

The Spanish Language: A Means to Conceptualize Our Hispanic Heritage in the U.S.

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This paper focuses on current qualitative and quantitative research in the area of the Spanish language in the United States. Statistics point out that by the year 2050, the United States of America will surpass Mexico in being the country with the greatest population of Spanish-speakers, by becoming the first country with the most speakers of this language in the entire world. This data is relevant whether or not immigration from Spanish-speaking countries continues. The Nielsen Report is a clear proof of how business, education, and other aspects of society are changing to personalize the demand of Hispanic and Latino corporations, having as a result, an increase of the Spanish language in the labor force. Furthermore, the often polemic subject of Spanish of the United States will be addressed as well as strategies of how Spanish (or any other heritage language) can be encouraged and taught inside and outside the classroom, serving this way as an educational tool to promote diversity and erase stereotypes.

Keywords: second/foreign language education, language acquisition methodology, bilingual-bicultural education, cultural studies

The individual's whole experience is built upon the plan of his language.

—Henri Delacroix

Reflection questions to consider before reading the article:

- (1) How do you define your identity?
- (2) What connection with the Spanish language or any of the Hispanic cultures do you have?
- (3) Name three instances where you use or would use Spanish in your life.
- (4) Why is Spanish or learning a second language important to you? Give specific examples.
- (5) Do you believe that knowing another language helps to enrich your way of thinking? How?
- (6) Do you think that the economy drives the language of a particular region?
- (7) How can you as an individual contribute to the Spanish or another language in the United States?
- (8) How can you contribute in helping to grow a bilingual American generation?

Introduction

Spanish has been present in the United States since the early 1700s due to Spanish colonization. The United States has been a greater number of years under the Spanish Crown than it has been under the British. This becomes evident when we observe the toponyms in the way that the streets, avenues, villages, or cities are

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named. This is just to mention that the Spanish language has already been part of the U.S. since the start of the Spanish colonization. Therefore, it would be beneficial to associate the Spanish language and culture as part of our own American identity and not to view it as foreign.

Identity, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2016), is “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (p. 1). The majority of Hispanics have chosen to retain their cultural roots and many even their language.

The U.S. Hispanic population is the largest minority segment and is growing at a dramatic rate towards ethnic plurality, which has already occurred in the most states and is beginning to occur among the U.S. baby population. Ethnic plurality refers to the coexistence of numerous ethnicities and races with no one segment in the majority. If the present U.S. economy substantially benefits from Hispanics, the future U.S. economy will depend on Hispanics by virtue of demographic change and the social and cultural shifts expected to accompany their continued growth. (Nielsen Report, 2012, p. 1)

The percentage of the demographics of the diverse Hispanic population reflects as follows: the Mexican-American population (66%), Puerto Ricans (9%), followed by Centro Americans and South Americans (15%), Cuban Americans (4%), and various (6%). These are the percentages submitted by the 2010 Census. Parallel to an increase of these populations, studies also point out where these populations are substantially increasing: New York, followed by Boston, Los Angeles, Houston, San Diego, San Antonio, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Miami. The Census also locates increments of Hispanic populations in U.S. states that in the past we would not identify with this cultural reality that exists in the present: Georgia, followed by Alabama, North Carolina, and Minnesota, followed by Maryland.

An increase of a diverse Hispanic population leads to visualizing these cultures among our everyday interaction reflected not only in a particular culture, but also in the language in different aspects of society. There are 48 media corporations that provide news in Spanish (see Table 1):

Table 1

Hispanic Media in the United States (Medios Latinos, 2002)

Aguila	Hispania News
Hola Hoy	Al Minuto
ImagenLatinoamericana	CNN en español
La Campana	Deportes Hoy
La Estrella	Diario Las Américas
La Prensa Orlando	Dos Mundos
La Prensa TX	El Argentino
El Día	El Clamor
El Herald	El Hispano
Laredo Morning Times	El Latino
La Nueva Opinión	El Nuevo Herald
La Oferta Review	El Paso Herald Post
La Opinión de Los Ángeles	El Popular
La Opinión de San Antonio	El Reportero
La Prensa de Minnesota	El Sol de La Florida
La Prensa de San Antonio	El Sol de San Diego
La Raza	El Sol de Texas
Laredo Morning Times	El Sol Latino

(table 1 continued)

New York Semanal	El Vocero Hispano
Nuevo Mundo	Enfoque Deportivo
Nueva Opinión	Estadio
Red Net Noticias	Florida Review
San Antonio Post	Hawaii Hispanic News
The Miami Herald	
The Wall Street Journal Interactivo	

Not many people think of the United States as one of the countries that represents the Hispanic world. Hispanics are the greatest minority in the country coming from diverse Spanish-speaking populations. According to data, by the year 2050, the United States of America will surpass Mexico in being the country with the greatest population of Spanish-speakers, by becoming the number one country in the entire world. According to the 2010 Census, currently, there are 55.4 millions of registered Hispanics. This data is relevant whether or not immigration from Spanish-speaking countries continues. We also need to be mindful that English is not the official language in the United States. In fact, the U.S. does not have an official language. Spanish has become the second most used language in the United States. It has therefore become visible in multiple spheres of our society, such as in professional and social areas, governmental, political, educational, economic, and commercial to name a few. Nielsen reported the following about the Hispanic market and consumption in the year 2012:

Finally, it is instructive to recognize that unique and useful vehicles for reaching Hispanics exist around language, media consumption, and technology adoption. Given the total market's dependence on Hispanics for future growth, tapping Hispanic preferences and purchasing behaviors is essential for any strategy or marketing plan to be successful. In forecasts of future consumption growth, the Hispanic share is significantly greater than that of non-Hispanics. The evidence for the distinctiveness and sustainability of Hispanic culture is convincing and implies a future American culture with a strong Hispanic flavor. (State of the Hispanic Consumer: The Hispanic Market Imperative, 2012, p. 15)

According to the projections for the year 2050, demographers predict that more than 25% of the U.S. population will be Hispanic, coming of diverse Spanish-speaking origins. In other words, one out of three people in the United States will be Hispanic. The origin and culture, as part of their identity, bring the language into the context of everyday life. Susana Rivera-Mills (2012) presented it as follows:

There is little doubt that the number of Latinos in the United States is on the rise and with them the Spanish language. In research released in 2010 by the economist José Luis García Delgado, the Spanish language is second, behind English, in the number of US speakers. Delgado states that, in the United States, Spanish is rapidly becoming “a cultural product very much valued by second and third generations of Hispanics, well educated, and wishing to remain faithful to their roots and the language. (Rivera-Mills quotes García Delgado, 2010, p. 21)

Parallel to an increase in Hispanic cultures, the Spanish language will also continue to increase within the U.S. population. Projections forecast that by 2050, the United States will be the first Spanish-speaking country in the world:

The estimates made by the United States Census Bureau talk that Hispanics will be 132.8 million in 2050, almost triple the 55.4 million today. Hence 30% of the population, almost one in every three residents in the United States will be Hispanic. (Instituto Cervantes, 2013, p. 11)

A visible growth within the Hispanic population points to an increase of the Spanish language in the United States. Some of these reasons are to retain their own identity and culture, which had been previously addressed. The market is also very interested in personalizing the products to the Hispanic market. How do they do this? They do so by utilizing the language, Spanish, as their primary code to sell their product. Hence, it is the economy that drives the target language in the market. The Nielsen Report provided “a general foundation for building effective strategies that will increasingly be the primary drivers of growth in virtually all product and services categories” (Nielsen, 2012, p. 15). In the year 2012, Nielsen published the increasing demand of products in the market and how this contributes to the U.S. market by primarily studying the Hispanic demand in the market and by personalizing the products they consume since the Hispanic market is increasingly larger than other populations in the U.S., according to data represented in the U.S. market. Nielsen reported that “Understanding the distinctive patterns of demographics, culture, and consumption can lead the way to a sizeable and growing impact on total market share” (p. 15). Canalizing the products to meet the Hispanic demand requires decoding their own cultures as well as having a broad understanding of the varieties of the Spanish language.

The Spanish Language in the U.S.

A language is the actual code to communicate meaning to a specific population. In the case of Hispanic population, it is the Spanish language. Sixty years ago, it was not easy for Hispanics to retain their roots due to the history of the United States. Therefore, a great number of Latinos would not encourage their children to speak Spanish and many lost their mother tongue as well as some parts of their culture. However, these days, the situation in this country looks very different. ACTFL, the American Council of Teaching of Foreign Languages, is promoting and encouraging a bilingual generation of Americans. ACTFL has encouraged the new generation of Hispanics to not only be bicultural, but also be bilingual.

Raising bilingual children is not an easy task since there is a time when the English language competes with the Spanish language and the child “chooses” a language of production. This scenario often causes a child to select a language in favor of another one; the latter being English. This is due to the fact that English tends to be the academic language as well as the primary language in social circles. It is at this point where the parents’ influence can make the difference in the retention of the heritage language as well as its production.

Benefits of Bilingualism

Bilingualism in today’s globalized world is not a luxury anymore, but has become a necessity. Studies indicate that students who are bilingual show greater respect and appreciation for other cultures. Furthermore, knowing more than language facilitates the process of learning a third or fourth language since skills transfer. Research in bilingualism has also demonstrated a delay of four years in dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. Finally, bilingualism helps in team-building, makes connections, and facilitates the understanding of other cultures and its people, which is key in our globalized world.

How Can We Contribute to Raising a Generation of Bilingual Americans?

By nature, the United States has been multilingual since the beginning of time. When the European powers came to the American Continent, they kept their language. Today, both Spanish and English are widely spoken and studied in the U.S. Instead of viewing one language over another as if it were a competition, it would be

beneficial to view both languages as complimentary. Speaking two languages is equivalent to understanding more people and having a wider perspective of the world.

If one is already familiar with the Spanish language, some contributions at a personal level would be the following: get to know the language formally; love your cultural roots: Spanish is part of your identity. A sociolinguist, María Antonieta Andión, explained the importance of the language as key to understand culture:

Las lenguas no solo son portadoras de unas formas y unos atributos lingüísticos determinados, sino que también son capaces de transmitir significados o connotaciones sociales, además de valores sentimentales. Las normas y marcas culturales de un grupo se transmiten o enfatizan por medio de la lengua. (Andión, 2013, p. 11)

It is also important to do a constant effort when communicating in the target language. It is often easier to use the English translation as a resource, instead of being mindful and finding the proper word in Spanish. Here is a concrete example:

E.g. –¿Te apetece un *cupcake*, hijo? Instead of saying: *una magdalena*, *un pastelito*

If we make an effort to find the proper word, our vocabulary as well as our fluency will also increase. Furthermore, it is also important to refer about a Spanish-speaking country with passion and positivism (to our students, children or nephews, etc.) in order to break stereotypes. Also, it is important to look for opportunities where Spanish is spoken. Our own home is the first opportunity to do so. Friends, associations, or clubs that share the same interests would be a second sphere where this could be put into practice. Using Socratic Dialogue as a way to use other's critical thinking is a successful way to help the speaker learn on the long-run, instead of just providing the answer by means of translation. This technique should be also accompanied by the implementation of positive reinforcement.

E.g. –¿Qué habéis hecho hoy en el cole, chicos?

–Hemos pintado buildings de San Antonio en la clase de arte.

–¿Habéis pintado qué cariño? (It is important that to help the speaker use his/her critical thinking instead of just providing him/her with an answer)

–Ah, vale, habéis pintado edificios importantes de San Antonio. ¡Qué bien!

Reading is another way to increase literacy and help with expanding vocabulary as well as unconsciously absorbing the syntax of the language. Finally, traveling to any of the Spanish-speaking countries is a means to provide people with the opportunity to listen, read, and speak the target language as well as to learn about the culture.

Conclusion

To sum up, statistics point out that by the year 2050, the United States of America will surpass Mexico in having the greatest population of Spanish-speakers, thus becoming the first country with the most Spanish speakers in the entire world. This data is relevant whether or not immigration from Spanish-speaking countries continues. The Nielsen Report serves a clear proof of how business, education, the media, and other aspects of society are changing to personalize the demand of Hispanic and Latino corporations, having, as a result, an increase of the utilization of the Spanish language in the labor force. Research has shown that being bilingual and bicultural greatly contributes to the understanding of others. As a result, the American Council of Teaching

of Foreign Language indicates its objective of raising a generation of bilingual Americans. Thus, as experts in language and culture, ACTFL considers that this will only contribute to American culture, but that it will also have a domino effect in the U.S. economy. As the Nielsen Report highlighted, “the future U.S. economy will depend on Hispanics by virtue of demographic change and the social and cultural shifts expected to accompany their continued growth” (p. 1). The Nielsen Report also pointed out that it has become increasingly important to challenge commonly held misconceptions about the Latino market that undermines the importance of its size, uniqueness, and value. The topics of this report draw on compelling evidence of market change and the perspective of marketers who have proven success in the Latino marketplace. Thus, learning Spanish is no longer a luxury, but is increasingly becoming a necessity for Americans.

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