



Recognizing the Needs and Talents of the Heritage Language Learner

SUMMARY

Heritage Language Learners have different needs from those of the traditional student studying languages other than English. Using a multiple case study design, the authors determined how middle-level teachers are modifying instruction to address the unique needs and talents of the HLL.

This article addresses recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10 and 11 of the “Reading Next” and recommendations 1, 10, and 11 of the “Writing Next” reports of the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. (See pages 95-96 and 98)

Heritage Language

Learning is a recent field of inquiry, drawing from research on second language acquisition, primary literacy instruction, and bilingual education. Lynch (2003) conducted a review of the literature on second language acquisition and bilingual education and compared those recommendations to the needs of HLLs. Often, the heritage speakers have learned basic language as their primary language, but do not have formal education in this language. His findings recommend that effective heritage language instruction blend native and second language teaching methods.

Literature overwhelmingly suggests separate classes for HLLs and non-HLLs, particularly at the beginning levels (Anderson, 2000; Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001; Roca,

2000; Roca & Colombi, 2003; Salaberry & Lafford, 2006; Webb & Miller, 2000). In smaller schools, or in large schools with a small number of HLLs, it is not always possible to have a separate course for HLLs. In smaller LOTE departments, both the HLLs and the non-HLLs are enrolled in the same class. The recommendations for working with HLLs are still valid, but may need adjustment based on the heterogeneous composition of the class.

A study of Chinese HLLs found that students felt their language use was restricted in the classroom due to the inclusion of non-HLLs (Weger-Guntharpe, 2006). For the formal study to have an impact on proficiency, instruction must be targeted to address HLL talents and needs. Teachers must know the abilities and

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interests of students (Romero, 2000; Lacorte & Canabal, 2003). Matsunaga (2003) suggested HLL students be grouped homogeneously for oral proficiency activities, but heterogeneously for reading activities. As HLLs have learned basic oral skills (listening and speaking) from their family, literacy (reading and writing) is an area where students' needs outweigh their talents. Therefore, teachers of beginning level language classes should focus on activities to promote reading and writing to help HLLs increase their language proficiency.

Heritage Language Proficiency as a Special Talent

If one were to view proficiency in a second language as a special talent, it may be appropriate to address Heritage Language Learners in a method similar to the way gifted and talented students are instructed. HLLs enter the formal study of a LOTE with prior knowledge. They know vocabulary and basic sentence structure in the language of study, and

some HLLs have been translating for non-English speaking relatives, so they are aware of the intricacies of language. HLLs are already able to function to some degree in American culture and the culture of the target language, as their family incorporates the two languages and cultures. They have the special talent of navigating the world in two languages.

As Lowe (2002) states, "Bilingual children will need particular provision in school but may or may not, ultimately, have the potential to become highly proficient linguists" (p. 143). HLLs learn the dialect spoken in the home, and are accustomed to the norms and traditions of that particular culture. In order to be successful in the formal study of language, students must learn a wider vocabulary base of the language of study. The formal study of a language includes the study of products, practices, and perspectives of countries where the language is spoken

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(National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). The challenge for teachers of HLLs is to bridge the gap between the home language and the standard dialect, while increasing grammatical precision and literacy skills.

Curriculum compacting is one way to address potentially gifted students in the regular classroom. “Curriculum compacting has three major objectives: (1) to create a more challenging learning environment, (2) to guarantee proficiency in the basic curriculum, and (3) to buy time for more appropriate enrichment and/or acceleration activities (Renzulli & Reis, 1986, p. 232). Curriculum compacting “relieves gifted students of the boredom that often results from unchallenging work” (Renzulli, Smith, & Reis, 1982, p. 193). Reis, Burns, & Renzulli (1982) identified the steps in curriculum compacting, which included the identification of learning objectives, pretesting students who may already possess mastery of those objectives, and the development of enrichment or acceleration of materials for students who demonstrate mastery.

The Study

The current study explored the instructional practices of traditional LOTE classrooms with Heritage Language Learners. Fifteen teachers completed a survey to determine how they would differentiate instruction for HLLs in the traditional middle-level Spanish classroom. In addition, seven classes were observed to determine instructional practices and differentiation strategies used with HLLs and non-HLLs.

Two instruments were developed for this study. The Instructional Scenarios Questionnaire (ISQ) described units of study and asked respondents what instructional activities they would assign to described HLLs. Responses were both open-ended and Likert scale. The ISQ was piloted and then sent to a Jury of Experts to establish content validity. Fifteen teachers of Spanish completed the ISQ. The Instructional Practices Record (IPR) was developed to record observations during classroom observations. The IPR required the observer to note the language-learning skill for each activity, and then to record the participation by an HLL and non-HLL in the class. The researcher and two additional teachers piloted the IPR to establish inter-rater reliability. Five middle-level teachers were selected by convenience for classroom observations.

Results of the study

On the first part of the ISQ, teachers were asked to describe activities for two HLLs in different units. Fifty-two out of 117 responses (44%) describe activities that represent modification strategies that meet the needs of the HLLs described in the scenarios. Figure 1 shows the frequency of modification strategies described by teachers in the open-ended scenarios.

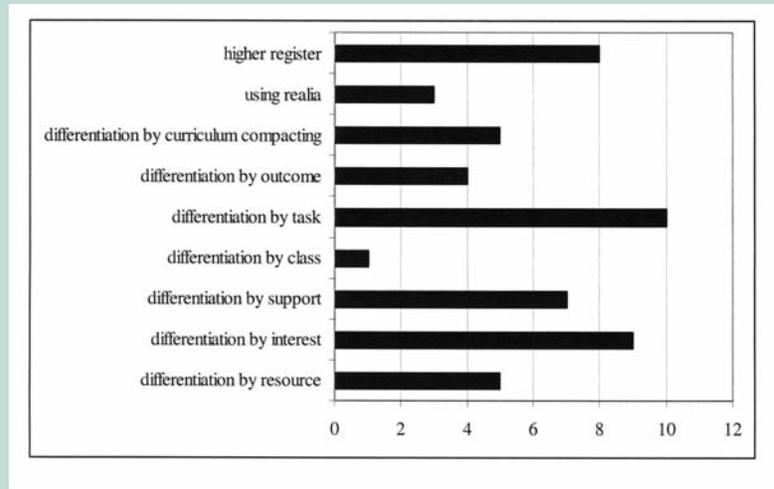
On the second part of the ISQ, teachers were asked to consider an HLL and a non-HLL in the same instructional unit and determine the likelihood with which they would assign a specific activity to each student. Teachers overwhelmingly suggested the same activities for each student.

Twenty-seven activities were observed during seven classroom observations. No differentiation was observed in 25 activities (93%). Both of the modified activities focused on grammatical accuracy through listening skills. In five of the seven classes, there was no observation of differentiation strategies. HLLs and non-HLLs participated in the same activities, and the teachers did not provide any additional vocabulary, resources, or support. The results of the classroom observations indicate that teachers do not modify instruction to meet the needs of HLLs.

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Figure 1:

Frequency of modification strategies reported by teachers



According to Languages Other Than English Checkpoint A: Resource Guide (The University of the State of New York, 2001), the students at the beginning level of LOTE study should be able to “understand the main idea and some details of simple informative materials written for native speakers” (p. 4). The realia suggested in the ISQ were selected because they represent authentic materials that are not commonly used in beginning level courses but would be appropriate for students who have the degree of proficiency suggested in the scenario. Table 1 indicates the total responses to both the HLL and non-HLL scenarios for these activities because the activities involving use of realia were seldom recommended for modification.

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Table 1:

Frequency of Anticipated Use of Suggested Realia Activities

Suggested activity	Very likely	Probably	Possibly	Not likely
1. read an article from the Spanish newspaper <i>El País</i> and answer related questions	3	10	13	4
2. read listings from a travel brochure about places in town	11	10	4	4
3. read the poem <i>La calle</i> by Octavio Paz and write a similar poem in Spanish	6	4	13	7

Note: One respondent did not provide an answer to the question about a travel brochure.

The data did not support that the teachers are incorporating authentic reading and writing tasks into their instructional practice. The teachers did not report assigning authentic reading or writing tasks. As these were skills often recommended for inclusion in an HLL curriculum, the data did not show evidence that the teachers were implementing these suggested strategies to address the needs of HLLs. At the beginning level of language study, reading and writing tasks are often limited to short notes and advertisements involving basic vocabulary and grammar structures. The HLLs need exposure to extended readings and formal writing experiences. “Language acquisition theory tells us that we acquire language

when we understand it. If this is true, ‘comprehensible input,’ messages we understand, will be the way to improve HLLs as well” (Cho, Shin, & Krashen, 2004, p. 7). Since Krashen (1981) recommends “optimal input includes structures that are ‘just beyond’ the acquirer’s current level of competence (p. 103)”, the teachers are doing a disservice to the HLLs by not providing them with increasingly more complex reading and writing tasks.

Curriculum Compacting for HLLs

Using methods adapted from instruction of gifted and talented students, the Curriculum Compactor (Reis et al., 1993) may be used to help teachers plan accelerated and enriched activities for HLLs. Two responses to the ISQ described techniques consistent with Curriculum Compacting. Teachers were asked to describe a way to assess prior knowledge and then describe some activities that would expand the vocabulary and grammar topics. Table 2 shows the Curriculum Compacting strategies suggested to address family member vocabulary.

Conclusion

Two important findings emerged from this study: (1) The teachers recognized the need to modify curriculum for HLLs; and (2) The teachers were not modifying the curriculum for HLLs. When asked to describe strategies to help specific students, the teachers stated activities that enrich instruction and advance the students' proficiency. By viewing heritage language proficiency as a special talent, teachers will be able to modify instruction in a manner similar to the way it is modified for potentially gifted and talented students. Those teachers who have a systematic method of planning for modification of HLLs may be better prepared to plan appropriate activities for these students. Teachers of LOTE who continually assess each HLL's prior knowledge of grammar and vocabulary will be able to plan instruction that not only addresses student needs but also enriches their language talents. The Curriculum Compactor may be used to help teachers better plan learning activities that celebrate HLL talents, address their needs, and consistently augment language proficiency.

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Table 2:

Curriculum compacting strategies suggested by respondents

Respondent	Assessment of prior knowledge	Activity to expand vocabulary	Activity to expand grammar
1	Write a description of your family in Spanish. How many members are there? Who are they and what are they like.	Describe in Spanish what each family member does for a living (professions)? Where does each work or go to school?	
2	Review family vocabulary and see what he remembers (immediate and extended family). Incorporate 'tener.'	Teach about pets and family activities, description of each family member.	He can create a family tree and pick five out of 20 members to write about including the physical description of that person and their likes/dislikes.

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