

## Utilizing elicited imitation tasks in order to measure Spanish heritage speakers' proficiency

Heritage language speakers are bilingual individuals whose native language is acquired in a familiar setting (usually at home with family) through interaction and naturalistic input. The crucial factor is that the heritage language is not the dominant language of the country (Rothman, 2009). The characteristics of heritage language speakers vary greatly. In the United States, a heritage language speaker may be a first-, second-, or third-generation immigrant to the country who speaks a language other than English. A heritage language speaker may have received formal education in the language for several years, or may have received language input solely in familiar settings (Montrul, 2004, 2009; Potowski, 2009). The language proficiency of those educated in the language often dwindles as they assimilate to U.S. culture, language, and schooling. Those who speak the language at home and in the community and are not educated in it fail “to reach full competence in the family language in early childhood probably because they began to use the other language more frequently early in life” (Montrul, 2004).

Heritage Spanish speakers acquire the language through a different process than their non-native and native Spanish-speaking counterparts. Similar to native speakers, heritage speakers are first exposed to the heritage language at home in a familiar setting. As articulated by Montrul, Foote, and Perpiñan:

Depending on when exposure to the majority language begins and on the amount of exposure the child receives in both the majority and heritage language, many heritage speakers develop basic knowledge of the heritage language at a young age. (p.127)

However, unlike first language (L1) learners, these diverse linguistic productions caused by interference from the majority language (of the host country) occur. The grammars “end up stabilized and incomplete, and native like attainment of the heritage language in these speakers when they reach adulthood is not guaranteed” (p 127).

Due to this incomplete acquisition of the heritage language, some heritage speakers exhibit linguistic structures that are different from those used by native speakers of the language. In Spanish, for example, research has shown that heritage speakers produce errors with gender, incorrectly marking masculine and feminine (e.g., “Tomo la agua;” Montrul, Foote, & Perpiñan, 2008), use of a subject pronoun when none is needed (e.g., “Yo tengo ...,” Montrul, 2004), mood (e.g., Montrul, & Perpiñan, 2011), and the subjunctive, not using a subjunctive verb when the context calls for it (e.g., “Yo quiero que él viene más tarde;”\_Montrul, 2004). However, despite these patterns in the speech of heritage Spanish speakers, they still possess many skills that nonnative Spanish speakers do not acquire after many hours of instruction, such as native pronunciation, strong command of vocabulary and syntactic structures, and knowledge of the cultural implications of specific language use (Valdés, 1997, 2000). Placing these heritage speakers in elementary Spanish classes with non-native speakers puts them at a disadvantage, since they already possess native-like phonetic ability and lexicon. Furthermore, it has been argued that heritage learners have specific needs that are different from those of second language learners (Montrul, 2011).

Despite theoretical and empirical work that supports creating separate classes for heritage and nonnative speakers of Spanish, these two types of learners continue to be combined in classes, or the heritage language speakers are being placed in the incorrect level of Spanish. One reason may be that there is a paucity of literature on the appropriate proficiency exam that should be administered.

The current study investigates the correlation between the 2 most utilized forms of assessments for Spanish heritage language learners' proficiency: a self-evaluation and a Spanish foreign language exam (the DELE), and the elicited imitation task, in order to determine whether the EI is a suitable measure of proficiency for this population. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Will the participants' performance on the Spanish elicited imitation task reveal any meaningful relationships with other language proficiency assessment tools, such as the DELE (sample foreign language proficiency exam) and self-evaluations?
2. Is an elicited imitation task an efficient manner in which to assess the proficiency of heritage language speakers for the purpose of future research and classroom/course placement?

It was found that yes, there is a strong correlation between the results of the participants' performance in both the DELE and the EI and could therefore consider in the future employing this type of assessment for heritage speakers. Of course, this study must be done on a grander scale with a larger *n*-size and a better variety of the Spanish heritage speaker population.

There is no obscurity that heritage language speakers are different than foreign language learners, and therefore special consideration must be given to the assessments, course placement, and the class structure provided to them. Despite their apparent fluency in the language, not all of them possess equal knowledge of grammatical and linguistic knowledge. Therefore, materials and exams created for foreign language learners of Spanish may not necessarily be the best way to assess these learners. However, it is currently the only option, or to not provide a proficiency exam at all, which results in a classroom with myriad levels of proficiency.

Rather than lump all of the heritage speakers into one classroom, a standardized proficiency exam is needed in order to properly assess the heritage language students' levels, and therefore needs. This study aimed to contribute to what we know about heritage learners and what is still required. More research is needed on the effectiveness of elicited imitation tasks as a way in which to assess their proficiency so that we can continue to fine-tune instructional materials, exams, and strategies to specifically address heritage learners' needs.

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