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The American Historian

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS

LATINE HISTORY

ALSO INSIDE

Teaching in Spanglish
The Legacy of POWs

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On the Cover:

Mural on side of La Chiquita Bakery depicting Mexican-American family life in San Antonio, Texas. Photo by Carol Highsmith, 2014. Courtesy Library of Congress.

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Teach in Spanglish: Latinx History with Bilingual Primary Sources

Claudia Holguín Mendoza, Jorge Leal, and Julie M. Weise

Teach in Spanglish (teachinspanglish.org) is founded on a simple idea: while just a small fraction of today's college students will progress to the high-level, all-in-Spanish courses offered by language departments, more than two-thirds enter college with the ability to understand Spanish when given context in English, support from their instructor, and time. Over nearly a decade in the classroom, our work has shown that students who took Spanish for at least two years in high school, at least one year in college, and/or who were raised in a bilingual environment (Spanish as a Heritage Language speakers, or SHL) can, with proper support, engage in high-level analysis of Spanish and Spanglish primary sources and original texts, utilizing insights from linguistics to both structure the classroom experience and guide students in their engagement.

As people and as teachers, distinct experiences led us each to experiment with bilingual teaching and eventually, formalize our work into a series of freely available materials for other professors and instructors. Raised in northern Mexico and educated in the U.S.-Mexico border region, Claudia Holguín Mendoza has devoted her career to the study of borderlands sociolinguistics and critical SHL education. All of her teaching seeks to break open the nationalist, racist, and classist underpinnings of the concept of "fluency," often understood as "complete" knowledge of a static and "correct" language form, and affirm instead the complex, real-life language practices of plurilingual individuals and communities. As such, she was more than eager to collaborate with a curious historian who approached her. Julie M. Weise learned Spanish as a second language and had long conducted research in Spanish-language sources as a transnationally oriented historian of Mexican migration and Mexican Americans. When she expanded to French-language sources for a new comparative history project, she realized how powerful her *receptive* knowledge of French was despite her lack of "fluency." Why, she wondered, did we give students the impression that anything short of "fluency" wasn't good enough to approach primary sources in their original language? Jorge Leal immigrated from Mexico to

Yet beyond just the pedagogical possibilities of bilingual teaching is its radical potential to reorient classroom power dynamics.

Los Angeles as a teenager and used bilingual and Spanglish sources in his history research on Southern California's Latinx music and youth cultures of the 1990s. Teaching Latinx history at U.C. Riverside, a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), he began experimenting with analyzing Spanish-language sources in his classes, for example asking students in whatever Spanish proficiency level they had to help translate song lyrics in groups and making guesses to fill in gaps in their translations.

This project thus began as a single class at the University of Oregon in 2015, where Weise and Holguín Mendoza were colleagues. They teamed up to develop a bilingual course, Latinos in the Americas. This course, which Weise has taught every year since, has a very basic language requirement: students must have completed two years of high school Spanish, one year of college Spanish, or have been raised in a bilingual environment. The class engages a broad range of students in interpreting historical primary sources in Spanish and Spanglish by first scaffolding their understanding with lectures and historical context in English. The bilingualism is the key. While details vary by campus demographics, the number of college students who can listen to lectures in Spanish, write papers in Spanish, and express themselves verbally entirely in Spanish is nearly always far lower than the number who can *understand* Spanish when given context in English. The same, of course, is true of professors.

Utilizing the strategies of "Intercomprehension," a strategy for understanding across languages first developed in Europe, we rely on the principle that the more context one has, the less language skills they need to understand a text. Lectures, documentaries, and secondary source readings in English develop students' understanding of key themes in Latinx Studies. This preparation gives students context that helps them overcome gaps in vocabulary and linguistic knowledge as they tackle primary texts in their original Spanish and Spanglish. Primary sources that students analyze include: life histories, oral history interviews, newspaper articles, government and educational documents, and songs among others. In addition to primary source analysis skills, instructors teach these students cognitive strategies for comprehension —strategies that are useful in interpreting challenging texts in any language and subject of study.

Yet beyond just the pedagogical possibilities of bilingual teaching is its radical potential to reorient classroom power dynamics. As a scholar in the field of SHL education, Holguín Mendoza is among a group of linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists that has theorized the relationship between language, identity, and power not only in the world outside the university, but also the classrooms within it. This scholarship proposes, and our pedagogical experience confirms, that the bilingual approach to teaching Latinx Studies works against racist narratives and class-based hierarchies that have expressed themselves linguistically in both the United States and Latin America. In other words, not only has the Spanish language been stigmatized within the United States, but the non-standard forms of the language that most Latinx SHL students speak has been stigmatized in most K-16 Spanish classrooms in the United States. Furthermore, idealized notions of Spanish grammatical competence lead not only SHL students but most second-language (L2) Spanish learners to conclude that their Spanish "isn't good enough" for high-level academic application. Their typical refrain is, "I took Spanish in high school but I don't remember anything." The critical bilingual teaching approach that emphasizes receptive knowledge begs to differ.

Due to these overly fixed ideas of "fluency," while more than two-thirds of today's undergraduates enter college with varying levels of Spanish skills, only a small fraction of them will progress to Spanish-only upper-division content courses offered by university Spanish departments.[1] For instance, at U.C. Riverside, where Leal and Holguín Mendoza now teach, the student body is nearly 40% Chicanx/Latinx of whom most are SHL speakers, and a majority of the rest of the student body has studied Spanish in high school and/or college. Yet in the academic year 2019-2020 only 1% of students graduating at UCR with a BA obtained a Spanish major. While *scholars* who are SHL speakers regularly utilize their culturally specific linguistic knowledge to conduct

research, today's SHL *students* typically learn during their K-16 years that U.S. Spanglish and other "non-standard" varieties of Spanish have no place in the academic environment.

Curricula placing a positive value on these skills rather than ignoring or denigrating them thus enhances SHL students' sense of belonging and competence in the academic environment while increasing L2 students' self-confidence as global citizens and appreciation for the ways that language has functioned as an agent of power in history and in their own lives. Students in our classes are encouraged to speak in English, Spanish, or use code-switching between both, enhancing their self-confidence around the linguistic knowledge they already possess. By engaging directly with the linguistic practices of historical Latinx immigrants and Latinx Americans, students are taught to reflect on the relationship between language, identity, and power in the world around them, and the ways these intersect with race, class, gender, and other sources of inequality.

To provide an example of how this interdisciplinary bilingual teaching can open up new levels of intellectual engagement and feelings of belonging for students, we can consider a sample History lesson developed by Weise on the Young Lords, a radical Puerto Rican youth movement in 1970s New York and Chicago. For homework, students read secondary literature and/or watch a documentary about the Lords in English. In class, this is followed by a lecture on the group that is mostly or entirely in English, depending on instructor preference. Presenting this background information in English rather than Spanish makes the course accessible to a vastly larger group of students than if it required the high level of academic Spanish necessary to engage novel and complex academic topics.

However, once students have learned the general outlines of the Lords' history, they are now ready to tackle a primary source in Spanish: "Existe el Racismo Puertorriqueño?" [Does Puerto Rican racism exist?] written by leader Iris Morales and published in the *La Guardia* bilingual newspaper in 1970. The professor guides student work groups through what is by now a familiar methodology: Look at visual clues to understanding what type of document you are reading. Then, they read it through twice without looking up any words, to glean the overall idea. On the third reading, look up select words that are truly necessary for comprehension. Analyze the source as an historian: Who wrote this document? What do you know about the author, and how do you know it? What is the author's attitude about the racial identities of Puerto Ricans, and what can historians learn from her writings?

Powerfully, and uniquely to this approach, students are trained to examine the form of the language itself in addition to the document's content. They observe that Morales has a complex understanding of history and therefore, likely had a high degree of formal education. But wait: one or two students now notice that the article is full of minor grammatical "errors" and misspellings. How to resolve the contradiction? After a moment of silence in the classroom, a SHL student speaks up: "Iris Morales was a heritage speaker. The 'mistakes' she makes are the same kinds I make." The student has opened up a new level of historical analysis. If Iris Morales was an educated woman but primarily schooled in English, why would she write this article in Spanish, a language in which she apparently did not have substantial academic preparation? Who was her intended audience? Given our background understanding of the Young Lords, students can conclude that Morales may have been trying to write for an audience of immigrant elders, whose views on Puerto Ricans'

Powerfully, and uniquely to this approach, students are trained to examine the form of the language itself in addition to the document's content.

relationship to blackness were more conservative than her own generation's. Students have now engaged in a multi-layered historical analysis of a source; deepened their engagement with the history of the Young Lords; analyzed the role of language itself in structuring social relations; and felt a sense of competence and accomplishment as they successfully utilized their Spanish skills, including their knowledge of bilingual forms of Spanish, for a higher-level academic purpose.

A decade into this pedagogical experiment, we are thrilled to offer the materials for this bilingual Young Lords lesson as well as dozens of others to the wider academic community, free of charge. Now as colleagues at U.C. Riverside, Holguín Mendoza and Leal received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to lead their Latin American and Latinx Studies colleagues in revising academic programs to center bilingual pedagogies, while Weise has received funding from OpenOregon to create an Open Educational Resource from the project. You can find the fruits of their collective labors at teachinspanglish.org: primary sources, lesson plans, worksheets, and even sample assessments are available alongside instructor-facing videos that delve more deeply into the practical and theoretical dimensions of this pedagogical approach. While the site was developed by and for college professors, we know high school teachers are hungry for this type of pedagogy too. While some of the lesson plans may be appropriate for high school students, instructors may wish to use the same primary sources but adapt the lesson plan, drawing inspiration from our instructor-facing videos and their own knowledge of the students they teach. If you are deploying or adapting these materials in a college or high school classroom, please connect with us so we can learn more about your work and explore possibilities for collaboration.

TAH

ENDNOTES

1 Most recent available data shows that 69% of the high school class of 2009 took at least some Spanish, and 56% took at least two years of the language. Table 225.70, Number and percentage of high school graduates who took foreign language courses in high school and average number of credits earned, by language and number of credits: 2000, 2005, and 2009, National Center for Education Statistics https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_225.70.asp. SHL students who did not take Spanish in high school yet still have familiarity with the language provide additional numbers to this total.