



Peer review among students of Spanish as a heritage language: The effectiveness of a metalinguistic literacy task



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ABSTRACT

This empirical study examined the effectiveness of peer review with heritage speakers of Spanish and sought to determine what considerations should be taken into account when applying the peer review method with heritage student populations. Sixteen college-level students participated in a guided peer review and completed a post-activity questionnaire. Analysis of the peer review feedback, quantitative and qualitative analyses of the questionnaire responses, and an analysis of the textual characteristics of three essay drafts suggest that peer review can indeed be a valuable writing exercise for heritage language students. Specifically, the overall response was positive, there was evidence of student reflection on writing, and there were indications of independent vocabulary learning. Participants were able to provide mostly accurate feedback (87% overall), even on writing issues related to language use, though they did appear to be somewhat limited in their ability to identify informal language contact phenomena in their peers' essays.

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1. Introduction

According to the [United States Census Bureau \(2006\)](#), at least 20% of U.S. college undergraduates speak another language in addition to English, a figure that is also predicted to increase in the future ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2008](#)). As a result of this trend, an increasing proportion of students enrolled in university “foreign” language courses, which have traditionally been filled by second language learners, is comprised of heritage language bilinguals. Yet, nearly all existing foreign language teaching methods and materials have been developed for second language learners, who typically have no significant exposure to the target language outside the classroom or during early childhood. Because of this critical difference in language history, the linguistic profiles of heritage bilinguals and second language learners are different (see, e.g., [Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñán, 2008](#)), especially with regard to strengths and weaknesses within the four language skills ([Bowles, 2011](#)). Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that at least some of the language teaching strategies commonly employed in foreign language classrooms are not as well-suited to heritage language students as they are to second language learners ([Kang, 2010](#); [Potowski, Jegerski, & Morgan-Short, 2009](#), but cf. [Montrul & Bowles, 2010](#)). Thus, the following empirical study was conducted in response to a pressing need to test and develop instructional methods that are appropriate for heritage language teaching and will serve to maximize learning among this growing population of bilingual language students.

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1.1. Heritage learners and academic writing

The term *heritage speaker* is usually used to refer to an early bilingual who is raised in the U.S. in a home where a minority language is spoken and who has some degree of competence in the home or heritage language. Many heritage speakers are U.S.-born children or grandchildren of immigrants, while others were born abroad and immigrated as young children. There is also great diversity of language skill within the group, due to differences in patterns of home language use, access to bilingual and “foreign” language education, socioeconomic status, and native variety (i.e., dialect or sociolect) of the heritage language (Valdés, 1997, 2001). Despite these differences and despite exposure to the home language from birth that in many cases precedes as well as exceeds early exposure to English, virtually all heritage bilinguals ultimately become dominant in English and as a group they show a trend toward progressively declining use of the home language that coincides with their progression through formal schooling (National Heritage Language Resource Center, 2009). Still, many heritage speakers elect to engage in formal study of their home language when faced with the opportunity in high school or college, typically enrolling in “foreign” language courses in their home language.

Because their exposure to the heritage language has been primarily in informal, conversational contexts and due to the emphasis on English in their formal schooling (Valdés, 1997), heritage speakers in general tend to have stronger oral skills (i.e., speaking and listening) and relatively underdeveloped literacy skills (i.e., reading and writing) in the heritage language. In a survey conducted during 2006–2008 by the National Heritage Language Resource Center (Carreira & Kagan, 2011; National Heritage Language Resource Center, 2009), the majority of 1701 college-level heritage speaker respondents indicated that writing was the least developed of their four skills in the heritage language, followed by reading, speaking, and listening, which was rated as the strongest skill. In addition, when asked which of the four skills they would most like to improve in the heritage language, more respondents selected writing than any of the other three language skills. Furthermore, academic and technical texts were rated as the most difficult of sixteen different genres queried in the survey. Thus, based on this initial needs analysis, formal academic writing should be a priority in heritage language instruction in most postsecondary contexts in the U.S.

In developing writing skill in formal academic contexts, heritage speakers can logically draw on their stronger productive skill, speaking ability (Chevalier, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that their writing can resemble spoken language (Colombí, 1997; Hislope, 2005). The challenge to the heritage student is then to transition from spoken language to written language. Such transfer of linguistic skill is quite plausible, as it has been posited for childhood literacy development; the *oracy-to-literacy* model is based on the long-term observation that high-level reading ability in school-age children is associated with strong oral language skills in early childhood, which in turn appear to stem from early exposure to exceptionally large quantities of input in the native language (Sticht, Beck, & Hauke, 1974). In mapping a trajectory for the transition for heritage speakers, however, one important difference between oral and written language is lexical density. This distinction is so critical that a quantitative study of vocabulary breadth in a wide variety of genres of spoken language and printed text in English found that only the most highly technical of oral genres, expert witness testimony in legal proceedings, can compete with the most basic class of written texts, preschool books, in terms of lexical density (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). Accordingly, heritage speakers initially exhibit relatively low lexical density when writing in the home language and could be expected to show growth in this specific area as their writing develops over time (Schwartz, 2003). Another fundamental and objective measure of progress in the transition from oral-based proficiency to advanced literacy is syntactic complexity, which is also indicative of greater sophistication in written language (Ortega, 2003).

On the other hand, previous research on writing in heritage languages has focused in large part on higher-level characteristics of written discourse and on cross-linguistic influence from English (Colombí, 1997; Fairclough, 2006; García, 2002; Martínez, 2007). Colombí (2003, 2009), for instance, has advocated for the analysis of genre in the heritage language classroom. Spicer-Escalante (2005) examined strategies of argumentation and other aspects of rhetoric, while Schwartz (2003) documented writing strategy using a think-aloud protocol. One notable exception to the trend toward targeting higher-level features of writing was Parada (2011), who found that the syntactic complexity of heritage Spanish writing assignments increased according to the level of the course in which the students were enrolled, presumably an indication of development over time. However, the objective of the investigation was the measurement itself, so the specific methods of writing instruction that might have fostered the observed improvement were not examined. What is more, these prior studies have made important contributions to the description of heritage language writing and its salient characteristics, but none sought to evaluate the effectiveness of a specific teaching strategy. The present study addressed these gaps in prior research by incorporating lower-level measures of writing skill in an investigation of one method of writing instruction, peer review.

1.2. Peer review as a method of writing instruction

Peer review is a common instructional strategy from the native language arts tradition, in which students read and comment on each other’s writing with the goals of short-term improvement in performance on a given assignment as well as long-term growth as writers (Hu, 2005). It is compatible with a more process-oriented approach to writing than traditional error correction by an instructor, which emphasizes the writing product (Krapels, 1990). Peer review and

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