

Crossroads in the Classroom: Heritage Language Learning **¡Gooooooooooooool!** *Building the team for Heritage Speaker success* *Jeremy Aldrich and Philip Yutzy, Harrisonburg City (VA) Public Schools*

Winning soccer teams can have a variety of successful configurations. Some have more forwards; some have more midfielders or defenders; but each configuration is designed to maximize the team's strengths and score goals. Thoughtfully matching teachers' skills and students' needs, along with an appropriate curriculum, make it more likely that students in heritage speaker courses will achieve their goals, too. In previous articles, we have discussed the typical profiles and needs of heritage speakers and we explored some appropriate routines and activities that give shape to a meaningful curriculum. In this third and final article of this series, we'll explore the characteristics of successful teachers for heritage speaker courses.

The first and perhaps most obvious characteristic is language skill. A teacher does not need to know everything the students know about the language or culture, but a teacher does need to know things that the students do not. They need to be able to consistently model standard academic forms of the language at or above the course proficiency goals. They must be aware of the varieties of the language that are spoken - the prestigious dialects in a variety of language registers – in addition to understanding the language varieties used in their students' homes. Depending on the course goals, expertise in literature, film, history, and politics will be helpful. As in all language classes, selecting appropriate input involves understanding students' backgrounds, interests, current skills and logical next steps for language development.

A second teacher characteristic is credibility. This topic can be sensitive and is often difficult to quantify, but it must be part of the discussion when selecting teachers and when thinking about professional development. The native speaking staff member on your team may be a logical choice, but other characteristics are even more imperative than being Latino. How does the teacher win the trust and affection of heritage language students? How does the teacher make the students feel that they have something in common with the teacher and something to learn from them? It's not as simple as "Well, teacher X is a native or heritage speaker so the students will surely relate to him." That is no more true than expecting native English-speaking students to connect with a teacher simply because they also grew up speaking English. Nonetheless, native speaking teachers will have some immediate credibility with students who share their same heritage because of last names, accents, and physical appearance. Non-native teachers need to accept that they are working from a deficit and must gain credibility by their knowledge and relationships with the students.

Third, there are a number of imperative personal and professional characteristics that mark successful heritage language instructors. Some of these characteristics include patience, the

ability to show caring, and a disposition that tells students we're all learning together. Also a true grasp of the American educational system and a desire to help students navigate routes to higher education are required. Heritage language courses become gateways to post-secondary education. Another characteristic is an acceptance without negative criticism of the wide variety of cultures and dialects that share the target language and a tenacious persistence to help students overcome obstacles in adapting to the American culture while preserving their heritage. The focus should be on creating bilingual and bicultural adults. It is also extremely helpful if the teacher adapts a linguistic perspective (focusing on appropriate, acceptable and contextual language) rather than a grammatical perspective (focusing on rule based correct language). This can be difficult for language teachers, but it humanizes instruction and enables the teacher to see the totality of the student's cultural and linguistic background. Ultimately, grammatical accuracy is achievable while still recognizing and even valuing engrained divergent linguistic patterns. These teacher characteristics often outweigh others in developing a strong program for heritage Spanish speakers.

Finally, a successful teacher of heritage speakers will be able to pull from a variety of teaching disciplines to provide students a well-rounded experience. At times the class will seem like a high school Spanish course, while at other times it may seem like an elementary school language arts class, or a university course in history or sociology. At times it may even look like a motivational seminar or counseling session! Skillfully using a wide variety of approaches depending on the goals of the course and the needs of the moment is no small feat. Teachers must be or become familiar with first and second language acquisition, effective classroom management, grouping and questioning strategies, history, current events, immigration issues, applied psychology, fine arts, effective advocacy, and more. Needless to say, this requires an ongoing commitment to reflection and professional development, as well as networking with other teachers, administrators, counselors, and professors inside and outside of the world languages department.

In conclusion, all the factors that lead to a successful heritage speaker program - matching the course offerings with real student needs, choosing appropriate activities and routines, and developing the most-needed teacher skills - should revolve around the articulated goals of the program. After all, while there are many team configurations that can be successful, the standard of success (scoring goals) has to be fundamental to every aspect of putting the team together. ¡Golazo!