

BOOK REVIEW: Learning and not learning in the heritage language classroom: Engaging Mexican-origin students

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BOOK REVIEW: K. A. Helmer. (2020). *Learning and not learning in the heritage language classroom: Engaging Mexican-origin students*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. ISBN:978-1788927628. 262pp.

Kimberly Adilia Helmer completed the fieldwork for her doctorate by interacting with Mexican-origin Spanish heritage language learners at an emerging charter high school in Arizona. *Learning and not learning in the heritage language classroom: Engaging Mexican-origin students* is her analysis focusing on the first year of the new high school. The book aims to explore reasons Mexican-origin students resist learning in their heritage language. As heritage language researchers, educators, and curriculum developers, we can glean several key points from her narrative.

The ethnography examines Latino/a student resistance to learning the Spanish language by contrasting their engagement in humanities class during the first year of their high school. The book affirms findings of the existing literature in three ways. Firstly, the book provides insights that can assist native Mexican and non-native Mexican heritage language teachers with the pedagogies that acknowledge cultural identity (Usborne & Taylor, 2010) of heritage language learners in a positive and rewarding way. Secondly, Helmer's findings affirm that heritage language teachers should refrain from using teaching materials designed for foreign language learners (Kagan, 2005; Kanno et al., 2008) but conduct purposeful activities designed for heritage language learners, crediting their cultural and linguistic knowledge. Thirdly, teachers should possess containment skills such as patience, perseverance, and the ability to observe, listen, analyze, relate, interpret, mediate, and evaluate (Deardorff, 2009).

The first chapter begins with a captivating account of a camping trip with the high school students and teachers. Helmer then shifts to a more academic pitch and presents the broader social and geographical context to a story about this specific high school. She unveils the school's emphasis on place-based pedagogy and provides the background of charter schools in the US. Chapter 2 explains the ethnographic research context and introduces her focal participants. With a critical ethnography approach, the researcher spent extensive time with the participants in varied contexts and institutional settings. The focus in Chapters 3 and 4 then shifts to the two Spanish language teachers who taught Spanish heritage language learners in the first and second semesters of the school. I, being a non-native teacher of heritage language and a heritage language

researcher, could relate to many aspects of Helmer's reflections. Both chapters guide the heritage language educators on what is to be avoided when teaching the heritage language learners.

Chapter 3 centres on the Spanish heritage language class taught by a qualified, non-Mexican and Anglo female teacher. The teacher had mastery over "academic" Spanish but, due to a lack of cultural sensitivity, unknowingly initiated student resistance. The students perceived that the teacher disrespected their Mexican identities in the *Pachuco* incident. *Pachuco* refers to the young Mexican-American subculture. In this incident, the teacher used this term while introducing language varieties in the class and accidentally addressed one of her students as a *Pachuco*, leading the students to regard the teacher as a linguistic outsider. While narrating this story, Helmer summarizes the challenges of a non-native teacher teaching Spanish to heritage language learners, and explores the psyche of the Mexican immigrants, the history of marginalization, language policies at public schools in America, and the reasons for minority language resistance. In doing so, the author suggests that the study of student resistance to learning the heritage language relates to wider issues, such as the undervaluation of minority languages and the English-only movement in the US that are well beyond the domains of classrooms and schools.

Chapter 4 examines the Spanish heritage language class taught by a novice but native Spanish speaker in the second semester. The students did not show resistance to Spanish speaking, unlike the first semester, but disregarded the teacher's authority due to his lack of teaching expertise and choice of study material. Here, the author identifies other factors affecting heritage language learning, including the adverse reactions that the Mexican-origin individuals experience when encountering Mexicans in Mexico, linguistic insecurity (González, 2001) and linguistic shyness (Krashen, 1998), and further highlights the distinctive differences between heritage language learners and foreign language learners. The author emphasizes that Spanish heritage language learners with their cultural and linguistic knowledge are superior to foreign language learners in a bilingual market. The author argues for concrete and systematic efforts and sound Spanish heritage language pedagogy to promote heritage language acquisition and maintenance. As a reader, we cannot stop contemplating when the author questions:

One may wonder: Are young mathematicians who can solve algebra problems in the primary grades forced to only solve simple arithmetic? These students are often steered toward gifted and talented programs, but not the student with bilingual potential. Many educators, and the general public, see math ability as an achievement and/or gift, while linguistic ability/potential among minority students is viewed as a barrier and a problem. (p. 87)

Chapter 5 details the activities of the focal Mexican-origin students in the humanities class over an academic year, which was the students' favourite class. Students liked the class teacher's positive qualities, such as being authoritative while respecting the student identity and providing the choice of self-expression in student assignments, all of which contributed to positive student participation. The author is aware that one cannot directly compare the humanities class with the Spanish heritage language class but utilized the natural school set-up where the same cohort of students took the Spanish and humanities class, which enabled her to observe the students in two different contexts.

Helmer then integrates the preceding three chapters and explores a place and people-based pedagogy for heritage language classes. Here, she renders a key message: that heritage language programs should offer curriculum going beyond textbooks. Illustrating family and community-based research projects, the chapter argues for establishing a safe learning environment; and for the mainstream schools officially acknowledging the significance of the heritage language programs. With the symbolic status of heritage language being enhanced, students are less likely to undervalue learning Spanish. A greater awareness of practical heritage language teaching guidelines will positively affect the field of heritage language education and lead to better outcomes.

Chapter 7 describes the time Helmer returned to the high school for a workshop 13 years after her original fieldwork. She compares the now-established organization with her observation of the school's first year. By recapitulating her original research findings, she discusses how the student identity, ideology, and imagination influenced their investment in Spanish over humanities (that is, English and social studies), and argues that the students have conflicting identities, either accepting or giving up their Spanish identities. The students are unable to visualize themselves using standard Spanish in broader contexts since their life experiences are restricted to school and home because of their age, but they could see the value of studying English in their humanities class. Thirteen years later, the author found that the school no longer maintained Spanish heritage language programs. Only Spanish as a foreign language program continued. I would be interested in learning how and why this occurred, and how the process might have been impacted by the maturation process of this charter school.

Drawing on a critical ethnography method, the book's seven chapters are replete with field notes and cover multiple aspects of Mexican-origin students. Helmer primarily used data collected in the form of field notes and interviews. She also conducted interactional discourse analysis. Helmer is a good storyteller, able to maintain a level of reflexivity, which drives the narrative forward dynamically:

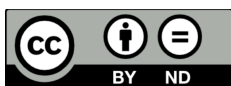
I explored what caused resistance to (heritage) language learning and, at the same time, I wanted to investigate the converse, what caused engagement in learning. I was fortunate to find myself in a research context where naturally occurring class schedules and events allowed me to observe student behavior under a variety of conditions, enabling me to make stronger correlations. (p. 25)

Overall, this critical ethnography is a timely, eloquent and analytically rigorous examination of how the Mexican-origin students resist the Spanish heritage language learning through non-participation. It provides an informative cross-section of resistance and engagement in heritage language learning and demonstrates how the institutional factors in the initial years contributed to student resistance. When an experienced native English speaker with advanced Spanish language skills taught Spanish, the heritage language learners refused to speak Spanish in class because they felt alienated from the non-native teacher. By contrast, with a Spanish heritage teacher, students displayed poor class attendance and disruptive behaviours because the teacher was inexperienced. Incorporating perspectives from social and political issues of the growing Hispanic population in the US, Helmer's rich ethnography provides concrete pedagogical ideas to heritage language teachers.

Resistance in Spanish heritage language learning is the central focus of the book. The original contribution of this book is that it revealed the detailed mechanisms where heritage language learners resist learning the language through an effective ethnographic fieldwork study. This book will interest anyone concerned with heritage language maintenance, administration, teaching, learning, and research.

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