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Heritage Language Learners in a Mixed Class: Educational Affordances and Constraints

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Abstract

Despite a general consensus that heritage language learners (HLLs) and second language (L2) learners are best taught in separate classes, they often end up in mixed classes (Abdi, 2011; Burgo, 2017; Draper & Hicks, 2000). To date, however, there remains a lack of sufficient research on how to best support HLLs in mixed classes (Burgo, 2017). In this ethnographic case study, the researcher set out to understand the lived experiences of eighth grade HLLs in a mixed Spanish classroom. The researcher visited a Spanish class over the course of six months during which audio and video recordings captured classroom interactions. The findings reveal that the teacher's use of the labels "advanced Spanish-dominant" and "English-dominant" created two distinct groups which were physically separated in the classroom. This dichotomy appeared to simultaneously constrain and provide affordances for various learning opportunities for the two different groups.

Keywords: *heritage language learners, mixed classes, social identities, learning identities*

Background

The rapidly growing number of Spanish speakers in the United States has major implications for classroom instruction across content areas. Students born in the U.S. who do not consider themselves native speakers of Spanish are often labeled heritage language learners (HLLs). For the purposes of this study, the definition of a HLL is adopted from Valdés's (2005) widely-used definition: "the student may speak or merely understand the heritage language and be, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language" (p. 412). Some HLLs are highly proficient in both Spanish and English. Others may have very limited to no receptive or productive skills in Spanish. A great deal of variety can come between these two examples.

Spanish-speaking students bring a wide range of diverse language and cultural experiences to the classroom. Scholars have been discussing the linguistic and cultural diversity of Spanish-speaking students in the U.S. for quite some time (Roca, 2001; Valdés, 1997). Despite the tremendous variability of linguistic mastery among HLLs, schools have categorized them dichotomously in ways that marginalize their language practices, restrict evolving identities, and constrain academic opportunities available to them, as demonstrated in this study.

Literature Review

Spanish Heritage Learners in American Schools

HLLs do not comprise a homogenous group but rather their diverse backgrounds, attitudes, linguistic needs, and expectations fluctuate among lower-level and more advanced proficiency groups (Alarcón, 2010; Bateman & Wilkinson, 2010; He, 2010; Montrul, 2010). Therefore, research has demonstrated that HLLs have distinct instructional needs from second language (L2) learners when they study Spanish (He, 2010; Montrul, 2010; Roca, 2001; Valdés, 1997). Montrul and Bowles (2010) explain, "Spanish language programs are increasingly accommodating heritage speakers, whose linguistic profile, academic experience, and needs differ fundamentally from those of second language learners" (p. 47). An example of HLLs' unique linguistic needs can be found in Montrul's (2002) study of incomplete acquisition and attrition of Spanish tense/aspect distinctions in adult bilinguals.

Despite scholarly recognition of the linguistic, cultural and academic differences between HLLs and L2 learners, current policy and instructional practices tend to deny them. For example, some Spanish-speakers who lack Spanish literacy skills are denied access to Spanish courses. This is crucial because the majority of Spanish speakers could benefit from some type of Spanish instruction, especially with writing skills (Kondo-Brown, 2010; Montrul, 2010; Parra, 2017; Szilágyi, Giambo, & Szecsi; 2013). It has been noted that many Spanish speakers are successful with regard to oral communication but they have never learned to write the language: "Unlike second language (L2) learners who learn Spanish in instructional settings and normally learn receptive and productive skills more or less simultaneously, heritage speakers with excellent comprehension abilities may not be able to speak fluently" (Leeman, 2005, p. 36). With a one-size-fits-all approach, HLLs are commonly placed in classes where they are unable to meet their fullest potential (Abdi, 2011; García & Sylvan, 2011; Hornberger & Link, 2012).

As the research on providing special HLL only courses shows, it is insufficient to group HLLs in one classroom and expect this alone will meet their needs. More attention needs to be paid to HLLs' unique needs, and teachers need support in identifying and then addressing these needs (Alarcón, 2010; He, 2010; Kondo-Brown, 2010). Accurate course placement based upon proficiency level is critical (Fairclough, 2012). In order to achieve this, it is crucial for educators to take the time to acquaint themselves with HLLs in order to gather information about their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences. However, teachers may meet resistance from students who do not wish to open up about their home language and cultural experiences due to a perceived sense of vulnerability. HLLs might worry about retaliation by authorities regarding their family's immigration status, for example. However, without critical information regarding HLLs' prior educational experiences and language proficiency, it can be difficult to address their individualized needs in the classroom.

Academic concerns surround Spanish speakers in the U.S. educational system because it is precisely these students who have been underserved by educational institutions in the past, as is well documented with high dropout rates for this population. Data from the 2017 American Community Survey (ACS) show that Latino

youth have the second highest status dropout rate when broken down by racial/ethnic group. Only American Indian/Alaska native youth have a higher dropout rate (10.1%) than Latino youth (8.2%), as compared to an overall national dropout rate of 5.4%. Although Latino youth dropout rates have declined considerably in recent years (from 21.0% in 2006 to 8.2% in 2017, according to ACS), these rates are still disproportionately high when compared to other racial/ethnic groups. High dropout rates and underachievement of Latino youth in schools can be largely attributed to a school structure which often denies their social and affective needs and constrains their educational opportunities. As Hornberger and Link (2012) explained, "as school populations become increasingly linguistically diverse, refusing to acknowledge the language resources of students and their families limits the possibilities for their educational achievement" (p. 240).

Mixed Classes

Despite a long-standing assumption that HLLs and L2 learners are best taught in separate classes, they often end up together in mixed classes (Abdi, 2011; Burgo, 2017; Draper & Hicks, 2000). HLL only courses are rarely offered in American K-12 schools today, even in areas with large concentrations of Spanish speakers. Instead, HLLs typically find themselves in courses designed for L2 learners that are commonly "designed for monolingual speakers of English with little or no knowledge about the language or the people and the cultures involved" (Blyth, 2003, p. 109). This situation presents a challenge for educators of mixed Spanish classes (Abdi, 2011; Burgo, 2017; Hornberger & Link, 2012; Reyes, 2006). Montrul and Bowles (2010) agree, purporting that combining "non-heritage and heritage learners in a single classroom present serious challenges for both teachers and students" (p. 47).

Despite the fact that mixed classes are a common occurrence for Spanish teachers today, there is a lack of classroom research about the complexities of such a class (Burgo, 2017; Carreira & Kagan, 2018). Of the scant literature available, previous studies have focused on the teachers of mixed classes but not the students. Russell and Kuriscak (2015) surveyed preservice and current high school Spanish teachers on their attitudes and pedagogical practices toward Spanish HLLs, discovering that although the teachers recognized challenges facing the HLLs, they struggled with supporting them in practice. Randolph Jr. (2017) also examined high school Spanish teachers' instructional practices implemented while teaching HLLs in mixed classes. Randolph Jr. (2017) reported that the teachers' actual instructional practice conflicted with their stated philosophical views of HLLs.

The few previous studies focused on students in mixed classes have mostly focused on affective aspects and participant perceptions by interviewing students about the advantages and disadvantages of such a class (Edstrom, 2007; Katz, 2003). Other studies have compared specific linguistic outcomes of HLLs and L2 learners (Bowles, 2011; Montrul, 2008; Potowski, 2002) without addressing how linguistic diversity can be used to collectively achieve goals in the language classroom. Draper and Hicks (2000) advocated for the investigation of HLL/L2 learner collaboration as an avenue for "using the linguistic diversity…as a learning tool for both teachers and students" (p. 16). In the literature that does treat mixed groups, research has primarily been conducted at the post-secondary level (Bateman & Wilkinson, 2010), while

the present study is conducted in a middle school, a context which has not yet been sufficiently explored.

Therefore, this study set out to better understand the lived experiences of eighth grade HLLs in a mixed Spanish classroom. Adopting Wortham's (2006) core notion that social identification and academic learning are deeply interdependent, this study was designed to answer the following research question: In a mixed Spanish class of heritage language learners (HLLs) and second language (L2) learners, what does the classroom discourse reveal about the HLLs' experiences and learning opportunities?

Methods

Inspired by a challenging personal experience teaching a Spanish class consisting of L2 learners and one HLL, the idea for a research study was borne. Although the researcher taught Spanish in a relatively homogenous rural community of Caucasians, one year a Latina HLL enrolled at the school. The HLL was highly proficient in the language and possessed a great deal of knowledge about her heritage culture, which made it difficult to find a suitable Spanish class for her. The high school offered Spanish I through IV but the standard curriculum would not sufficiently challenge her.

After discussing the predicament with the teacher (researcher), administrators decided to place the HLL in a Spanish I class but asked the teacher (researcher) to treat the HLL as an independent study. Administration also decided that the HLL could be utilized as an "assistant teacher" for the students in Spanish I whenever she was not working on independent study assignments. At that time, there were no specialized textbooks or instructional materials available for teaching Spanish to HLLs and the teacher (researcher) did not know where to find appropriately challenging materials to supplement the existing curriculum.

Although she did her best in a tough situation, the teacher (researcher) knew she was not meeting all of the HLL's social, affective, and educational needs that year. At the end of the school year, the teacher (researcher) decided to go to graduate school in order to equip herself with better strategies for teaching a mixed class. What resulted was a strong desire to conduct a research study of a mixed classroom to explore the case in detail. The teacher (researcher) ultimately wanted to help other teachers in similarly challenging situations better serve HLLs and L2 learners in the same class. This situation deeply influenced the present study's ethnographic case study design and implementation. The researcher adopted the role of participant observer in the focal classroom in order to meet her research goals.

Qualitative case studies such as this one are particularly useful for educational inquiry in that they offer a complex view of the case under investigation. A case study, in which "the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection including multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73), suits the research goals of focusing on one specific classroom that presents an "unusual or unique situation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). The unique situation presented here is that of a mixed class made up of HLLs and L2 learners of Spanish.

While it is important to emphasize that case study research is not about generalizing to other contexts, educators still stand to learn a great deal about language classrooms from insights provided by studies like this one. The analytical insights

gained as an outcome of case study research are particularly pragmatic for the advancement of educational practice, as well as future research. Applied social research, such as the present study, is uniquely tied to problem-solving. Bickman and Rog (2009) emphasized this important feature of applied social research: "applied research uses scientific methodology to develop information to help solve an immediate, yet usually persistent, societal problem" (p. x). In this case, the 'immediate, persistent, societal problem' is the lack of a solution for improving students' experiences in mixed Spanish classes that have recently become commonplace in American schools. This study offers a glimpse into life as a student in a mixed Spanish class. As is the case with all educational research, this study furnishes analytical insights to add to the discussion about educating students in mixed classes.

Researchers' own perceptions of what is "typical" versus what is "atypical" in a classroom setting can influence the study. For example, if a classroom practice veers from a researcher's conceptualization of what is "typical" or expected, it may be deemed an anomaly. Therefore, the researcher kept the phrase 'make the familiar strange' (Holliday, 2002) at the forefront of her mind during classroom visits. Being a reflexive researcher was another important strategy used to manage subjectivity during this study. Hammond and Wellington (2013) described researcher reflexivity as: "the examination of one's own beliefs, judgments, and practices during the research process and how these may have influenced the research" (p. 129). In this case, the researcher was cognizant of the importance of seeing the classroom context in new, unexpected ways, and this helped greatly avoid the danger of taking things for granted. Consequently, the researcher employed the following strategies to ensure that the findings were not based on the researcher's own beliefs about language learning: a.) using bracketing techniques to separate personal thoughts from observations in the fieldnotes and b.) using classroom participants' own words to illustrate their classroom experiences.

Context and Participants

To locate a mixed Spanish classroom, the researcher sent out an e-mail solicitation to all identifiable schools within one school district. A few teachers responded to the original solicitation, and Mrs. Lola Flores, after a face-to-face meeting with the researcher, agreed to allow the researcher to observe her class. After receiving clearance from both Mrs. Flores' building principal, as well as her district administration, a discussion of the logistics ensued. The study was granted IRB approval before data collection began. All names are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the study's participants. Care was taken to anonymize students, the teacher, and the district where the study took place.

This qualitative case study was conducted at Pablo Neruda Bilingual Institute (PNBI), a public, Title I, pre-kindergarten through eighth grade school in the northeastern United States. PNBI is part of a large, urban school district. At the time of data collection, PNBI had a total enrollment of 664 students with 83% categorized as Hispanic or Latino. 52% of the student body was English Language Learners (ELLs). 88% of the students were eligible for free lunches and 2% were eligible for reduced-price lunches. This demographic school data came from the state's department of education website.

PNBI is located in a community where Spanish maintains a strong presence. For example, one block away from the school there is a small grocery store called "El Pueblito" which caters to Spanish-speaking customers. Students end up at PNBI because of where they live. Since 83% of the student body is Hispanic or Latino, most PBNI students have had some exposure to the Spanish language and culture at home. However, there are also some monolingual English speakers that live in this community and attend PNBI.

PNBI is an early-exit transitional bilingual school, meaning its main goal is to help ELLs rapidly acquire academic English so that they may be integrated into classrooms with native speakers of English. This model aims to move ELLs toward higher levels of English proficiency. At PNBI, student course placement is heavily guided by standardized tests given at the beginning of the school year. Spanish and English language skills are assessed by bilingual teachers and these scores impact student placements for the academic year. For example, students whose test scores reveal a strong Spanish dominance are placed in both a "Native Language Arts" (NLA) course (conducted in Spanish) and also in an "English Language Arts" (ELA) course (conducted in English). Students who are either completely "English-dominant" or HLLs deemed to have proficiency in both English and Spanish are placed in a traditional ELA course. Once they reach eighth grade, these students are offered a beginning Spanish elective, and at the end of their eighth-grade year, "advanced" Spanish students are selected by their teacher to take a district-wide Spanish placement test. Based upon their test results, some eighth graders earn high school credit for Spanish I.

The focal Spanish class was selected for this study via input from both the researcher and the classroom teacher. After visiting three of Mrs. Flores' mixed class (8A, 8B, and 8C), the researcher met with Mrs. Flores to select one focal class. Based heavily on Mrs. Flores' input, an agreement was made to focus on class 8B. The primary deciding factors were the number of HLLs, student behavioral issues in some classes, and student willingness to participate in the study.

Consequently, the focal class selected for the study was an eighth grade mixed Spanish class. The ten HLLs in the focal class constituted the majority, but each was unique in terms of linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, and educational background. According to information obtained from the classroom teacher, the HLLs all spoke Spanish at home (but to varying degrees). For example, some HLLs had been educated in a Spanish-speaking country before arriving at PNBI. Others had limited contact with Spanish-speaking relatives and therefore, had a low Spanish proficiency. The fourteen students in 8B had a range of ethnic affiliations; the L2 learners were either of European descent or African American whereas the HLLs were either Puerto Rican or Dominican. It was not unusual to have only fourteen students in a class at PNBI.

Table 1

Focal Student Demographics

Name	HLL or L2	Dominant Language (determined by teacher)	Ethnicity (self-reported)	Spanish Literacy Level (determined by teacher)	Gender
Antonio	HLL	English	Puerto Rican	intermediate	M
Araceli	HLL	Spanish	Puerto Rican	advanced	F
Cristina	HLL	Spanish	Puerto Rican	advanced	F
David	HLL	English	American	beginner	M
Destiny	L2	English	African American	beginner	F
Dylan	L2	English	African American	beginner	M
Hernando	HLL	English	Puerto Rican American	beginner	M
Ignacio	HLL	Spanish	Puerto Rican	advanced	M
Jamarion	HLL	English	African American/ Puerto Rican	beginner	M
Jessie	L2	English	American	beginner	F
Jimena	HLL	Spanish	Dominican	advanced	F
Liliana	HLL	Spanish	Puerto Rican American	intermediate	F
Logan	HLL	English	Puerto Rican American	beginner	M
Madison	L2	English	American	beginner	F

Mrs. Flores was a middle-aged, short, joyful, and energetic lady who was passionate about being a bilingual teacher. She spoke fondly of special moments from her sixteen-year teaching career where she had felt she made a positive impact on students' lives. A native speaker of Spanish, born and raised in Ecuador, Mrs. Flores moved to the U.S. for school and career opportunities in her twenties.

A Tale of Two Semesters

Although there were ten HLLs and four L2 learners in the focal class, the two groups often evened out due to some HLLs' frequent absences and administrators periodically removing other HLLs from Spanish class for English language remediation. During the observations that occurred in October, November, and December, Mrs. Flores primarily had her students work in mixed dyads (HLL-L2 learners). Mrs. Flores initially approached the curriculum with the mindset that pairing students heterogeneously was the most effective way to teach them. While there were many other available options, Mrs. Flores asked the so-called "Spanish-dominant" students to teach their "English-dominant" partners. In fact, she constantly referred to her pairing strategy and the roles and responsibilities inherent in these partnerships. Positioning "Spanish-dominant" students as teachers for the "English-dominant" students reveals Mrs. Flores' underlying assumption that the "Spanish-dominant" HLLs possessed sufficient linguistic and cultural expertise to teach the content to their "English-dominant" peers. On the other hand, Mrs. Flores clearly assumed that the

"English-dominant" students in her room required assistance from peers, regardless of their language aptitude or heritage connection to Spanish.

Mrs. Flores' instructional choice of creating "Spanish-dominant" and "English-dominant" dyads reveals the accretive effect of her conceptions of her diverse group. Because she had taught mixed classes in bilingual schools for sixteen years, Mrs. Flores approached her students through the lens of her previous experience and impressions of working with similar students over time. Wortham (2006) spoke to the issue of presuppositions: "classroom identities early in the year are constrained by widely circulating presuppositions" (p. 18). So rather than starting with a blank slate, Mrs. Flores drew on her store of experiences and implicit and explicit messages about students that circulated more broadly in the school.

However, Mrs. Flores opened the second semester with the following statement that characterized her change in instructional approach: "Listen up. A big change is coming" she said. The "big change" was that Mrs. Flores had received administrative approval to begin test prep for students deemed advanced enough to try the state Spanish language assessment. The state had not allowed students to take this assessment for the two previous years but it had recently been reinstated. Mrs. Flores explained that eighth grade students who could pass the state's Spanish language assessment would receive high school credit for Spanish I. The students who were deemed "advanced" by Mrs. Flores would be set on a different instructional path, marked by this test preparation.

Mrs. Flores labeled HLLs Antonio, Araceli, Ignacio, Jimena and Liliana "advanced Spanish-dominant," thereby granting them the opportunity to take the state Spanish assessment. When the researcher inquired about how students were selected, Mrs. Flores characterized these "advanced Spanish-dominant" students as possessing a larger linguistic skill set than their "English-dominant" peers. Her tracking procedures imply the assumption that the "advanced" students separated themselves from their peers through the linguistic skills that they brought to the classroom. In contrast, students who either had a loose heritage connection, or none at all, were depicted as entering the classroom with a "tabula rasa" upon which to begin dumping information.

Data Collection

Acting as a participant observer, the researcher became an active part of the classroom community, visiting the class 26 times between October and March. Both the teacher and students came to see the researcher as a Spanish resource in the classroom. The students regularly approached the researcher to ask procedural or content questions. The students seemed comfortable with the researcher, and in informal one-on-one conversations with her, revealed personal information, such as their home language use and knowledge about their heritage culture as well as prior educational experiences.

In order to capture whole-class interaction ethically, consent forms were sent home which asked parents for permission to video record 26 class sessions. All fourteen students were ultimately recorded because each parent provided written consent and the students gave assent. A small video recorder was positioned on a tripod in the back of the classroom with the majority of the video capturing the back of

the students' heads in order to be as inconspicuous as possible. Additionally, naturally occurring paired and group work was audio recorded for all students in the focal class. The oral activities were assigned by the classroom teacher without input from the researcher. Small, discreet audio recorders were chosen to help mitigate students' sensitivity to the recorder. Detailed transcripts of the classroom discourse were created by the researcher after each visit. Throughout the analytic process, the researcher returned to the transcripts of interactional data to check and re-check the data in order ensure its adherence to actual classroom events.

The video recorder was utilized to record photographic artifacts of both the classroom setting and local classroom interactions to capture the classroom setting in a broad way. Student work was also photographed with the goal of gauging the sort of academic learning that was typical in the class. Copies of any papers handed to students were collected by the researcher and analyzed to facilitate a better understanding of general learning tasks and activities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing, recursive process. During observations, a laptop was used to record observations of classroom interactions in observation notes for the purpose of answering the research question. These observation notes were detailed to create more composed and polished fieldnotes after each visit. Information gleaned from the observations and fieldnotes assisted the researcher by adding important information about classroom structure and procedures, student participation, and contextual cues that helped identify subtleties in the classroom discourse.

The analytic process was ongoing during the data collection period because each evening the researcher typed up the day's fieldnotes and added as many relevant details to the notes as possible. The purpose of completing the write up as close as possible to the site visit was that it remained freshest in the researcher's memory. Transcription also happened continuously over the six month course of the study. The researcher transcribed corresponding video and audio recordings from each classroom visit as soon as possible before visiting the classroom again. The researcher transcribed any feature of the classroom discourse that could possibly offer insight into the students' classroom experience. For example, both tone and eye rolling were included in transcripts when they were noticed. These discourse features alerted the researcher to moments where students appeared to be sarcastic or irritated. Proximity was also important when the two student groups were physically separated. The researcher transcribed instances when students communicated amongst their smaller groups as well as when they elevated the volume of their voices to reach the other group. Ultimately, 21 hours of video recordings and six hours of audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher using transcription software.

Once written transcripts were checked for adherence to actual classroom events, the researcher began first cycle coding and then proceeded to second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive codes like "off task" and "eager to learn" were salient during first cycle coding. The researcher then utilized pattern coding by color coordinating common first cycle codes to chart their appearance within and across the lessons and days. Pattern coding (a second cycle coding method) was particularly useful for grouping descriptive codes into emerging themes or explanations. For ex-

ample, "resistance" and "compliance" ended up being the link between descriptive codes like "off task" and "eager to learn" and larger emerging themes about classroom behavior. After reviewing and revising the first and second cycle codes, final codes were aggregated into categories. Salient patterns and trends emerged to provide insight into answering the broad research question. Using the constant comparative method, the researcher emerged with themes which captured the essence of the data (Thomas, 2011).

The researcher triangulated the data by collecting multiple sources (artifacts, observations/fieldnotes, audio recordings, and video recordings) and incorporating member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking consisted of asking Mrs. Flores to inspect the fieldnotes and transcripts for accuracy. The data were also triangulated by checking for patterns within and across different visits and data types for congruence.

Findings

Educational Affordances and Constraints

Instead of allowing her current students to fully explore and negotiate their own social identities in the classroom, Mrs. Flores' past teaching experiences came to bear on the options available to this particular class. Since students were initially labeled and categorized by Mrs. Flores, based upon her assessment of their language proficiency, their identities developed according to the various constraints placed upon them. The social identities ascribed to students based on the labels given to them had important implications for academic learning, as these labels opened doors for certain students while simultaneously closing them for others. For example, the state language assessment was only available to students that Mrs. Flores deemed ready for the test. Only the so-called "advanced Spanish-dominant" HLLs in the focal class were allowed to take the state test and thereby possibly earn credit for Spanish I in high school.

In contrast, the so-called "English-dominant" students were not conceived of as capable of passing the test by Mrs. Flores, despite their language abilities or motivation levels. This type of categorization was evident throughout the discourse and had pervasive implications for student learning because Mrs. Flores clearly assumed that the "advanced Spanish-dominant" HLLs already knew a sufficient amount of Spanish and did not require classroom instruction. However, this stance did not afford the "advanced Spanish-dominant" HLLs the learning opportunities they deserved as students in this Spanish class at a bilingual school. To problematize Mrs. Flores' entrenched vision of what it means to be a prototypical heritage learner, the "English-dominant" HLLs were not blank receptacles awaiting an information dump. Instead, these diverse learners demonstrated students' individual uniqueness even within subcategories of heritage learners.

Physical Separation of Two Subgroups

Starting in January, Mrs. Flores physically separated the five "advanced Spanish-dominant" students from the remainder of the class. For the majority of the time, this group was relocated to a table at the back of the room where they worked togeth-

er quietly on form-focused test-prep worksheets while Mrs. Flores used direct instruction with the other group of students. Mrs. Flores definitely attempted to check in with the "advanced Spanish-dominant" group but a majority of her instructional time and attention was devoted to the other group. This physical separation in accordance with the corresponding labels created a tension between the two groups of learners which is demonstrated interactionally in the following excerpt.

Excerpt

HLL Ignacio: I guess we have to do our own work because we are Spanish-speakers…we're *advanced*. So, that's why they don't join us.

HLL Antonio: But why do we have to do extra work? It's way harder… what we do.

HLL Jimena: Well, their work is too easy for us because we already know it from home. So, we have to do more advanced stuff. That's why we're *advanced*.

HLL Antonio: But, I don't really speak *that* much Spanish. I'm not really *advanced* like you two.

HLL Ignacio: Look at David. He's over there working with them because he doesn't speak Spanish.

HLL David: Yes, I do! I just don't speak *that much* Spanish…I only know a little. [motions with his hand to signal a little]

This exchange between HLLs of varying proficiency levels and diverse heritage connections typifies the classifications set up by the teacher and the resulting student negotiations of their places within such a rigid system. The HLLs were subcategorized based on language skills. Therefore, only the "advanced Spanish-dominant" HLLs were provided membership into the test-prep group. In contrast, the "English-dominant" HLLs were grouped with the L2 learners.

In this excerpt, students attempted to make sense of their physical separation in the classroom which was never addressed by the teacher. Additionally, students grappled with understanding how Mrs. Flores had subcategorized the HLLs into the "advanced-Spanish dominant" subgroup. Note that while David is a HLL, Mrs. Flores did not consider him to be a part of the "advanced-Spanish dominant" subgroup like his fellow HLLs Ignacio, Antonio, and Jimena. Consequently, during this excerpt, David was sitting with the L2 learners and the other HLLs whom Mrs. Flores had not labeled "advanced Spanish-dominant" working on textbook assignments. The classroom was small so the groups could often hear each other talking.

In this excerpt, the "advanced Spanish-dominant" group attempted to understand their physical distance from their classmates as well as their differentiated tasks. HLL Ignacio supposed that the distinction between the two groups had to do with the labels applied to them. He employed the strategy of what Gumperz (1982) called "contextualization" of the differences in signs between the two groups. Wortham (2006) described signs as "any utterance or object that people find culturally meaningful" (p. 32). Clearly, these four HLLs found the sign or label "advanced" impactful in categorizing the two groups. The sign "advanced" in this interaction was meaning-

ful as it related to the shifting metapragmatic model (Wortham, 2006) that students were trying to make sense of. That is to say, the salience of the term "advanced" for this group and the implications for social identification and academic learning was based upon the shifting metapragmatic model or "model of recognizable kinds of people participating in a recognizable kind of interaction" (Wortham, 2006, p. 32).

The classroom discourse in this excerpt reveals affordances and constraints for certain students based upon their teachers' categorizations of them. Ignacio's opening statement depicts this dichotomizing at work interactionally, as he used the pronoun "we" to reference the group of "advanced Spanish speakers" while creating a marked boundary between the advanced group and all other students in the class. He said, "I guess we have to do our own work because we are Spanish speakers… we're *advanced*. So, that's why they don't join us." Ignacio distinguished himself and the other advanced students as "Spanish speakers" and implied that the other students in the class are not Spanish speakers, utilizing the pronoun "they" to refer to them. There is clearly an "us versus them" situation constructed in Ignacio's remarks as he tries to makes sense of this new configuration.

Although Ignacio equated the "advanced" status with being "Spanish speakers" and effectively depicted "advanced" students as the only Spanish speakers in the class, his conversational partners took issue with the generalization that the labels and enactment of being "advanced" and a "Spanish speaker" went hand-in-hand. First, Antonio rejected Ignacio's characterization of him as "advanced" by contesting his status with an assessment of his perceived language ability: "But, I don't really speak *that* much Spanish. I'm not really *advanced* like you two." In this utterance, Antonio problematized Ignacio's interpretation of the "advanced" status by creating a distinction between himself and Jimena and Ignacio. Antonio self-identified in this utterance as less advanced than his peers. Antonio problematized the assumption that all of the "advanced" students deserved the labels "advanced Spanish speakers" on the grounds of their linguistic abilities. He seemed to suggest that the local models of identity available to the students did not accommodate for the nuances of their realities.

Antonio not only problematized his inclusion in the "advanced Spanish-dominant" group, he connected this social identity of "being advanced" with additional assignments of incremental difficulty that he mildly resisted. He questioned his placement in the group and the additional work he was therefore required to complete, saying: "But why do we have to do extra work? It's way harder… what we do." It appears that Antonio believes this is unfair treatment as he does not position himself as a true "advanced" student in the classroom discourse. While an adult like Mrs. Flores can see the value in testing out of a high school language course, Antonio does not seem to view this as an advantage.

In sum, the students worked discursively to understand and explain the new classroom structure which subcategorized the HLLs and separated them into two distinct groups. This exchange and the information revealed within it help us begin to understand students' complex experiences and negotiations as language learners in this mixed class. It allows us to examine in greater detail the various experiences different students had in this environment. For students in the "advanced Spanish-dominant" group, the curriculum and instruction on an interactional level privileged

them as "legitimate" Spanish users but simultaneously marginalized them as HLLs deemed to not need instructional support. These social identities afforded the "advanced" students educational opportunities as well as classroom autonomy but also constrained their classroom language learning by presupposing that they already knew Spanish well enough. Conversely, the curriculum as it was enacted constrained opportunities for the "English-dominant" group regardless of heritage status. These students were categorized as learners requiring assistance and incapable of matching the "advanced" group's Spanish skills. They were viewed as non-Spanish speakers even if they had a loose heritage connection to Spanish. Furthermore, they were positioned both physically and interactionally as outsiders by the existing hierarchical structure. However, they did receive the vast majority of the teacher's attention and were provided opportunities to improve their limited Spanish skills in class which were not available to the "advanced" group.

Temporarily Reunited

There was a brief, temporary departure from the subcategorization of the HLLs and resultant physical separation in class during a research project that Mrs. Flores assigned everyone. Students worked primarily in mixed dyads (HLL & L2 Learner) chosen by Mrs. Flores. The dyads were assigned a Spanish-speaking country to research, and provided with a rubric detailing project requirements and expectations. Students utilized a classroom set of iPads to complete the research. The research project culminated in each dyad creating a Glog (an interactive, web-based poster) on their country. This collaborative research project on Spanish-speaking countries created a new learning opportunity, allowing students to work on open-ended tasks to explore the language and culture creatively.

Mrs. Flores stated to the researcher that the project was designed to provide the HLLs an opportunity to use their cultural knowledge as a resource. However, she insisted that each group select a different Spanish-speaking country to research and present so that the entire class could learn about multiple countries during the final presentations. Since the class' heritage learners were of Dominican or Puerto Rican descent, the project guidelines created opportunities for some students to share their knowledge of the heritage culture whereas other HLLs researched an unfamiliar country.

Overall, the students were engaged and worked collaboratively in pairs during this project. Students appeared to enjoy using the iPads for research purposes as they learned about the currency, religion, music, cuisine, etc. of their assigned country. The HLLs seemed excited to share their knowledge of cultural elements with their peers. Some HLLs made connections between the culture of their assigned Spanish-speaking country and their heritage country, if they were different. For example, HLL Liliana was excited that she could share her grandmother's flan recipe with classmates, as flan was also considered a typical dessert of her assigned country, Spain. Other HLLs noticed distinct cultural traditions from their heritage country and the assigned one. In one illustrative example, a Puerto Rican HLL named Araceli was researching Colombia and encountered the native Colombian Carnival dress. She was very surprised because the clothing did not resemble anything she had been exposed to in Puerto Rican culture.

During the presentation phase, each dyad taught the class about their country using their Glog, which was displayed on the overhead projector. Students played audio clips of their country's music, showed videos of traditional dances, and offered samples of authentic cuisine to their classmates. Students who researched cultures that were familiar used their cultural "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) as a resource. Although not explicitly instructed to do so by their teacher, when HLLs presented on an unfamiliar country, they often brought up differences between their heritage culture and the one they were presenting to the class (like the flan example above). Students seemingly enjoyed sharing their new knowledge of the Spanish-speaking culture with the class during the presentation of their Glogs. The iPad portion of the assignment, along with the interesting content they researched, kept the students actively engaged with the project. All of the students completed the country project and earned a B or higher.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of middle school HLLs in a mixed Spanish classroom. The findings reveal that the teacher's categorization of her diverse class created a rigid hierarchical structure that students were unable to traverse. Mrs. Flores first labeled and categorized her class as either "Spanish-dominant" or "English-dominant" based upon her assessment of their language abilities. Later, according to her own perception of their language abilities, she subcategorized some "Spanish-dominant" students into a smaller group which she labelled "advanced Spanish-dominant."

Assumptions about students' linguistic skills and cultural affiliations constrained their potential social identities in the classroom. These social identities correlated with specific classroom roles and responsibilities for particular kinds of students. The "advanced Spanish- dominant" HLLs were privileged by their ascribed social identities and therein had extra learning opportunities which were unavailable to the "English dominant" group. Hornberger & Link (2012) cautioned against such a narrow view of diverse students and the correlated academic impact, "as school populations become increasingly linguistically diverse, refusing to acknowledge the language resources of students and their families limits the possibilities for their educational achievement" (p. 240).

This paper argues that labels attributed to the focal students constrained the social identities available to them in class. These social identities were inextricably linked to students' learning identities (Wortham, 2006) which marginalized the "advanced Spanish-dominant" group by way of partitioning them off from the rest of the class and leaving them without instructional support. The teacher's stance was that this group of students already "knew enough" Spanish and this justified her decision to work almost exclusively with the other group during class time. The curriculum and instruction in general appeared geared toward the so-called "beginners" in the class. In contrast to her conceptualization of the "advanced" group, the teacher believed that the "beginners" needed significant support in the classroom, so she bestowed upon the "advanced group" the task of helping their "English-dominant" peers.

This study supports the argument that schools often constrain opportunities for HLLs instead of promoting the development of their linguistic repertoires. De-

spite wide-spread recognition in the field of heritage language education that "minority languages are worth preserving and maintaining, rather than suppressing or ignoring" (Montrul, 2010, p. 3), it became evident that in this Spanish class, most of the HLLs were in fact either ignored or given very little attention. In general, the "advanced Spanish-dominant" students slipped through the cracks in Mrs. Flores' class, which is not a new story, as it is widely recognized that it is precisely these students whom the educational system has underserved for decades (Carreira & Kagan, 2018; Fairclough, 2012). Norton and Toohey (2001) also noted this marginalization of language users, when they wrote about the "often unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers" (p. 312). This type of situation is a cause for concern but it is also not completely surprising, as language educators on the whole have yet to figure out how to adapt schooling practices and pedagogy to meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

Limitations and Pedagogical Implications

This case study sheds light on the significant work that remains in the field of language education which often incorporates both HLLs and L2 learners in mixed classes. Classroom research is critical because HLLs are already in a great deal of American public classrooms today. Teachers are largely unaware of *how* to effectively teach HLLs and as an extension, *how* to approach the mixed classes that are commonplace in our nation's schools (Burgo, 2017; Kagan & Dillon, 2009). Therefore, more classroom-based studies such as the one presented here are needed to provide language instructors with information about how to meets the needs of these diverse classes (Carreira & Kagan, 2018).

Upon reflection of the situations observed in this class, educators must work collaboratively to reflect upon the impact of their classification systems and labeling practices on academic opportunities for *all* students. As Weis (2008) explained, "within schools, we need to acknowledge and legitimate the lived experiences of *all* students" (p. 252). Restrictive classification systems in schools often spill over into the classroom, where teacher practices have the opportunity to acknowledge and legitimate students' lived experiences, as Weis (2008) suggested, or marginalize and delegitimize them, as this study has shown. In maintaining status quo, educators are doing nothing to adapt schooling practices that have long been seen as underserving the culturally and linguistically diverse students that end up in American schools.

Students should be allowed to self-select labels, as Holley, Salas, Marsiglia, Yabiku, Fitzharris, and Jackson (2009) suggest, "at the very minimum, practitioners must allow youths to name themselves using labels they self-select" (p. 24). Self-identification without input from teachers or administrators is critically important because as this study has shown "schools have opportunities to shape youths' identities" (Holley et al., 2009). However, in this case, assumptions about students' linguistic and cultural identities constrained their potential social and learning identities in the classroom.

Furthermore, instead of blindly implementing the curriculum, educators ought to consider the actual consequences of the enacted curriculum for their specific diverse student population (Johnson, Yerrick, & Kearney, 2014). Teachers likewise must continually reflect on their practice during the planning, implementation,

and reflection stages in order to improve their pedagogy. Instead of casting students off as "lazy" or "incapable," educators must consider to what degree students may be resisting the enacted curriculum for the simple fact that they believe the curriculum does not reflect their reality. A better approach would be to utilize the strategy of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) whereby all students could "maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" alongside one another (p. 476).

One limitation of this study is that the researcher did not interview the HLLs on how they self-identified regarding language dominance. Although interviews are not a main focus of ethnographies such as the present study, it would have been interesting to compare the HLLs' self-perception of their language dominance with their teacher's perception. Therefore, future studies should interview HLLs to illuminate conflicts between students' self-perception and their teacher's perception of their language dominance.

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