s) briefly in the space provided below.

.....

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### Part III: Pedagogical Views

Define the following in your own words. You can use visual images (e.g., you can resort to analogies or comparisons), examples from your own experience, etc. This is an informal, individual, and personal task, i.e. we are not interested in what researchers or

scholars think, but in what YOU think. You can use the back of the questionnaire if you need extra space. You may write your answers in Spanish or English.

1. A typical Advanced Spanish classroom is like / is

.....  
.....

2. In an Advanced Spanish classroom, an instructor is like / is

.....  
.....

3. In an Advanced Spanish classroom, a student is like / is

.....  
.....

4. Successful interaction in the Spanish Advanced classroom is like / is

.....  
.....

**Please feel free to use the space below for any other comments you wish to make about issues of concern to you as a faculty teaching Advanced Spanish courses in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. We look forward to sharing the results of this project with you as soon as possible. ¡Muchas gracias!**

Date Posted: 10/12/2005

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