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Meaningful Writing in the Heritage Language Class: A Case Study of Heritage Learners of Spanish in Canada

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This article reports on a classroom-based experience that draws from the critical approach to heritage Spanish language teaching and Hanauer's concept of meaningful writing. Participants were three students enrolled in a first-year course for heritage Spanish speakers at a major Canadian public university. The writing component of this language course was fulfilled through online discussions and individual compositions that revolved around social, cultural and personal topics relevant to the linguistic experience of students. This study will demonstrate that placing meaningful writing at the core of heritage languages course not only encourages students to reflect on their own language identity and the role of Spanish in the Canadian society, but also fully engages them in the process of writing in Spanish.

INTRODUCTION

Heritage Spanish speakers are individuals who grew up in a Spanish-speaking home in a context where Spanish is not the majority language, and who have receptive and some degree of productive competence in the language (Valdés, 1997). Traditionally, courses designed for this population in the United States have heavily emphasized the acquisition of prestige varieties (i.e. standard Spanish) and the development of linguistic registers associated with formal or scholarly writing (Leeman, 2005; Martínez, 2005). Such emphasis derives from the fact that, due to a lack of formal instruction in Spanish, heritage speakers may not have acquired the linguistic registers expected in the oral and written formal settings of their native language (Colombi, 2003).

Without entirely ruling out the instruction of prestige varieties and forms, emerging critical pedagogical approaches propose making heritage Spanish speakers' linguistic experience "a more central part of the classroom and to foster awareness of linguistic and sociolinguistic principles related to Spanish in the US" (Leeman, 2005, p. 37). Following this line of thought, critical pedagogues further suggest integrating a reflection on sociopolitical and sociolinguistic topics that are relevant to students within the course curriculum (Leeman, 2005; Martínez, 2003). This critical approach to the teaching of Spanish as a heritage language (HL) is consistent with the concept of meaningful literacy instruction developed by Hanauer (2011). Hanauer proposes a more humanized second/foreign language curriculum, one that incorporates personally and socially meaningful writing activities focusing on students' lived experiences and emotions.

This article reports on a classroom-based experience that draws from the critical approach to heritage Spanish language teaching and Hanauer's concept of meaningful

writing. The writing component of this language course was fulfilled through online discussions and individual compositions that revolved around social, cultural and personal topics relevant to the sociolinguistic experience of students. By looking at the linguistic histories of three students, this study will demonstrate that placing meaningful writing at the core of heritage language courses not only encourages students to reflect on their own language identity and the role of Spanish in Canadian society, but also fully engages them in the process of writing in Spanish.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I present an overview of critical pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Spanish as a heritage language. In the second, I explain how critical approaches to writing and Hanauer's concept of meaningful literacy are interrelated. In the third section I describe the methodological aspects of the study. Then, the three case studies, the students' linguistics histories, are presented. Last, I emphasize the importance of incorporating meaningful and relevant writing activities into the heritage language curriculum.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING SPANISH AS A HL: AN OVERVIEW

Traditional approaches to the teaching of Spanish as a HL have been mainly concerned with the acquisition of prestige, standard varieties of Spanish, and have been focused on the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. Early textbooks emphasized prescriptive uses of the Spanish language and were frequently "explicit in their intent to eradicate non-prestige varieties from learners' linguistic repertoires" (Leeman, 2005, p. 37), which were considered "bad", "low" or "contaminated" by English (Valdés, 1981; Villa, 2002).

Writing in the HL classroom has also been approached from this prescriptive standpoint. Teachers and textbooks have viewed Spanish writing skills "as an empty vessel in the communicative repertoire of heritage learners" (Martínez, 2005, p. 80). These students are otherwise able to communicate orally with success, albeit in informal registers, because they learned Spanish in the family context. Potowski (2002) points out that many instructors continue to measure HL writing proficiency against foreign language standards, focusing on heritage learners' linguistic weaknesses rather than on their strengths, and engaging in traditional forms of error correction (e.g. circling specific forms and replacing them with what they deem 'correct').

Over the past decade, proponents of a critical pedagogical approach to the teaching of Spanish as a HL have challenged the traditional prescriptive methodology (Aparicio, 1997; Correa, 2011; Leeman, 2005; Martínez, 2003; Samaniego & Pino, 2000; Valdés, 1997; Valdés, González, López García, & Márquez, 2008). At the core of critical pedagogy is the need to validate and legitimize students' non-standard linguistic varieties, and to bring them into the classroom as a way of promoting language maintenance and development. Heritage learners' varieties also serve as a natural starting point in the classroom, in the sense that students can build on what they already know (Aparicio, 1997; Valdés, 1997). The teaching of standard varieties is not rejected within this framework, however, as Leeman notes, its introduction is recommended "only after students have had the opportunity to solidify their knowledge of their own varieties" (2005, p. 39). Under this pedagogy, then, standard Spanish is seen as another register to add to students' linguistic repertoire rather than a replacement for their home variety. Leeman warns, though, against telling students that learning a standard variety will prepare them to communicate in academia and professional settings, as this bolsters "the

hegemony of prestige varieties by socializing students to accept and reproduce dominant ideologies and practices without critical analysis” (2005, p. 38). In order to avoid this delimitation of sociolinguistic domains, critical pedagogies suggest including a sociolinguistic component in the HL classroom, helping “students reflect on why and how all those varieties have attained the sociopolitical/linguistic status that they have over the years” (Correa, 2011, p. 317).

Critical pedagogies stress that HL students should learn what is most meaningful and relevant to their own lives and the social contexts in which they live, and that they should learn in ways that are significant and meaningful to them. Traditional techniques often used when teaching Spanish as a foreign language, such as the explicit teaching of grammar rules and conjugating verb paradigms, not only discourage students and impede HL learning (Lynch, 2003; Samaniego & Pino, 2000), but also send “a message to the HL speaker that he or she does not know his or her own language, while an outsider does, [...] given the authority of the classroom and the value the teacher places on conscious knowledge of grammar” (Krashen, 2000, p. 441). Ideally, instructors should be well versed in HL pedagogy and have the sociolinguistic knowledge required to understand and appreciate the roles that Spanish and English play in this student population. Only then will teachers be able to provide HL learners with meaningful, thought-provoking activities that will ensure “not only that they stay focused, but also that they become aware of what they still have to learn to be able to successfully express their ideas” (Correa, 2011, p. 314).

When it comes to writing instruction, critical pedagogical approaches focus on the notion of literacy transfer, suggesting that the focus should be on “students’ strengths in the writing process in general rather than on their ‘ignorance’ or ‘non-acquaintance’ with Spanish writing systems” (Martínez, 2005, p. 80). Researchers and pedagogues adopting this critical approach to the teaching of Spanish as a HL have also proposed the integration of writing activities that promote students’ awareness of the relationship between language and identity, and linguistic attitudes and language use (Bartolomé & Macedo, 1999; Leeman, 2005; Walsh, 1991). Integrating this type of activities in the curriculum will allow students to “critically understand their own linguistic experience and the role of language in their own lives, as well as in their own communities and in the country in which they live” (Leeman, 2005, p. 43).

MEANINGFUL WRITING IN THE HL CLASSROOM

Hanauer’s concept of meaningful literacy (2011) supports the idea of promoting HL students’ (socio)linguistic awareness through meaningful and relevant writing activities. Hanauer, following Kramsch (2006), denounces the recent decontextualization and dehumanization of language learning, and advocates for a learning experience that pays attention to students’ experiences and emotions, and not just to their cognitive and measurable skills. In other words, the language learning process should be a “personally contextualized, meaningful activity” in which the student is recognized as “a living, historically situated, individual human being” rather than an “intellectual entity involved in an assessable cognitive process” (Hanauer, 2011, pp. 105-106).

Hanauer (2011) argues in favor of a language instruction that incorporates writing activities that are personally and socially meaningful to students, and thus he formulates four principles that inform literacy work in his own ESL classroom. These principles revolve around the idea of tapping into students’ personal experiences to explore and to understand themselves (*autobiographical writing*), to elicit their emotional responses as well as the reader’s

(*emotional writing*), to encourage a deep appreciation of their personal experiences (*personal insight*) and, finally, to situate the writing process socially, inside and outside the language classroom (*authentic public access*) (Hanauer, 2011, p. 108). Following Hanauer's proposed principles when designing writing activities will ensure that "the language learner's memory, experiences, feelings, beliefs, history and social environment are the context of language use" (p. 109).

Linguistic autobiographies, that is, "life histories that focus on the languages of the speaker and discuss how and why these languages were acquired, used, or abandoned" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 165), have proven to be an effective writing task for HL speakers. Leeman suggests that students examine their own linguistic practices and repertoire, and reflect on the reasons why they choose different practices (e.g. code-switching⁵) as a starting point for linguistic biographies (2005, pp. 42-43). In other words, she proposes guiding students from a micro to a macro analysis of language use. With regards to the choice of language for these linguistic autobiographies, Pavlenko argues against the insistence on writing entirely in one language, as it deprives bilingual students from "an important linguistic resource with a range of semantic and affective functions, namely code-switching" (2007, p. 172). Moreover, research shows that instructors' acceptance of Spanish/English code-switching does not detract from the use of Spanish in the HL classroom, and it also helps validate students' home varieties (Nichols & Colón, 2000).

As we can see, Hanauer's concept of *meaningful literacy*, although originally developed with the second and/or foreign language-teaching context in mind, clearly conforms to the suggestion from critical pedagogy that HL writing be made relevant, interesting and personally contextualized from both social and linguistic perspectives. Thus, HL classroom instruction that is informed by both critical pedagogy and Hanauer's approach to writing instruction will help situate HL students' unique experiences at the center of a contextualized and, most importantly, humanized language-learning context.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

The community

The classroom writing experience I am reporting on took place at the University of Manitoba (henceforth U of M), located in Winnipeg. Winnipeg, the largest city of Manitoba with a population of 730,018, is ethnically and linguistically diverse (Statistics Canada 2012). More than 16% of its population is made up of minorities, and more than 100 languages are spoken in the city (Statistics Canada). The 2011 Canadian census registered 439,110 people that speak Spanish as their mother tongue, which represents an increase of 32% since 2006 and makes Spanish the third largest non-official language in the country after Punjabi and Chinese. Manitoba has a Spanish-speaking population of 8,825 speakers, with most of them (6,225) residing in Winnipeg. It should be noted that the Spanish-speaking immigration to Canada is fairly recent. The first major wave began in the early 1970s, after the passage of the Immigration Act (1952) and in conjunction with the increased emphasis on attracting highly trained immigrants, and the majority of the Spanish-speaking immigrants arrived in the 1990s (Statistics Canada).

The instructor and the course

A researcher's positioning is critical when designing and implementing a study, and more especially so when the researcher also plays the role of instructor. Critical pedagogy recommends that instructors share their own cultural and linguistic background with the students in order to make classes personally relevant and to create an inclusive and comfortable atmosphere for students to share their own experiences (Ducar, 2008; Samaniego & Pino, 2000). Thus, from day one, I shared my multilingual and bicultural background with my students, and often told them stories and anecdotes about my own life. I grew up in a bilingual home speaking Spanish and Galician, a minority Romance language spoken in northwestern Spain, and I learned English in college. I attended graduate school in the United States, where I learned about and taught classes for heritage speakers of Spanish. My husband is an English-speaking Canadian and we are raising our son to be trilingual. Sharing my multilingual and bicultural background with my students enabled me to build rapport with them and encouraged them to share their personal experiences.

The Spanish program at the U of M is rather small and does not offer a parallel track for heritage speakers. Heritage and second/foreign language learners are together in mixed classesⁱⁱ with the exception of SPAN1280, a first-year course focusing on writing and grammar that Spanish speakers are encouraged to take in lieu of SPAN1180. However, because the title of SPAN1280 is *Spanish for native speakers* (as opposed to “Spanish for heritage speakers”) and the catalogue description indicates that it is designed for “people with an advanced level of oral Spanish”, this course is open to immigrants who have received formal education in Spanish in their countries of origin and non-native speakers with high proficiency in the language. This diversity of linguistic competence and sociolinguistic backgrounds was manifested in my own class, as we will see later.

As it was my first time teaching this course at the U of M, I opted for designing a flexible course syllabus that would allow me to personalize the course content as the term progressed. I decided to follow the *meaningful literacy* approach for the writing component of the course because it would encourage productive discussion and self-reflection in my students and, consequently, I would be able to better understand the heritage Spanish-speaking student population at the U of M.

The writing component

For the writing component of this course, I aimed to present students with meaningful topics that would make them reflect on their sociolinguistic experience, motivate them to write and help them to learn the ropes of writing in Spanish. All writing topics were socially and culturally contextualized and, because students were highly proficient in both languages, Spanish/English code-switching was allowed in all narratives. With all these goals in mind, I devised two types of writing assignments: online discussions and compositions.

Online discussions were accomplished through the course learning management system platform. Every two weeks, I would create a discussion board post on a topic revolving around Spanish language use. Following Leeman's (2005) micro- to macro-linguistic analysis, I started by asking students to examine their own personal use of Spanish and English, and then progressively moved onto societal uses and perceptions of Spanish within Winnipeg and within Canada. Students were asked to submit an entry in response to the question I posed, and to contribute to the class dialogue by submitting at least three other comments in response to other students' entries.

Compositions were conceived as linguistic biographies in which students had the opportunity to reflect on topics of a more introspective nature, such as childhood memories pertaining to language use, memorable bilingual anecdotes, or passing on Spanish to their future children. Students wrote five individual compositions throughout the semester; the final one was a reflection on the writing process itself and what it had meant to them. The first draft of each composition was written at home, and then peer-edited for content and form in class.

The students

Eleven students were enrolled in SPAN1280 in the fall of 2012. Seven of them conformed to the definition of heritage speakers, because they grew up in a Spanish-speaking home in a context where Spanish is a minority language, and they received all or most of their formal education in English. Three of these HLs (Conchita, Juan and Dessieⁱⁱⁱ) were born in Canada, and the other four (Ernesto, Alicia, Francisco and Gloria) moved to Canada between the ages of 7 and 11. There were also two recent immigrants who had been in Winnipeg for less than 5 years, and two non-native speakers with intermediate-high proficiency in Spanish^{iv}.

This paper focuses only on the language histories of HL learners, and specifically on Conchita, Juan and Gloria. These students were chosen for the case studies because they were the only ones who completed all writing tasks, and they were also the most active participants in the online discussions. Most importantly, their compositions were longer and more detailed and, in general, demonstrated greater engagement and introspection than those of their classmates. Also, while other students' writings were more fragmented and anecdotal, Conchita's, Juan's and Gloria's offer a cohesive and comprehensive look at their life journey as bilinguals. In what follows I present Conchita's, Juan's, and Gloria's individualized perceptions of and reflections on their own language use, as well as their personal experiences as bilinguals.

STUDENTS' LANGUAGE HISTORIES

Conchita

Conchita was born in Winnipeg of Peruvian parents who speak only Spanish at home. The majority of her family lives in Peru and does not speak English. Conchita speaks only Spanish with her parents, and English with her sister and friends. She is fluent in French, which she started learning in elementary school, and she is currently studying Italian at the U of M. She recalls being first exposed to English at the age of 2, when her Chilean nanny traveled to Chile and so Conchita's aunt, who did not speak any Spanish, took care of her:

[...] *hablé únicamente en español por los primeros dos años, ya que soy la hija mayor y mis padres sólo hablaban en español en casa. Es cuando cumplí los dos años que la niñera chilena que me cuidaba viajó a Chile por seis meses y mis padres me tuvieron que dejar al cuidado de mi tía Debbie, que es canadiense y no habla español. Me dicen que sólo me tomó un mes para hablar inglés fluidamente.*

[...] I spoke exclusively in Spanish during the first two years of my life, because I am the oldest daughter and my parents only spoke Spanish at home. When I turned two, my

Chilean nanny went to Chile for six months and my parents left me with my auntie Debbie, who is Canadian and does not speak Spanish. They tell me that it only took a month for me to be fluent in English^v.

Conchita remembers having to translate for her maternal grandparents when they visited for the summer, as they did not speak much English.^{vi} Both her maternal and paternal grandparents use some Quechua expressions and words, which they passed on to their children and grandchildren. Conchita often intersperses Quechua words in her writing, such as *wawa* ‘little girl’ in the excerpt below:

Mi abuelo no hablaba, ni habla, nada de inglés, excepto su frase favorita: “okey-beri-wel-tenk-you,” y mi abuela sólo habla un poco. Entonces, yo era la traductora oficial y la gente anglo-hablante siempre se quedaba asombrada al ver que yo, una wawa de siete años, traducía todo sin problema alguno.

My grandfather did not speak any English, and still doesn’t, except for his favourite phrase: “okey-beri-wel-tenk-you” (‘okay, very well, thank you’, written out as he would pronounce it), and my grandmother only speaks a little bit. So, I was the official translator and English speakers couldn’t believe that I, a 7-year-old little girl, translated everything without any problem.

But soon she started mixing Spanish and English, which would lead to *situaciones vergonzosas* ‘embarrassing situations’, like the time she spoke Spanish to the cashier when ordering coffee and snacks for her grandparents:

El cajero me miró con una mezcla de confusión y tristeza, y me preguntó, “Are you lost, little girl? Do you need help?” Y yo, con tanta vergüenza, respondí, “No, I just want two coffees and three sandwiches, please.”

The cashier looked at me with confusion and sadness, and asked me: “Are you lost, little girl? Do you need help?” And I, very embarrassed, responded: “No, I just want two coffees and three sandwiches, please.”

Now Conchita realizes that switching back and forth between English and Spanish is a great communicative resource within the bilingual community. However, she considers that not being able to completely separate both languages can be a limitation when talking to non-Spanish speakers:

Esto sólo se convierte en un problema cuando hablo con canadienses que no entienden el español y empiezo a balbucear, por ejemplo: “Oh, I know the word in Spanish, but I don’t know how to say it in English. It’s like ternura, but not really...”

This (not finding the right word in English) only becomes an issue when I speak with Canadians who don’t understand Spanish and I start to fumble, for example: “Oh, I know the word in Spanish, but I don’t know how to say it in English. It’s like ternura [tenderness], but not really...”

When she was around 9 years old, Conchita stopped speaking Spanish at home, and it was her grandmother, with whom she has a special bond, who finally convinced her to speak

Spanish again, telling her that *me daría mucha tristeza no poder comunicarme contigo* 'It would make me very sad not to be able to communicate with you'. Since then, she has strived to use Spanish at home all the time and, even more importantly, to learn to speak and write it correctly. Conchita projects this ideology of correctness, the belief that there is an agreed-upon standard (Mrak, 2011), onto her younger sister, who uses English more often than she does and has a lower proficiency in Spanish:

Le corrijo a mi hermana menor cada vez que comete un error- y cada vez, sin falta, me manda al diablo o me ignora. Pero sé que me escucha porque veo que está cometiendo estos errores con menor frecuencia.

I correct my sister every time she makes a mistake –and every single time she either tells me to go to hell or she ignores me. But I know that she listens to me because I notice that she is making these mistakes less frequently.

For Conchita, language and culture are inherently tied to each other. Her Peruvian heritage defines her to the point that, although she was born in Canada, in all her writings she positions herself as Peruvian or Latina:

Mi lengua y mi cultura están al centro de mi ser, y la mayoría del tiempo me siento más peruana que canadiense.

My language and my culture are at the center of my being, and most of the time I feel more Peruvian than Canadian.

Speaking Spanish and defining herself as Latina in Winnipeg was never an issue for Conchita. She did, though, have to deal with some kids mocking her for 'being Mexican', but later, in high-school, being different was an advantage:

Jamás he escuchado algo negativo relacionado con latinoamericanos en Winnipeg. Es cierto que mis compañeros de la escuela se burlaban de mí por ser "mexicana" y nunca perdieron la oportunidad para preguntarme [...] si llegaba tarde porque la patrulla fronteriza me atrapó. Pero ellos eran niños [...] En la secundaria, ser latinoamericana y hablar español se hizo algo exótico e interesante.

I have never heard anything negative regarding Latin Americans in Winnipeg. It is true that at school other kids would make fun of me for being "Mexican" and never missed the chance to ask whether I was late because I had been held up by the border patrol. But they were just kids [...] During secondary school, being Latin American and speaking Spanish became something exotic and interesting.

Writing about her life experiences was a personal challenge for Conchita, as she described herself as *una persona muy reservada* 'a very reserved person'. Compositions became a sort of personal diary for her, as she touched upon intimate topics, like the fact that her boyfriend often talks about getting married and having children, something she has not even shared with her mother:

El siempre habla de nuestro futuro, de casarnos y eventualmente tener una familia. ¡Un pensamiento que seguramente aterroriza a mi madre, pero gracias a Dios que ella no lee estas reflexiones!

He always talks about our future, about getting married and eventually having a family. A thought that would for sure horrify my Mom, but thank God she does not read these reflections!

Once she overcame the initial obstacle of sharing personal experiences, she fully enjoyed the writing tasks and the class itself. She found the confidence to write in Spanish to her Spanish-speaking family in Peru, and now she is encouraged to continue taking advanced Spanish writing classes.

A partir de ahora ya no me avergonzaré o sentiré incómoda cuando escriba en español. [...] y este curso me ha motivado a tomar cursos avanzados en composición

From now on, I will no longer feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when writing in Spanish. [...] and this class has motivated me to take advanced writing course.

Juan

Juan was born in Winnipeg of a Salvadorian mother and a Guatemalan father. He was raised speaking Spanish at home and is fluent in French, which he learned in elementary school. He speaks mostly Spanish with his parents and siblings, and only Spanish with his grandparents. With friends, he speaks Spanish, English and French. He remembers that his first words were in Spanish, and that he did not speak English until kindergarten.

Mi primeras palabras fueran 'Mamá' y 'Pacha' (en El Salvador le dicen pacha al biberón/ mamila/ tetero). Mi único aprendizaje de inglés fue por la tele, las caricaturas y conversación en kindergarten con mis compañeros.

My first words were 'Mom' and 'Bottle' (in El Salvador they use 'pacha' for [baby]bottle). I only learned English from TV, cartoons, and my kindergarten friends.'

Out of all of the students, Juan had the most exposure to Spanish by far, using it daily in a variety of formal and informal contexts:

[...] en casa hablo español, en mi trabajo hablo español, un tercio de mis amistades hablan español, veo tele en español, y leo noticias en español. En fin, ¡pareciera que no estoy en Canadá!

[...] at home I speak Spanish, at work I speak Spanish, a third of my friends speak Spanish, I watch TV in Spanish, and I read the news in Spanish. Anyway, it seems as if I were not in Canada!

Juan's parents always emphasized that *entre más idiomas uno habla, uno vale por más* 'the more languages one speaks, the more one is worth' —in fact, this is something he mentions in several of his writings. However, recalling his first years of schooling, Juan points out that being bilingual *puede complicarle a uno la vida* 'can make your life more difficult', as this anecdote reflects:

Cuando era pequeño, me acuerdo de las dificultades que tuve que pasar. La maestra me preguntaba: “Can you tell me what the days of the week are?” y yo decía que no, aunque sí sabía la respuesta, pero no en inglés sino que en español. ¡Pero cómo así! Si yo había nacido en Winnipeg, una ciudad de habla inglesa. Probablemente porque en la casa solo me hablaban en español.

I remember the difficulties I had to face when I was little. The teacher would ask me: ‘Can you tell me what the days of the week are?’, and I would say that I couldn’t, although I did know the answer, but I knew it in Spanish and not in English. But how was this possible? I had been born in Winnipeg, an English-speaking city. Probably because at home only Spanish was spoken.

At first it was hard for Juan to understand why he had to speak differently at school and at home, but soon he realized what being bilingual meant and he started compartmentalizing both languages:

Me costó un poco adaptarme a tener que hablar en inglés cuando iba al colegio. No entendía por qué tenía que hablar de una forma en un lugar, y en casa de otra. Cuando iba al primer grado, aprendí lo que era un idioma, y que yo era una persona bilingüe. Aprendí a hablar español solo con la familia o con la gente de la iglesia y, si no eran familia ni conocidos, sabía que tenía que hablarles en inglés.

It was a bit hard for me to get used to speaking English when I went to school. I didn’t understand why I had to speak differently at school and at home. When I went to first grade, I learned what being bilingual meant and that I was bilingual. I learned to speak Spanish only with family or with people at my church, and with those who weren’t family or were strangers, I knew I had to speak English.

Like Conchita, Juan is extremely proud of his heritage culture and language. He never defines himself as ‘Canadian’ but rather as ‘Latino’ or ‘Salvadorian’, which is his mother’s nationality. When discussing the topic of raising bilingual children, he mentions that it is easier to learn the language your mother speaks to you, which may explain his identification with the Salvadorian culture rather than the Guatemalan. He takes pride in speaking Spanish and the fact that his parents passed on their language to him, and finds the idea of not being able to communicate in Spanish with other Latinos in Winnipeg embarrassing:

Me siento muy afortunado de poder hablar tres idiomas. Y como dice mi mamá, entre mas idiomas uno hable, la persona vale por más. Trabajo con mis papás en su negocio latino [...] Qué difícil sería hablar con los hispanos en inglés, y qué vergüenza me daría. Aún no entiendo por qué hay padres que no les hablan a sus hijos en español. Es un orgullo y un placer. ¿A poco no?

I’m very lucky to be able to speak three languages. And, as my Mum says, the more languages one speaks, the more one is worth. I work for my parents’ Latino business [...] It’d be so difficult and embarrassing to speak English with Hispanics. I still don’t understand why some parents do not speak Spanish to their children. It [speaking Spanish] is a reason for pride and a pleasure, isn’t it?

Although Juan maintained that non-Spanish-speaking Canadians do not hold negative stereotypes towards Spanish speakers, he agreed with the rest of the students that it is common to assume that all Spanish speakers are from Mexico. One reason behind this

generalization could be the increasing number of Mexican temporary agriculture workers in the small towns around Winnipeg, as well as the growing population of Spanish-speaking Mennonites of Mexican origin in the area. Among my students, Juan seemed to be the most offended by this false assumption, likely moved by his stronger in-group identity:

Desafortunadamente, pienso que muchos generalizan que todos los que hablan español son “mexicanos.” He hablado con muchos latinos sobre este problema, y todos estamos cansados de esto. No todos somos mexicanos.[...] Hay varias veces que me preguntan algo como, “How do you make pozole?” Y yo les respondo, “we don’t make pozole.” Y me hacen una cara como diciéndome, “what do you mean you don’t make pozole, aren’t you Mexican?”

Unfortunately, I think many people believe that all Spanish speakers are “Mexicans.” I have talked to many Latinos about this issue, and we are all tired of it. We are not all Mexicans [...] Sometimes they [customers at his family’s restaurant] ask me something like “How do you make pozole [a typical Mexican dish]?” And I tell them “We don’t make pozole.” And they look at me like saying “what do you mean you don’t make pozole, aren’t you Mexican?”

The ideology of correctness is also revealed in Juan’s writings. Like Conchita, he insists on correcting his younger sister’s Spanish. Ironically, he does not speak what would be considered ‘correct’ or ‘standard’ Spanish all the time, as he code-switches into English when he cannot remember a word in Spanish:

Hoy como el hermano mayor que soy, regaño a mi hermana cuando habla mal el español. Pero yo sé que algún día ella me lo agradecerá.

As the older brother, I scold my sister when she speaks Spanish incorrectly. But I know she will thank me some day.

Se me va el vocabulario a veces, y en vez de parar para pensar cómo se dice tal palabra en español, la digo en inglés, ya que me entiende mi Spanglish.

Sometimes I forget the words, and instead of stopping to think how to say a word in Spanish, I say it in English, because [my interlocutor] understands my Spanglish.

Juan came to class with a strong desire to improve his writing skills, something he believes he was able to accomplish through the writing tasks and peer-editing. Most importantly, though, meaningful writing made him *más interesado en el idioma español que antes* ‘even more interested in Spanish than before’, as he became aware of the lexical variations within the Spanish-speaking world:

Como nuestra clase tenía una variedad de compañeros de diferentes orígenes, he aprendido un poquito más del español de cada país o región. Me di cuenta de que en Argentina se usa mucho el ‘vos’ como en El Salvador, y que los peruanos tienen un caliche muy diferente al caliche que yo conozco.

Because my classmates were of different origins, I have learned a bit more about the Spanish spoken in those places or regions. I found out that in Argentina they use ‘vos’

(2nd person singular pronoun) like in El Salvador, and that Peruvians' slang is very different from the one I am used to.

Gloria

Gloria was born in Paraguay and moved to Canada when she was 9. She learned some English at school in Paraguay, but Spanish was the language spoken at home. She only speaks Spanish at home, with her parents and sister; with her friends, even with those of Spanish-speaking background, she always speaks English.

Las únicas veces que uso el español para hablar es con mi familia. [...] tengo una amiga mexicana [...] pero no solemos hablar español entre nosotras porque ya nos acostumbramos a hablar inglés.

The only time where I use Spanish is to speak to my family. [...] I have a Mexican friend [...] but we don't usually speak Spanish to each other because we are used to speaking English.

Gloria has very happy memories of starting school in Canada. Her classmates were friendly and helped her improve her English. As she became more proficient in English, though, her Spanish skills started to decline:

Mi primer año en Canadá también fue muy interesante porque fue cuando empecé a tener dificultades con el español [...] y empecé a olvidarme de ciertas palabras.

My first year in Canada was also very interesting because I started having troubles with Spanish [...] and started to forget certain words.

As was the case with Conchita and Juan, Gloria often cannot remember certain words in Spanish and thus will switch to English, ending up *mezclándolo todo* 'mixing everything'. Her parents, like the other students', do not like it when she and her sister speak English or code-switch at home, which can be difficult to avoid when, for example, reporting an event in a different language from that in which it occurred:

El problema empieza cuando mi mamá me pide que cuente la historia que me pasó en inglés en español y ahí empiezo a mezclar las lenguas.

The problem comes when my Mom asks me to tell her in Spanish a story that happened to me in English, and right there I start mixing both languages.

Throughout her writings, Gloria revealed a great concern with learning to speak and to write Spanish properly (the standard language ideology again), and also emphasized the opportunities that learning a "second language" would offer her. It is interesting that, although she grew up speaking Spanish, she still considers it a second language. This is likely related to having had little formal education in Spanish and to the lack of daily exposure to the language, all of which makes her insecure of her Spanish skills. Gloria's concern with the formal acquisition and market value of the Spanish language (Bourdieu, 1991) can be seen in the following excerpt in which she explains why she would want her children to learn

Spanish:

Me gustaría que aprendan el español porque yo creo que es muy útil saber dos idiomas, especialmente algo como el español [...] que es usado por muchas personas en el mundo. [...] trataría de hablarles en español primero, ya que aprenderían inglés en el colegio. [...] pero igual me gustaría que aprendieran el español en una manera más formal.

I would love for [my children] to learn Spanish because I think it is very important to know two languages, especially Spanish, as it is spoken by many people in the world. [...] I would try to speak to them in Spanish first, as they would learn English at school. [...] but I would still like them to learn Spanish formally.

When reflecting on the writing process, Gloria reported that the writing tasks helped her understand written Spanish better, and motivated her to keep learning Spanish and use it beyond conversing with her family:

Me han dado la motivación de seguir aprendiendo el español [...] Tengo más motivación para practicar español en otras maneras además de hablar con mi familia, como leer un libro en español o ver películas en español.

[The writing assignments] have motivated me to keep learning Spanish [...] I am more motivated to practice Spanish in other ways, besides talking to my family, such as reading a book or watching a movie in Spanish.

The writing assignments also gave her a sense of a community, as she found that she shared stories of her journey as a bilingual with other students:

He conocido a otros hispanohablantes que están en situaciones similares cuando se trata de ser bilingüe, como el mezclar el inglés con el español. Esto me hizo sentir que mi situación es algo común entre bilingües.

I have met other Spanish speakers who are in similar situations as bilinguals, such as mixing English and Spanish. This made me realize that my situation is something common among bilinguals.

Finally, she talked about how she started to make connections between language and culture through the writing tasks, which is something that she had never reflected on before this class:

Gracias a las reflexiones me he dado cuenta de que sin el español tendría dificultades para entender mi cultura y la relación que mi cultura tiene con el español.

Thanks to the reflections I have realized that, without [speaking] Spanish, I would have difficulties understanding my culture and how my culture and Spanish are interrelated.

FINAL REMARKS

Hanauer argues that that “the real difficulty of language teaching is to find a way to make language learning a personally contextualized, meaningful activity for the learner” (2011, p. 106). This holds true for Spanish as a HL classes. The acquisition of a standard variety and formal registers of writing is still the focus of most courses designed for this population, and very little effort is put into creating meaningful, contextualized writing activities.

This study has shown that it is possible to successfully integrate meaningful writing activities into the heritage language curriculum, while still focusing on the acquisition of formal registers. The linguistic histories of Conchita, Juan and Gloria revealed that placing meaningful writing at the core of the curriculum engages students in the process of writing in Spanish, and has benefits that go beyond the academic, such as encouraging them to use Spanish more often in their everyday lives, making them aware of the relationship between language and culture, and helping them feel part of a larger Spanish-speaking community.

Meaningful writing allowed me, as an instructor, to really get to know my students as individuals. Reading about their experiences helped me to develop a curriculum that would fit their needs and keep them interested and challenged. They honed their writing skills while learning about and reflecting on Spanish language from social and linguistic perspectives. The content of the class always revolved around them, and they learned from each other. As a consequence, they were motivated to keep studying Spanish, and they were more inclined to use Spanish in contexts beyond the familial one.

Finally, meaningful writing made students realize how much they have in common as bilingual and bicultural Spanish-speaking individuals in Canada, and how similar their lived experiences are. Thanks to the incorporation of meaningful writing into the curriculum, students started to feel part of a bigger community and to realize that, although they come from different countries, they are very much alike.

NOTES

ⁱ Code-switching is the linguistic phenomenon whereby a bilingual speaker alternates between languages, often within the same utterance, and usually with no change of addressee or subject (Bullock & Toribio, 2009b). Over the last four decades, an extensive body of research (See Bullock & Toribio, 2009a) has shown that code-switching is a communicative resource employed by highly proficient bilinguals for diverse social, conversational, or contextual reasons.

ⁱⁱ Research recommends separate classes for heritage language learners, as they have different needs from second/foreign language learners (Roca & Colombi, 2003; Valdés, 2000). Also, it has been shown that instructors encounter pedagogical difficulties when these two types of students are together in the same language class (Lacorte & Canabal, 2005; Valdés, 1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ To protect students’ privacy, pseudonyms are used.

^{iv} The two non-native speakers were heritage learners of other minority languages, so they focused on their own heritage language when responding to the writings, especially on the compositions.

^v All translations are my own.

^{vi} It is common among children of immigrant parents to language broker, that is, to translate for parents and other adults in diverse situations (Weisskirch & Alatorre Alva, 2002)

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