

Dialects and Linguicism: Challenges in Spanish Heritage Language Education

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Abstract:

Linguicism, a discrimination based on language or dialect, continues to affect Spanish Heritage Learners (SHLs) in deeply embedded and often overlooked ways across educational settings. As the population of Hispanic and Latino students grows in the U.S., many are enrolling in Spanish language courses where their home language, instead of being affirmed and celebrated, is corrected, stigmatized, or erased. This presentation examines the complexities that SHLs face in both mixed classrooms and heritage-specific courses, and it calls for a rethinking of pedagogical practices that unintentionally contribute to linguistic marginalization.

In mixed classrooms, SHLs are frequently compared to L2Ls and judged through a second-language acquisition framework that does not reflect their lived experiences as heritage speakers. They are often subjected to overcorrection for using regionally rooted or colloquial Spanish that reflects their family or community dialects. This reinforces the perception that their Spanish is incorrect, or inferior. Many instructors, often trained in traditional second-language pedagogies, may unknowingly contribute to these dynamics by favoring formal registers or Castilian norms, thus sending the message that only “academic” Spanish is valid in the classroom. These experiences can lead SHLs to feel ashamed, discouraged, or disconnected from the language they’ve grown up with.

Even in heritage specific courses, which are designed with SHLs in mind, linguicism may still be present. Curricula and instructional methods can sometimes reflect outdated deficit-based models that frame SHLs as linguistically lacking or deficient. Instead of validating the dialects spoken by students at home, instruction may emphasize “correcting” their Spanish to conform to a more standardized version. This not only undermines students’ confidence but also reinforces the idea that their cultural and linguistic identities are inadequate for academic spaces.

While the manifestation of linguicism varies between mixed and heritage specific classrooms, both reflect broader systems of subtractive schooling. In these systems, students are expected to shed aspects of their home language to meet institutional standards of correctness. Such expectations contribute to linguistic insecurities, lower engagement, and ultimately a weakened connection between SHLs and their cultural heritage.

This presentation invites educators, administrators, and program developers to critically examine how linguicism appears in their own classrooms and curricula. Through interactive activities, including scenario-based reflection and data-driven insights, participants will explore how linguicism functions and how to recognize its presence in educational settings. The session also provides practical strategies to shift toward culturally sustaining pedagogy, one that honors and builds upon the diverse Spanish dialects students bring into the classroom.

By centering student voices, dismantling linguistic hierarchies, and affirming all



dialects as valid, we can create more inclusive and empowering spaces for Spanish Heritage Learners to Thrive.

Keywords: Linguicism, Spanish Heritage Learners (SHLs), mixed classrooms, Second Language Learners (L2Ls), subtractive schooling, pedagogy, standardized Spanish.

