

Crossroads: Heritage Learning

Attitudes and activities for the heritage speaker classroom

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What does a good class for heritage speakers look like? How is it different from other World Language classrooms? What are the particular challenges these students face, and how can teachers and students use class time well? In short, what are some of the best practices for courses focusing on heritage speakers? In Harrisonburg City Schools, we recognize that we still have much to learn and our experience with heritage classes so far is limited to Spanish speakers. But we offer the following ideas based on several years of work in this field.

Classes for heritage speakers look like a hybrid of many subjects including Literacy, Language Arts, Literature, Social Studies and World Languages. Students actively use the target language to engage meaningful and interesting content. Teachers address the three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) in ways that recognize and appreciate the student's personal historical connection to the language. For this to be effective, it is imperative for the teacher to know each student's "story" and language abilities as soon as possible.

We find that students often come to the heritage speaker class with the experience of having been criticized for their use of or lack of use of their heritage language. Many times they have also been criticized for their use of English. So it is important to develop a climate of mutual respect and learning where it is okay to not be perfect. It is unrealistic to expect academic skills that have never been formally taught so teachers should consider the amount of academic exposure the student has had to the language when developing goals and expectations.

Teachers who are not native speakers are best advised to develop a humble "we will learn together" attitude. They should look specifically for topics in which they are the experts (such as the history and culture of Spain). Teachers who are native speakers must resist the urge to over-correct, because they will certainly notice many errors! They must be mindful and accepting of the wide variety of accents and regional variants while teaching about standard forms of the language. Always be cognizant that there is a great deal of prejudice regarding certain forms of languages and certain regions and work to honor and build on the knowledge that students bring to your classroom. As one of our teachers writes:

It's important to teach students respect for the variety and use of the language, creating an atmosphere where students feel confident even while they talk about errors of grammar or diction. I've realized that students aren't aware of the errors they're committing until they're taught that those errors are quite common. The task of the teacher is to use different activities that emphasize the use of words that students usually struggle with to

create a ‘mental habit’ for the correct word, because they’ve used the other forms so often that the correct forms feel ‘weird’ to them.

In short, the teacher’s approach must always be constructive, using reflection and awareness rather than a judgmental or hypercritical imposition of rules. Another teacher uses the “*abuelitos* rule”: most heritage speakers pick up the habits of their parents and grandparents, so when a teacher addresses a student’s language errors it is often perceived as a comment about the students’ family. Tell the truth, but be careful about what you say about their *abuelitos*.

As in regular world language classes, remember the natural progression of language acquisition from Novice to Intermediate to Advanced to Superior. As students progress toward higher levels, remember that although they may be speaking at the Intermediate High or Advanced levels, heritage students have typically not developed their writing skills to the same degree because of limited formal education in their heritage language. In looking at heritage speakers’ WPT and OPIc test results, we discover a typical pattern in which writing lags at least one sublevel (and sometimes as much as one full level) behind speaking skills. Be ready for your Intermediate High heritage speakers to write at an Intermediate Mid, Intermediate Low, or even Novice High level. As in all world language classrooms, students need to experience a lot of practice at their current level to develop automaticity, expand their repertoire of topics, and increase motivation and a feeling of success. Grammatical concepts and the mechanics of language are important and should be included in course design, but watch out for activities that are too far above the student’s current level to be useful and avoid dwelling too long on frustrating aspects of mechanics (such as the use of accents in Spanish).

So what kinds of classroom activities are useful? Creating a culture of reading, writing and analytical thinking is not an easy task. Build from the basics up; Spanish, as we know, is phonetically based with few exceptions; specifically teach those exceptions (b, v, s, c, z, y, ll, g, h, j, etc.) and work on vowel sounds repeatedly until they become second nature for students. Use routines to build different modes into your daily class schedule and to reinforce and extend prior learning. Reading and writing comprehension are crucial in literacy and proficiency in all languages and often are the starting point of activities developing interpersonal and presentational modes. Some ideas for routines and activities that are relevant to heritage speakers are in the table below.

Interpretive Listening and Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Short stories (stop at appropriate intervals for students to interact with the text and each other through a pattern like <i>POP</i> -- write a <i>pregunta</i>, <i>observación</i>, and <i>predicción</i>.)● Legends, fables and popular folk stories (students also may collect these in their community)● Newspapers, magazine articles (consider both news videos and written articles)
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feature films as well as short films¹ ● Dictation of newspaper articles, excerpts from speeches, etc. ● Song study: cloze activity to listen for missing words/phrases in a song ● MadLibs ● Readers' Theater (dramas)² ● Childrens' books (older students can read to younger students in the community)
Interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Show clips of world news and have students discuss their reactions ● Password game: students describe the word/concept/person (without gestures) and others guess what it is ● Conversation station: put a variety of questions into a can and have pairs or small groups discuss their answers ● Host a "call in radio show": students face away from each other and the teacher or a student is the host of the show, talking about interesting or controversial topics (such as school uniforms or banning the use of Spanish in schools) and presenting opposing viewpoints
Presentational Speaking and Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Question-of-the-day for student opinions or aspects of daily life ● Show and tell about objects meaningful to them ● Rehearse and tell jokes ● Reflecting on their learning (in your class or others) in writing ● Opening routines that call on an individual student to speak at length ● Autobiographical writing (a great year long project or it could span over several courses) ● Daily journals ● Summarizing news articles ● Grammar signs and bulletin boards highlighting recurring problems

In conclusion, the choice of appropriate activities for the heritage speaker classroom comes from an understanding of students' current skills, their logical next steps in building proficiency, and a continual awareness of their affective filter.

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¹ See the NCLRC article April 2011 *On Using Film for Spanish for Native Speakers Classes*, and *Using Feature Films With Native Speakers* in the Fall, 2011 FLAVA Bulletin

² See the NCLRC article January 2012 *Plays in the Classroom: Raising interest and involvement through reading*