

Review: Belpoliti, Flavia & Bermejo, Encarna (2020). *Spanish heritage learners' emerging literacy: Empirical research and classroom practice*. Routledge.

SENDY MONARREZ RHONE
University of Houston

Book review

Received 1 September 2020; accepted after revision 16 September 2020

ABSTRACT

EN This manuscript reviews *Spanish Heritage Learners' Emerging Literacy: Empirical Research and Classroom Practice*, by Flavia Belpoliti (Texas A&M University-Commerce) and Encarna Bermejo (Houston Baptist University), published in 2020 by Routledge. The book is the result of an empirical study. Its eight chapters follow a research-based approach to the teaching of Spanish Heritage Language. The authors present detailed linguistic features to consider when teaching SHL writing and research-based pedagogical and instructional implications.

Key words: SPANISH HERITAGE LANGUAGE, RESEARCH-BASED PEDAGOGY, EMERGING LITERACY

ES Este manuscrito es una reseña del libro *Spanish Heritage Learners' Emerging Literacy: Empirical Research and Classroom Practice* de Flavia Belpoliti (Texas A&M University-Commerce) y Encarna Bermejo (Houston Baptist University), publicado en 2020 por Routledge. El libro es el resultado de un estudio empírico: tiene ocho capítulos y sigue un enfoque de aprendizaje basado en la investigación para la enseñanza del español como lengua de herencia. Se presentan características lingüísticas detalladas que se deben tomar en cuenta al enseñar la escritura del español como lengua de herencia y las implicaciones pedagógicas e instruccionales según el enfoque del aprendizaje basado en la investigación.

Palabras claves: ESPAÑOL COMO LENGUA DE HERENCIA, APRENDIZAJE BASADO EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN, ALFABETIZACIÓN EMERGENTE

IT Questo manoscritto è una recensione del libro *Spanish Heritage Learners' Emerging Literacy: Empirical Research and Classroom Practice* di Flavia Belpoliti (Texas A&M University-Commerce) e Encarna Bermejo (Houston Baptist University), ed è stato pubblicato dalla Routledge nel 2020. Il libro, risultato di uno studio empirico, è suddiviso in otto capitoli che seguono un approccio all'insegnamento dello spagnolo come lingua ereditaria basato sulla ricerca. Le autrici presentano nel dettaglio le caratteristiche linguistiche da tenere in considerazione nell'insegnamento dello spagnolo come lingua ereditaria e le implicazioni pedagogiche e per l'insegnamento che derivano dalla ricerca.

Parole chiave: SPAGNOLO COME LINGUA EREDITARIA, PEDAGOGIA BASATA SULLA RICERCA, ALFABETIZZAZIONE EMERGENTE

In *Spanish Heritage Learners' Emerging Literacy: Empirical Research and Classroom Practice*, Flavia Belpoliti and Encarna Bermejo offer a substantial contribution to the field of heritage language (HL) pedagogy by presenting a multidimensional research-based approach to the teaching of Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHL). This book is the result of an empirical study that focuses on the linguistic knowledge and writing abilities of beginner Spanish heritage language learners (SHLL) in Spanish college courses. The novelty of this book is its comprehensive analysis of SHL emergent writing production, and its strength relies on providing linguistic analysis and pedagogical and practical solutions derived from an empirical research study. The book uses this analysis to help professors and professionals that come in contact with SHLL at beginner stages to better comprehend their linguistic abilities and help them develop their literacy in the HL.

This book has eight chapters, in addition to the introduction, which can be divided into three sections. In the first section, Chapter 1 provides an overview of heritage languages in the United States, particularly Spanish and its context, and an introduction of the research that drives the remaining chapters. In the second section, Chapters 2 through 6 explain the linguistic features to take into consideration when teaching SHL writing, from the surface-level conventions (orthography) to sentence structure and lexical production to more complex components at the discourse level. The third section, Chapters 7 and 8, highlights current and future research and teaching trends in SHL pedagogy, projects that can be implemented in beginning SHL courses, and research-based ideas to create a SHL curriculum at the university level. While each of Chapters 2 through 6 concludes with research-based pedagogical and instructional implications, the last two chapters are fully pedagogically oriented. The unique contribution of these last chapters to HL pedagogy is to provide teaching approaches and classroom activities that address each linguistic feature analyzed in the earlier chapters.

In the introduction, the authors provide a general history of HL research—which dates back to the late 1970s and developing more fully at the beginning of the 21st century—and its unique context in teaching SHL, particularly writing, at the university level. Due to the nature of HLLs, the authors show the need to focus on literacy at the beginner's level in college courses, as increasing numbers of second, third, or later generations of Spanish speakers are enrolling in Spanish courses at the university, thus creating a particular pedagogical and curricular need at this academic level. The authors define literacy as “reading and writing effectively in a variety of contexts” (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013, p. 60) and explain the dynamic dimensions of language and literacy, such as being able to engage with the language in its written form rather than just orally and considering the diverse social functions of language (Halliday, 1996). Furthermore, emergent literacy is defined as “the initial stages of this multidimensional process” (Belpoliti & Bermejo, 2020, p. 4). Heritage speakers' abilities and knowledge are merged to produce written texts in the HL in different social contexts (Beaudrie & Ducar, 2005; Vergara Wilson & Ibarra, 2015).

Chapter 1, “Heritage Languages and Spanish Heritage Language Speakers in the United States,” has four sections that set the foundation for understanding SHLL: a literature review of HL research over the past two decades, a discussion of the complexity of the definitions of HL and HLL, an account of the context of SHLL in the United States and particularly of the Hispanic population of Texas and Houston, which acts as a segue into the final section, a description of the research study on which this book is based. The study involved a corpus of 200 writing samples, essays from beginner students that took the online placement test for Spanish heritage learners at the University of Houston. The results from this study are then analyzed and discussed in detail in the following chapters, focusing each chapter on one of the areas of language: writing conventions, verbal morphology, sentence complexity, lexical access, and discourse organization.

In Chapter 2, “Spanish Orthography in Heritage Language Writing,” the authors present, through statistical analysis, the challenges of spelling as one of the most difficult topics for SHLL to master. They make a three-level analysis: (1) phoneme-to-grapheme relationships, divided into different representations, particularly the problematic relationships such as the /s/ phoneme and the <h> grapheme; (2) accent marks, focusing on the omission (the primary problem), misuse, and addition of accents; and (3) syllable and word division, though this is the least of the problems at the orthographic level. With these findings, the chapter concludes with different pedagogical strategies for HLLs to improve their spelling, such as providing direct instruction on high-frequency words, using discovery and visualization techniques, and technology.

Chapter 3, “Spanish Verbs in Emerging Heritage Language Writing,” focuses on analyzing the beginning SHL learners' knowledge of the verbal system of Spanish, in order to guide classroom implementations to help SHLLs acquire a more complex verbal morphology. First, this chapter introduces the tense, aspect, and mood system of Spanish and explains this system in terms of SHLL accuracy and complexity of use. The main section of this chapter is a statistical analysis of the corpus in terms of tense, aspect, and

mood. It shows that though SHLL have challenges in the use of different tenses (i.e., differentiating between the preterit and the imperfect) and different moods (i.e., deciding when to use indicative or subjunctive), the main problem is that they tend to avoid using complex verbs and instead use more familiar structures, making their writing more colloquial. The chapter also ends with pedagogical implications, mainly recommending interactive reading and the use of folklore in language teaching.

The strength of Chapter 4, “Building Sentences in Spanish: Complexity, Fluency, and Accuracy,” relies on the understanding of the grammatical competence in SHLL’s production as the foundation for deciding the order of the grammatical instruction. In this chapter, the authors show how SHL instruction needs to focus on sentence structure, particularly in terms of complexity, fluency, and accuracy, as students become more functional in their writing by developing proficiency and a more academic writing style. Their research has shown that the most problematic structures for SHLL are nominal phrases, gender, number and person agreement, possessive structures, relative clauses, and prepositions. Based on these findings, the authors give three practical approaches to teaching grammar. First, raising linguistic awareness, which allows students to pay close attention to the Spanish linguistic system. The second approach is focusing on form, through techniques such as dictogloss, a teaching technique that addresses grammatical structures by requiring the students to listen to an oral piece and write and rewrite it as they listen. The last approach is extensive reading, focusing particularly on authentic and multidialectal texts.

The focus of Chapter 5 is vocabulary knowledge. The authors argue that the main vocabulary problem for SHLL is the influence of English into their Spanish lexicon. Due to the particular context of how Spanish is acquired in the context of the United States, explained and contextualized in the first chapter, SHLL at college level have a strong colloquial lexicon, and they use a (sometimes very inventive) language from their upbringing, even in academic contexts. English contact has brought into SHLL lexicon a variety of loans, calques, and new creations. To help students build a more formal vocabulary and decrease the number of English transfers, the authors recommend that teachers focus on specific vocabulary areas, which will help the learners build a larger lexical repertoire that includes academic and formal vocabulary. In its pedagogical implications, this chapter recommends vocabulary teaching activities that cover a wide variety of areas introduced to the students in stages of difficulty (from easier, limited vocabulary to more complex, idiomatic use of vocabulary) to allow students to grow their vocabulary breadth and depth in an intentional way.

Chapter 6 focuses on the widest linguistic characteristic of writing, discourse competence, which allows students and writers to go beyond the sentence level and provide a stronger organization of text and information. Discourse competence not only includes linguistic strategies, but it also requires cultural knowledge to make texts understandable and meaningful to the reader. This chapter, then, describes how SHLL organize their texts, focusing on the global structure, the argumentative sequencing, and text cohesion.

The last two chapters are fully pedagogical in nature. Chapter 7, “Towards a Signature Curriculum For Spanish as a Heritage Language,” promotes a curriculum design that includes all of these previously analyzed linguistic features and explains how they can be implemented in project-based learning (PBL). From a research-based approach, the chapter indicates that there is a higher chance of student participation and development of writing abilities and skills through PBL. Chapter 8, “Teaching and Learning Heritage Languages: New Directions, Enduring Questions,” is a fascinating and brilliant chapter, as it uses the framework of the story of Rosa, a 29-year-old third-generation Mexican-American student, to illustrate and pull together all the research on the five linguistic aspects of literacy from this volume. By using the PBL model, the authors provide recommendations and clear techniques to apply all the knowledge that they have presented throughout the book.

In conclusion, Belpoliti and Bermejo have given the field of SHL a new, fresh, groundbreaking research-based book that is scientific by virtue of the data and approach used, but that it is also very practical as it has a strong focus on classroom application. Although the book focuses on university-level SHL, the findings and recommendations will appeal to a wider audience of readers: non-language university teachers, educational leaders, policymakers, and anyone who comes in contact with SHLL in and outside of the academic context. Finally, it is also a valuable volume for training graduate students in research and research-based pedagogy.

References

- Beaudrie, Sara, & Ducar, Cynthia (2005). Beginning-level university heritage programs: Creating a space for all heritage language learners. *Heritage Language Journal*, 3(1), 1-26.
- Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood (1996). Literacy and linguistics: A functional perspective. In Ruqaiya Hasan & Geoffrey Williams (Eds.), *Literacy in society* (pp. 339-376). Addison Wesley Longman.
- Pilgrim, Jodi, & Martinez, Elda (2013). Defining literacy in the 21st century: A guide to terminology and skills. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education*, 1(1), 60-69.
- Vergara Wilson, Damián, & Ibarra, Carlos Enrique (2015). Understanding the inheritors: The perception of beginning-level students toward their Spanish as a heritage language program. *E-JournALL, Euro-American Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages*, 2(2), 85-101.

Sendy Monarrez Rhone, University of Houston
sendyrhone@gmail.com

- EN** | **Sendy Monarrez Rhone** is a Spanish Instructor in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston, where she is currently pursuing a PhD in Spanish Linguistics. Her areas of research are Spanish applied linguistics, especially phonetics and pronunciation, and heritage language learners. Her language pedagogy interests are multilingualism, teacher training, e-learning content development, online learning, and language learning strategies.
- ES** | **Sendy Monarrez Rhone**, es instructora de español en el Departamento de Estudios Hispánicos en la Universidad de Houston, donde actualmente está haciendo un doctorado en Lingüística Española. Sus áreas de investigación son la lingüística aplicada del español, especialmente la fonética y la pronunciación, y los hablantes de herencia. Sus intereses en la pedagogía de idiomas son el multilingüismo, la formación del profesorado, el desarrollo de contenido de aprendizaje en línea, el aprendizaje en línea y las estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas.
- IT** | **Sendy Monarrez Rhone** è una docente di spagnolo nel Dipartimento di Studi Ispanici all'Università di Houston dove sta attualmente completando il dottorato in Linguistica Spagnola. Le sue aree di ricerca sono la Linguistica Applicata Spagnola, con un focus particolare sulla fonetica e sulla pronuncia e gli apprendenti di lingue ereditarie. La sua sfera d'interesse nell'ambito pedagogico delle lingue sono il multilinguismo, la formazione dei docenti, lo sviluppo dei contenuti di apprendimento a distanza, l'apprendimento online e le strategie d'apprendimento delle lingue.