

Spanish as a heritage language in the United States: An overview

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Por
*Eulises Avellaneda Duarte**

Abstract

Day by day, the Latino cultural influence in the United States becomes more significant, so the importance of Spanish language has risen considerably. This study analyzes the possibilities that new generations of people born in North America and brought up in a Spanish-speaking household have regarding their culture and language. The document provides an overview of the language programs that have become a necessity in many states due to their high number of Latino residents, and how these programs influence the Hispanic community, as well as the increasing importance that the community is taking since Latino vote is now an objective for most US politicians.

Keywords

Brought up, hispanic, spanish-speaking, program.

El español como lengua de herencia en los Estados Unidos: Una vision general

Resumen

Día a día, la influencia cultural latina en los Estados Unidos se hace más significativa, por lo que la importancia del idioma español ha aumentado considerablemente. Este estudio analiza las posibilidades que las nuevas generaciones de personas que han nacido en América del Norte y han sido criados en un hogar hispanoparlante tienen con respecto a su cultura e idioma. Este documento ofrece una visión general de los programas de idiomas que se han convertido en una necesidad en muchos estados debido a su elevado número de residentes latinos, y cómo estos programas influyen en la comunidad hispana, así como la creciente importancia que la comunidad está tomando desde que el voto latino se ha convertido en un objetivo para la mayoría de los políticos estadounidenses.

Palabras clave

Criados, hispano, hispanoparlante, programa.

* Doctoral ABD, University of South Florida.

Le patrimoine de la langue espagnole aux États-Unis: un aperçu complet

Résumé

Jour après jour, l'influence culturelle des communautés latines implantées aux États-Unis devient plus significative, et l'importance de la langue espagnole s'est considérablement accrue. Cette étude analyse les opportunités dont disposent les nouvelles générations de personnes nées en Amérique du Nord et ayant grandi dans un foyer hispanophone à l'égard de leur culture et de leur langue maternelle. Le document donne un aperçu des programmes linguistiques spécifiques devenus une nécessité pour de nombreux États en raison du nombre élevé de résidents Latino-américains, et de la façon dont ces programmes affectent l'importance croissante prise par la communauté hispanique du fait que « le vote latino » est désormais une cible pour la majorité des hommes politiques américains.

Mots clés

Race, hispanique, hispanophones, programme.

O Espanhol como língua de herança nos Estados Unidos: uma visão abrangente.

Resumo

Dia após dia, a influência cultural latina nos Estados Unidos torna-se mais significativa, por isso a importância da língua espanhola aumentou consideravelmente. Este estudo analisa o potencial que a nova geração de pessoas nascidas na América do Norte e criadas em famílias de língua espanhola têm em relação à sua cultura e língua. O artigo fornece uma visão geral dos programas de línguas que se tornaram uma necessidade em muitos estados por causa de seu alto índice de residentes latinos, e como esses programas afetam a comunidade hispânica, e também a crescente importância que a comunidade está tomando já que o voto latino é agora um alvo para a maioria dos políticos americanos.

Palavras-chave

Criados, hispano, hispano-falante, programa.

1. Introducción

Known as a country of immigrants, the melting pot, and more recently the salad bowl, the United States continues to be shaped and reshaped as new cultural groups become ubiquitous. Among the many cultures present in the American tapestry, Latinos lead the minority population growth and thus their cultural influence has become more preponderant. Latinos continue to be one of the fastest growing cultural groups in the United States, and it is estimated by the US Census Bureau that this minority group could become the majority in 2042 (Aemisegger, 2014).

Latinos have traditionally populated states such as California, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Florida, New Jersey and Illinois. However, recently this cultural group has shown considerable growth in states such as North Carolina, Georgia, and other traditionally White states such as Tennessee and Kansas.

This population growth has contributed to the notoriety of this cultural group at the national level. Particularly education and politics have seen how Latinos moved from the background to the front page. Spanish speaking students challenge the mainstream American educational system with their bilingualism and biliteracy. The K-16 educational system grapples with Spanish heritage speakers as their needs differ from those among monolingual English speakers. Heritage language (HL) programs have become a must in those states with high number of Latino students for their needs are particular and differ from those among foreign language learners.

With high numbers in a group, political power may become a reality. The Latino vote is now an objective for most politicians in the United States and its significance was particularly evident during the 2012 presidential election when 7 out of every ten Latinos voted for president Obama, compared to 2 out of 10 for candidate Romney, according to López and Taylor (2012), researchers from the Pew Institute. Politicians in American counties make education-related decisions they deem are best for their constituents, regardless of how much they know about their real needs. Education is commonly used as a way

to attract voters and therefore minorities may be appropriately represented in such decisions. In states where the Latino presence has been a constant the fight to implement or eliminate bilingual education has divided people and their political representatives.

2. The Latino presence in the United States

Even though the term Latino is rather recent, the Latino presence in the American territory is older than the country itself. The thirteen original colonies included people who spoke languages such as English, German, French, and Dutch among many others. To the south and the west of these territories, Spanish was the official language in what is today Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California and parts of Utah. This continuous Latino presence in the American territory, added to the growing numbers of people who identify themselves as Latino or of Latino descent create new realities in the American life style, particularly in education and politics.

3. Latinos: a definition

The word Latino is supposed to cover a variety of people under the premise that they speak Spanish or have been brought up in a Spanish-speaking household. It is usually interchangeable with Hispanic, although originally these two words meant two different things. In a country where race permeates every aspect of society, individuals are classified according to a race or ethnicity. People with Latin American/Spanish ancestry or origin challenge this American way of categorizing people since they do not fit the descriptors assigned to the other races. Thus, a person from Argentina may look White but does not speak English and has not been brought up in a Caucasian household. People from Latin America and Spain are already a mixture of races and cultures and therefore the easiest way for the American system was to label them Latinos or Hispanic.

The U.S. Government defines a Latino or Hispanic as “persons who trace their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish cultures” regardless of their race. Thus, Latinos are a mix of racial and ethnic groups from 22 different countries of origin and any assumptions made about them will most likely be inaccurate.

Four decades after the United States governmental mandate implementing the term “Hispanic” or “Latino” to categorize Americans who trace their roots to Spanish-speaking countries, a nationwide survey of Hispanic adults in 2012 found that these terms still haven’t been fully embraced by Hispanics themselves. A majority (51%) say they most often identify themselves by their family’s country of origin; just 24% say they prefer a pan-ethnic label (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2012). Identifying with a label perceived as not appropriate contributes to the confusion among Latino students. Many of these students were born in the United States and grew up speaking English as their first language while Spanish was only the language to interact with grandparents. However, when these students enter the American education system, they are classified as Latino due to their physical appearance. There have been cases of students who were placed in English as a second language classes even though English was their first language.

4. Latino students in the American educational system

Many Latino students are classified in the American educational system as Spanish heritage language (SHL) speakers if they have achieved a level of proficiency in Spanish that allows them to interact with other speakers of Spanish. The term heritage language (HL) had its origins in Canada when the Ontario Heritage Languages Programs started in 1977. In the United States the construct only became part of the American scholastic community in the late 1990s (Kagan & Dillon, 2008). It has been both widely adopted and criticized by many scholars. According to Beaudrie and Fairclough (2012), on the one hand the term evokes the idea of ancient, past, or even going back to colonial times, and a detriment of great gains during the civil rights era. The term has also developed more neutral and even positive connotations that include the

importance of cultural and linguistic patrimony as part of the richness of the American individuals. Some second language acquisition (SLA) scholars have also welcomed the field of heritage language since “it allows us to address fundamental theoretical debates in our field from different perspectives, including debates on the role of age, input, and environment, language transfer, linguistic mechanisms and the type of linguistic knowledge acquired before and after a critical period” (Montrul, 2008, p. 487).

This positive perspective of HL has generated the creation and implementation of instructional HL programs in the United States, particularly in those states with large populations of immigrants. Additionally, several areas of HL research have sprung up in the last two decades. Yet to date, finding a single definition for heritage language speakers (or learners) that has been adopted by most scholars is a rather illusive task.

5. Heritage language speakers (learners)

In order to be considered a speaker of a foreign or second language, a certain level of proficiency is expected. When it comes to heritage language learners (HLLs), proficiency is not necessarily a determinant factor. Most definitions in the literature considered it a key factor to decide whether or not someone can be considered an HL speaker. Others favor personal connections to the HL or to an HL community, even if the speakers are not able to use the language for real life purposes.

Fishman (2001) introduced the first categorization of HLLs according to the socio-historical connections to heritage groups in the United States. The first group included speakers of indigenous languages spoken by Native Americans before the arrival of Europeans. Some of the languages continued to be used by large communities of speakers while some others have become endangered. Speakers of languages such as Spanish, French, or German, which came from Europe or Latin America, were part of a second group, while speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Korean were classified as immigrant languages since they were more recent influxes of immigrant populations (Horneberger & Wang, 2008).

Another categorization of HLLs was outlined by Valdés (1995, 1997), in which she classified them according to their academic skills in English and their HL as well as their proficiency in the HL. It can be inferred from her categorization that HLLs could vary considerably within the groups. In a later publication, Valdés (2001) introduced what has become the most often cited definition of HL, particularly within the academic context. She described an HL as an individual “who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken. The student may speak or merely understand the heritage language and be, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language” (Valdés, 2001, p. 1).

According to her, the term heritage language is relatively new in the field of foreign language teaching. Before the National Standards in Foreign Language Learning project of 1996, these learners were referred as native speakers of the language, quasi-native speakers, or bilingual students. Because of the dissatisfaction among teachers and scholars with these terms, the Canadian term heritage language was adopted. Draper and Hicks (2000) defined an HL learner as:

Someone who has had exposure to a non-English language outside the formal education system. It most often refers to someone with a home background in the language, but may refer to anyone who has had in-depth exposure to another language. Other terms used to describe this population include ‘native speaker’, ‘bilingual’, and ‘home background’. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they can have very different interpretations. (as cited in Hornberger & Wang, 2008, p. 3).

This definition, as the previous one by Valdés (2001), placed importance on the proficiency in the heritage language the speaker has acquired. This aspect has received criticism because it may leave out many HLLs who do not necessarily have a level of linguistic proficiency but possess knowledge of cultural aspects of the heritage language or those who may self-identify as an HLL.

Recently, Kagan (2008) introduced a more conciliatory definition that included a broad and narrow perspective. Under a broad perspective, an HL learner is someone who grows up in a home where a language other than English is spoken, while the narrow perspective implies that the speaker has some basic

level of proficiency in the heritage language that allows interactions between them and proficient speakers of the language without major breakdowns.

One of the major challenges for researchers has been the continuum of bilingualism that HLLs have. It can be a daunting activity for both teachers and researchers to establish concrete findings about a population that includes individuals who have been exposed to the HL at home but who may have limited proficiency in it. Particularly, when the same definition is used to include learners who speak the HL for many years before beginning to learn English or who were even schooled in a country where the HL is spoken.

Although recognized authors such as Beaudrie and Fairclough (2012, p.7) advocated for a broad definition of HL as “an individual who has a personal or familial connection to a nonmajority language”, supporting the definition introduced by Fishman (2001), my personal experience as a high school Spanish HL teacher for almost a decade showed me that the level of proficiency in the HL plays a major role not only to be identified or to self-identify as an HL but also to succeed academically in the HL. Unfortunately being able to speak a heritage language does not imply that the student is able to perform academically in the HL.

I consider an HL speaker someone whose level of proficiency in speaking allows him to interact with other proficient speakers of the language, but who has developed even higher levels of listening comprehension due to years of exposure to the language at home. The learner may be illiterate in the HL but has developed academic skills in English that allow them to transfer skills or literacy in the HL through home schooling, community or public heritage language programs, or schooling in a country where the language is spoken, oftentimes their country of origin.

Thus, the definition coined by Valdés (2001) aligns more with my own ideas learned through years of working with Spanish heritage language learners. When an HL teacher has to make a decision whether to assign an HL learner to a class, time is of an essence and the easiest observable element is the learner’s ability to use the language orally. If a student is assigned a class where participants have higher levels of proficiency in the HL, it can have detrimental effects for the student’s motivation. During my experience

as a Spanish HL instructor, many students who had filled out their school application form indicating that Spanish was the first language spoken at home were assigned to my classes. However, they could not or did not want to interact with me and their classmates because they perceived their Spanish as incomplete and preferred to participate in English. Many requested a change of class and ended taking Spanish as a foreign language. Thus, an HL teacher may face a class where students have different levels of proficiency in the HL with challenges that this type of environment creates.

6. Spanish as a heritage language program

The large numbers of people who claim Latino heritage in The United States and who consequently have some level of language proficiency in Spanish would presuppose an array of robust Spanish heritage programs in the country. This, however, is not the case. Most states with high Latino population have not developed unified heritage Spanish programs. In a state rather than federal education system, states make educational laws according to their perceived needs. This may have prevented noticing that there is a dire need to create a national program tailored specifically for heritage Spanish students.

Traditionally Spanish heritage language courses are instructed by teachers who are certified in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language but who most times have not received any training on how to deal with the needs of Spanish speakers' linguistic, cultural and academic needs. According to Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, and Pérez (2008), in the United States there is a need for programs that prepare instructors who can teach heritage speakers, particularly Spanish speakers. This lack of professional preparation has generated instructors who:

Provide instruction to a category of students whom they have not been trained to teach and about whom they know little. These instructors frequently have little understanding of bilingualism and bilingual individuals, contact varieties of language, and factors influencing the retention or abandonment of heritage languages (Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, & Pérez, 2008, p. 5).

The lack of college preparation on how to instruct heritage Spanish speakers has generated heritage Spanish teachers who use a range of practices traditionally found in a foreign language setting. Thus, the oral practice of particular grammar structures and grammar explanations were found among the most common (64% and 81% respectively) in the study conducted among high school teachers by Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, and Pérez (2008).

Lacking the necessary professional training on how to educate heritage language learners may lead to inappropriate teaching practices. A common practice among heritage language teachers is their preference of one variety of Spanish as more valuable and socially accepted than others. HL teachers tend to be biased towards their own particular variety of language or that of a chosen country while undermining the varieties among their students. This practice usually contributes negatively to the development of the students' linguistic skills (Carreira, 2000) since they feel unfit or incompetent and default to English as their language of communication.

Similarly to what happened in second language teaching, in heritage language there is a ubiquitous idea that there is one ideal native speaker of Spanish. Traditionally that native speaker has been someone from Spain. According to Said-Mohand (2011), the best way to demystify the construct of native speaker requires instructors to be sensitive when dealing with it in the classroom, particularly among heritage language speakers. Heritage language learners usually have acquired their speaking skill at households with parents and relatives who may not have finished their formal education and therefore possess more colloquial ways of speaking with a regional vocabulary and grammar uses commonly unaccepted among more educated speakers of Spanish.

Not having professional development courses where HL teachers discuss about recent scholastic advancements deprive teachers of the possibility of offering the best available education for their Spanish HL students. The use of the term native speaker or its avoidance needs to be included in professional development programs at any school county where heritage language curriculum is implemented or there must be heritage language classes for those who want to become foreign language teachers in the United States. Currently due to the lack of training for in-service teachers, many of them continue to believe there is an ideal native speaker of Spanish and they instruct

their students towards that goal. I advocate for Spanish HL classes where teachers help their students develop their Spanish as they learn to function in a country where there are several varieties of the same language with their value and contribution to the linguistic richness of the country.

Heritage language programs contribute positively to HLLs' identity development. The role language plays in the construction of a speaker's identity has long been researched in sociology, psychology, and SLA. Identity can be understood as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2005, p. 5). Besides, identity "is not fixed for life, but fragmented and contested in nature" (Block, 2007, p. 864) and is also "a contingent process involving dialect relations between learners and the various worlds and experiences they inhabit and they act on them" (Ricento, 2005, p. 895). Identity is therefore dynamic, and its construction is intricately related to first, second, or heritage language learning (He, 2006).

HLLs' identity, similar to what happens to any other language learners, is constantly reshaped as they switch languages according to the context where they interact, sometimes developing a sense of ambivalence. Students in HL classes emphasize the fact that they gain a new sense of identity and understanding of their linguistic and cultural knowledge, leaving the classes with a better understanding of who they are (Beaudrie, Ducar & Peñaño-Pastor, 2009).

The role of school in the shaping of a learner's identity was researched by Otcu (2010) at a Turkish Saturday school program in New York. By exploring the beliefs and practices among teachers, administrators, parents, and students, Otcu claimed that Turkish was the main way to develop a Turkish identity in the United States and school was the bridge that made the connection between language and culture possible. This study corroborates school as a key factor in the developing of heritage identity and the contribution of HL programs to the development of an HL learner's identity.

In a study among Mexican American adolescents, González (2009) surveyed 122 Mexican Americans in tenth grade who attended a low performing school with a high Hispanic population. She selected 12 second-

generation participants and interviewed them. The selection was based on the level of academic engagement and their experiences with negative racial/ethnic encounters in school. The findings reveal the importance of HL in the development of HLLs' identity. By allowing students to participate in events that dispel stereotypes and/or allow students to use their bilingual competence, students feel schools can renew their commitment to their ethnic selves and their identity as member of a valued community heightened, which also turns into a higher commitment to school and academic endeavors.

7. Research on Spanish heritage language

Depending on the area of interest, researchers in SHL learning and teaching have used quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of both. Scholars in areas related to linguistic components of the language such as morphology and syntax have favored quantitative methods. Montrul's (2010) study of dominant language transfer with 72 second language learners and 67 Spanish heritage speakers included statistical analysis such as factorial analysis of variance (ANOVAS) and detailed tables that require from the reader high levels of statistical understanding. However, researchers interested in attitudes and motivation have used quantitative methods to answer their research questions as well. Yanguas (2010), for instance, conducted a study among twenty-one college students in Washington, D.C. using the well-known AMTB tool designed by Gardner (2001) to measure motivation and attitudes among second language learners. Alarcón (2010) uses surveys, a suitable tool to help her answer questions related to attitudes. She investigated the sociolinguistic profiles, attitudes, language contact, and linguistic behaviors of college HL students attending a small private college.

Similar to what has been happening in SLA research in general, SHL researchers have also welcomed qualitative methods that allow them to tell the stories behind just numbers. Thus, despite a clear favoritism among SHL researchers for surveys, the inclusion of a qualitative paradigm is contributing to unveil the world of Spanish HL learning and teaching. Interviews and observations are the most commonly used way to collect data, although some researchers also include field notes and journals.

Scholars doing research in SHL learning and teaching have begun to include approaches conventionally used in other fields such as anthropology or psychology. One of those is Felix (2009, p.147) who uses a phenomenographical methodology that emphasized the importance of “revealing the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon is experienced rather than on defining the phenomenon itself”. This methodology changed the focus from the researcher’s perception and explores the participants’ reflection and awareness of the chosen phenomenon. Interviews become more a dialogue where researcher and participant interact and reflect on the phenomenon.

Scholars investigating Spanish as a heritage language seem to be more inclined to use quantitative methods based mainly on survey, but there is also a push for the inclusion of qualitative research or even a combination of the two.

8. Major research finding in Spanish heritage language

Researchers concerned with the Spanish production by HL learners and second language (L2) learners of Spanish have found that these two groups share more similarities than differences. Results show that L2 learners surpass HLLs in the written mastery of the language but HLLs have more oral production skills and are able to use grammar according to standard varieties of Spanish, but struggle when having to read or write. SHLLs possess more native-like knowledge of Spanish and, therefore, may benefit more from focused grammar instruction (Bowles, 2011; Cuza, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Montrul, 2009, 2010, 2012; Potowski, Jegerski, & Morgan-Short, 2009). These findings are related to other areas of research such as motivational factors since HLLs have reported their desire to improve their reading and writing skills as their major motivational factor to join SHL classes (Alarcón, 2010; Berho 2009). However, Schwarzer and Petró (2005) found that participants in their study expressed a common desire for more emphasis on vocabulary, culture, and conversation and less on grammar use. Ducar’s (2008) study showed that learners were not particularly interested in learning academic Spanish.

Research in the area of students' experiences and perceptions has also provided the SHL learning and teaching field with findings that can contribute considerably to how SHL programs are being implemented in the country. Giving culture a more central role within the SHL curriculum and promoting a sense of self-identity and cultural pride by engaging students in community-based activities were perceived as highly important among SHLLs (Beaudrie, Ducar, & Relaño-Pastor, 2009).

Schools and SHL programs can contribute significantly to identity development among SHLLs by having them participate in community-based activities where students have the opportunity to use their bilingual competence as an asset as well as in activities that dispel negative stereotypes of Hispanic students in the United States (González, 2009). HLLs join their SHL classes with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, but inappropriate materials, curriculum, and or teaching methodologies can negatively impact them replacing their interest by frustration and boredom (Defeo, 2011). Unfortunately, research on SHL teachers is rather scarce and isolated and most programs in the country continue to be developed and implemented based on assumptions rather than on facts based on empirical research.

Gaps in research include not only insights on teaching practices but also qualitative studies that provide evidence of how identity processes take place among SHLLs and how this construct may be impacting the academic achievement of this population. Similarly, there is a dire need for empirical studies that investigate the materials being used to instruct SHLLs and the role that technology is playing in this instruction. As of this literature review, there is no single study on technology and Spanish heritage language teaching. Besides, as Beaudrie (2012) indicates, in order to gain comprehensive insights into SHL programs, studies that utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are needed.

9. Insights from Spanish heritage language research

HL learning and teaching research has flourished but many areas of interest are still in their infancy. It has been established, for example, that SHLLs and second language learners of Spanish share some similarities, particularly those with low proficiency in the heritage language. However, these findings do not imply that these populations can be grouped together and assigned to the same class as it has traditionally done in Spanish as foreign language classes where SHLLs have to receive instruction. Research shows that HLLs have very specific needs and that their instruction must prioritize culture and identity development over linguistic mastery of the language. HLLs usually have good command of the spoken language but need activities that foster their reading and writing skills in formal varieties of the language. SHL teachers need to be aware of the need to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and negative ideas about the different varieties of Spanish and should welcome students with all their linguistic and cultural richness. They should motivate them as well by engaging them in activities where they feel valued and in which their bilingual competence is appreciated as an important asset in today's American academic life and job market. Yes, there is still a dire need for research on motivation and the role identity plays, particularly in high school where learners become aware of who they are and how they are perceived by others in the United States.

Regarding curriculum design and implementation, researchers need to invest more in finding out what teaching methodologies are more conducive to better academic achievement and studies that include methodology and the application of the latest technologies need to be conducted. Similarly, studies that assess the effectiveness of the current SHL programs, materials, and placement procedures are necessary. Knowledge on the appropriate sequence for learners in these programs is vital so that students are not retained in classes that are not appropriate for their academic needs or that correspond to personal motivational factors. Thus, the area evaluating programs and the effectiveness of instruction needs attention so that a justification for the need of this kind of program in American public school be generated, curriculum improvement be a reality, and teachers development opportunities be based on the needs of the faculty currently teaching HLLs in the country.

Language teachers usually bring their own ideas and prejudices to the classroom. Research has established that, even unconsciously, teachers are influenced by ideas about particular varieties of Spanish that should be taught, something that may be detrimental for SHLL. Thus, research on SHL teachers' attitudes towards linguistic variation is an area that needs to be explored, since it has serious implication for pedagogical practices.

Studies on biliteracy such as the one conducted by Shin (2005) among Korean children demonstrate contributions of HL literacy to academic achievements and are therefore necessary among Spanish HLLs. English and Spanish share a large number of words and many of them are necessary to perform well on standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Studies that show the effects of SHL learners' literacy development on standardized tests can help validate the importance of SHL programs in the country. Similarly, these students can contribute to changes in curriculum, textbook preparation, and HL implementation.

10. Latinos, bilingualism, and politics

Politicians in states such as California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and even Illinois and North Carolina make huge attempts to attract the Latino vote. Politicians such as Jeb Bush or Marco Rubio from Florida are considered among the leading contenders for the Republic nomination to run for the White House in 2016. Their English-Spanish bilingualism is certainly one of their most outstanding characteristics. Politics in the United States has seen a change of focus from the Black vote towards the Latino vote.

In the tight presidential election in 2012, the Latino voter was crucial. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the levels of Hispanic support for President Obama are the highest ever seen for a Democratic candidate since 1996 when the Latino support for President Clinton was measured at 72%. Thus, it is clear that hardly any Republic or Democrat candidate will be able to gain the White House without that Latino support.

The 2014 congressional and gubernatorial elections will most likely be also influenced by the Latino vote. According to Loren McArthur from the National Council of La Raza (NCLR):

It is estimated that Latino will contribute to determine the future of as many as 33 narrowly contested House seats, including 14 held by Republicans and 19 held by Democrats. The Hispanic vote also has potential to be highly influential in a number of tightly contested gubernatorial races, including the swing states of Florida and Pennsylvania, with potential implications for the 2016 presidential race.

The number of Latino voters does not necessarily correspond to representation in the government or a direct effect on the decisions affecting the Latino population. The Latino population is about 17% of the US population, yet only a few Latino representatives are in the house and a couple in the senate. This lack of representation when making decisions that affect the largest minority in the country creates a sense of lack of belonging among its members. Education has always been seriously affected by decisions made at top. The implementation or discontinuation of bilingual education has been one of them.

11. Bilingual education

Bilingual education has been the concern of different groups with high stakes regarding the benefits or harms it can mean to learners in the American educational system. Some groups use the findings in second language acquisition and pedagogy of language instruction to support its implementation. These groups claim that bilingual education not only fosters the learner's ability to function in more than one language, to interact with people from other cultures, but also consider that the American community benefits too. Those groups that oppose it consider bilingual education as a threat to the American identity since it interferes with the use of English as the glue that keeps the country united and contributes to the creation of a linguistically divided country.

Behind the purely linguistic reasons may hide some more delicate. In states such as Texas, for example, race and the continuous growth of the Latino population was established to be considered a threat to the historically dominant race. According to Hempel, Dowling, Boardman, and Ellison (2013, p. 1), “the increasing opposition to bilingual education among Whites corresponds to changes in the Hispanic population”. Their research findings also highlight “the relevance of the interaction between minority group size and minority growth rates in generating majority opposition to bilingual education programs in the United States.”

Bilingual education, heritage language programs and their contributions to the Latino community in the United States continue to generate controversy. However, it is undeniable that Spanish is a language that should not be considered foreign in the American educational system. Foreign means that the language is spoken in a distant land from the one where it is being taught. Spanish in the United States is present, vivid and evolving in every corner of the country. The need for heritage language programs shows a new reality and makes evident the need for college language programs that prepare teachers to better address the needs of the Latino population.

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