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RESPONSE

El futuro de los programas de español y portugués en los departamentos de lenguas modernas: Visiones alternativas

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Spanish and Portuguese Programs in Higher Education Institutions in the United States: Perspectives and Possibilities

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Abstract: This essay addresses key challenges that Spanish and Portuguese programs in higher education institutions will face over the coming years. First, we present options to position Spanish and Portuguese as an integral part of institutional efforts concerning interdisciplinarity, community engagement, and global awareness. Next, we discuss curricular changes for Spanish and Portuguese programs to focus on historical, cultural, linguistic, and social questions linked to Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking communities throughout the world. Finally, we look into programmatic ways for the profile of Hispanics and Lusophone Americans in the United States to be taken into distinct consideration by Spanish and Portuguese programs.

Keywords: curriculum design/diseño curricular, heritage learners/estudiantes de herencia, higher education/educación superior, language program articulation/articulación de programas de lenguas, teacher education/formación de profesores

A recent report by the Modern Language Association (MLA) (Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin 2015) reveals a mixed outlook for Spanish and Portuguese in United States higher education. Spanish enrollments are still greater than all other languages combined, but the report documents an overall decrease of 8.2% since 2009—5.7% at the undergraduate level, and 20.5% at the graduate level. Portuguese continues with its steady increase since the 1960s, and it is one of only a handful of languages that gained enrollments between 2009 and 2013. This increase could be related to a greater attention to Brazil in the last decade (Milleret 2012), but it is still far from the position that Portuguese should have as the fifth most spoken language in the world.

There are significant underlying trends that may be affecting second language (L2) enrollments in US higher education. Among others, they include a reduction in L2 requirements (particularly in the natural and social sciences), pressure on students to select academic options with more immediate financial promise, competition with other disciplines (e.g., computer sciences, information and communication technologies), and lack of institutional support in spite of calls for “internationalization,” “globalization,” or “cultural diversity.” While many of us consider this as a quite shortsighted approach to the value of a liberal education, US higher education does not seem to envisage a better future (Pratt 2009). For this reason, our article will propose institutional, curricular, and programmatic choices for Spanish and Portuguese university programs to reach a more solid position in years to come.

Spanish and Portuguese at the Institutional Level

During all historical periods and especially in the last 40–50 years, L2 study has been framed in service of US geopolitical and economic security. Such practical orientation involves several asymmetrical or even conflicting views. Jeff Bale (2014) alludes to a “zero-sum approach” towards...
language education seen as “either an economic and political resource to bolster the national interest or essential for the expression and extension of the rights of minoritized language communities” (184; emphasis in original). Similarly, Lacorte (2013) notes the contrast between 1) the advantages of learning Spanish for middle- or upper-class English-speaking students (Hughet and Pomerantz 2013); and 2) the “problem” that would set US Latino students seeking to maintain and/or learn Spanish apart from the model of the ideal English-monolingual US citizen (García 2014; see Carvalho 2010 for an insightful discussion about Portuguese in the United States). Furthermore, the emphasis on utilitarian perspectives about language education could play a major role in its persistent view as a complement for other academic areas—communication, business, health, etc. As Rogelio Miñana (2013) points for Spanish in small institutions, such a view of Spanish and Portuguese programs as “providers” of language services may entail excessively large enrollments in lower-level language courses, pressure on staffing needs, institutional reluctance to fund additional tenure lines, and a perception of language programs as academically and/or intellectually inferior (see Klee 2006 for a similar view regarding larger institutions).

Spanish and Portuguese programs should tackle these institutional asymmetries or conflicts through a resolute engagement in “constructive dialogues” at committees, study groups, panels, task forces and program reviews with administrators and other colleagues. Conversations about documents such as “Languages for All? Final Report” (Abbott et al. 2014), “The Heart of the Matter” (Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences 2013), or the “Twenty-First-Century Skills World Language Map” (Partnership for Twenty-first-century Skills [P21]/ACTFL 2011) could lead to more informed decision-making to meet the short- and long-term language needs for students in the academic, social, business, security, and information sectors. Another critical dimension of these dialogues should involve the alignment of student learning outcomes for L2 programs with those at the institutional level. Such endeavor would supply administrators with measurable evidence about the achievement of linguistic and cultural objectives. For example, Carol Klee, Charlotte Melin, and Dan Soleson’s (2015) programmatic evaluation model combines the proficiency guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL 2012), the World-Readiness Standards for Foreign Languages (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015), and the goals for liberal education stated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC and U) (2007). (See Heining-Boyton and Redmond 2013 for a similar proposal apropos the Common Core Standards.)

Suitable institutional support for interdisciplinary work and equal collaboration with other disciplines should promote the development of curricular models that are more responsible to the academic and professional interests of students (Scullion 2005). In this regard, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) programs have gained traction in the past two decades because they allow students to develop their language abilities at the same time they learn content in areas such as public health, business, American studies, communication, education, law, etc. (Klee 2015). Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) provide a type of CBI for students planning to use Spanish or Portuguese in their professional work (Abbott, Lafford, and Lear 2014).

Finally, outreach outside the institution would entail for both L2 programs and administrators more determined efforts to recruit domestic minority students; hire and retain diverse faculty and staff; collaborate with related student organizations on campus; and develop Community Service Learning (CSL) initiatives for both educators and students “to create synergy between the work of their classroom and the real-world concerns of nearby communities” (Rabin 2015: 168).

Curricular Perspectives for Spanish and Portuguese Programs

The first years of the new century have brought forth several frameworks of substantial relevance for the curriculum design of L2 programs: the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the
World-Readiness Standards, the "Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages Report" (MLA 2007), and the "Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature" (MLA 2009).

As stated in the preface to the 2012 revised version, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are descriptions of an individual's functional language ability for speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. The guidelines are used for assessment and/or evaluation in academic and workplace settings, but they may also have instructional and curricular implications; e.g., diagnostic testing for program evaluation, assessment of learning outcomes at the end of a program of study, or setting and implementing goals for instruction based on performance or language in use. The World-Readiness Standards are the most recent version of the National Standards for Learning Languages created in 1996. Also known as the 5 C's model (Communication, Connections, Comparisons, Communities, Cultures), the Standards are not a curricular guide, but they can propose beneficial curricular experiences for students to achieve its main purposes, and support the ideal of extended sequences of study.

Both the Proficiency Guidelines and, particularly, the Standards have had more impact in secondary education and only limited influence in higher education (Byrnes 2012). However, these frameworks have been regularly updated to fit the needs of all kinds of L2 programs (Cutshall 2012; Magnan, Murphy, and Sahakyan 2014). As a result, they have become more efficient tools for language program evaluation (Mills and Norris 2015), development of pedagogical materials by authors and textbook publishers (Cubillos 2014), and design of teacher education courses and activities at the collegiate level (Glisan and Shrum 2015; Norris 2013). In this latter regard, it will be crucial to put an end to the ongoing lack of communication between L2 departments and schools of education so they can together implement effective and innovative professional programs for language instructors in secondary and higher education (Huhn 2012).

The MLA reports are explicitly directed at higher education in order to 1) address the effects of the language crisis after 9/11 on L2 teaching in colleges and universities (MLA 2007: 1); 2) to examine options to reinforce English and language programs; and 3) "attract new generations of students to a traditional core of liberal study: language, literature, and culture" (MLA 2009: 1). Almost 10 years after their publication, the actual impact of these MLA reports may still be limited. As Frank Nuessel (2010) notes, curricular changes for language departments are generally voluntary, and cyclic program reviews do not often bring about significant consequences. Furthermore, the structure of many L2 university departments in the United States is still shaped by faculty members mainly trained in literature, instead of by a more balanced group of experts in literature, cultural studies, linguistics, and language pedagogy (VanPatten 2015; see also Dings and Hertel 2014 for a revealing quantitative analysis of faculty views towards courses that should be part of an undergraduate major in Spanish).

For Spanish and Portuguese programs to go beyond an idealistic view of the MLA reports and actually "walk the talk" in the coming years, we suggest to focus energy on three key recommendations. First, accurate language requirements and student learning outcomes should be based on appropriate program articulation and the combination of current tools for undergraduate and graduate curriculum development (Arens 2014; Klee 2015; Magnan, Murphy, and Sahakyan 2014; Nuessel 2010). All programs should have an integrated curriculum with principled, articulated educational goals and expected outcomes for each course, so students can experience both "a steady progress toward advanced proficiency in the language" (MLA 2009: 5), and "a series of complementary or linked courses that holistically incorporate content and cross-cultural reflection on every level" (MLA 2007: 5). Second, several important publications have come out in recent years focused on overcoming the traditional divide between language and literature in L2 programs (Allen, Dupuy, and Paesani 2015; Kumagai, López-Sánchez, and Wu 2016; Swaffar and Urlaub 2014; see Miñana 2013 and López-Sánchez 2016 for detailed accounts of curricular projects in different contexts). The main goals of these initiatives are 1) to situate
language study and cultural enquiry in historical, geographic, and crosscultural frames in courses at all levels (MLA 2007: 4); 2) to include a range of expressive forms into the instruction—literature, essays, journalism, humor, advertising, etc.; and 3) to restructure outdated models of teacher education and professional development (Allen 2014; Allen and Maxim 2013). Finally, deep-seated, systemic change within Spanish and Portuguese programs will not happen without constructive dialogues and collaborative teamwork among all faculty members. Non-jaundiced attitudes about certain areas of expertise, sharing common responsibilities, and engagement “in shaping and overseeing the content and teaching approaches used throughout the curriculum, from the first year forward” (MLA 2007: 7) will make it much easier for L2 programs to consolidate the above-mentioned structural coherence, and to develop interdisciplinary CBI, LSP, and CSL initiatives (Klee 2015; Abbott, Lafford, and Lear 2014; see also Carvalho, De Silva, and Freire 2010, for a rationale about Portuguese learning among Spanish-speaking students, and the website of the Portuguese Flagship Program for details about programs for undergraduate student to achieve superior proficiency in Spanish and/or Portuguese).

**US Higher Education and Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Communities**

The members of Hispanic and Lusophone communities in the United States will play an essential role for the future of Spanish and Portuguese university programs. First, these communities have been well established in the United States for centuries, with 1) an important demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic presence throughout the nation; and 2) very close links to languages spoken in the seven continents—especially in the Americas. Second, more members of these communities have become part of US higher education due to the overall growth of the Hispanic and Lusophone populations, and the steady development of Hispanic and Lusophone middle classes with more resources and interest in providing their children with university education. Students of Hispanic and Lusophone heritage may enroll in Spanish or Portuguese courses in order to become teachers of these languages; to meet the L2 requirements in other majors or to fulfill the requirements for a minor or a double major; to reinforce ties with relatives or friends with limited knowledge of English; to strengthen their own identity as members of a community with distinct social and cultural characteristics; or to build their professional profile through advanced proficiency in languages other than English (see e.g., Bagio and Rivera 2013; Dumitrescu 2013). With the recent slowdown in immigration to the United States from Latin America, another relevant consideration about these communities is the extent to which new generations will be willing to maintain their heritage language instead of falling into the usual process of language shift (Carvalho 2010; Krogstad, Lopez, and Rohal 2015).

How will the pedagogical needs of this significant population be addressed by Spanish and Portuguese programs in the coming years? Those genuinely enthusiastic about their students of Hispanic and Lusophone heritage should:

1) restructure their literature and culture course offerings beyond specific periods, geographical areas and/or renowned authors in order to explore cultural, intellectual, and ideological bonds among Spanish, Latin American, Latina/o and Luso-American studies.

2) validate and incorporate the varieties of Spanish and Portuguese spoken by our students into courses specifically designed for heritage learners, as well as advanced courses in a variety of literary, cultural, linguistic, and professional areas.

3) address the implicit linguistics ideologies among (under)graduate students and faculty of all ranks that may limit the learning and teaching of Spanish or Portuguese to standard, prestigious or hegemonic varieties.
4) boost the transcultural and translingual connections between Spanish and Portuguese programs so more of our heritage students can become successful learners of a third language.

5) design courses for professional areas not only focused on utilitarian views of Spanish and Portuguese, but also concerned with the cultural, sociohistorical, and ideological conditions of these languages in the United States.

6) involve heritage students in coalitions or alliances with community partners, institutions, and agencies in community-based initiatives from which both students and their communities can learn from each other and collaborate to achieve coordinated goals (for further information about these and other initiatives see Beaudrie, Ducar, and Potowski 2014; Beaudrie and Fairclough 2016; Jouët-Pastre 2011; Luna 2012; Wiley, Kreeft Peyton, Christian, Moore, and Liu 2014).

WORKS CITED


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Palabras clave: ACTFL, curricular design/diseño curricular, curricular integration/integración curricular, critical competences/competencias críticas, linguistics/lingüística, MLA, second language teaching/enseñanza de L2

El futuro de los programas de español y portugués estará marcado por la habilidad de los departamentos en que están integrados para aprovechar la oportunidad que ofrecen la globalización, los discursos pro internacionalización y la importancia del español en Estados Unidos, pero también para resistir la visión instrumental dominante en la enseñanza de L2. La intervención en el ámbito institucional es decisiva. Habría que distinguir entre dos modelos alternativos: por un lado, documentos como el informe “Languages for All?” (Abbott et al. 2014) y los producidos por ACTFL, en los cuales la lengua se ve ante todo como instrumento y categoría administrativa; por otro, el modelo presente en los informes del Modern Language Association (MLA) (2007; 2009), los cuales apuestan por una visión integradora de la enseñanza de lengua, literatura y cultura.

Al poner el acento en “objetivos de aprendizaje” y en sistemas de evaluación que requieren “evidencia objetiva de que se han alcanzado los objetivos lingüísticos y culturales”, el primer modelo separa categóricamente la enseñanza de L2 de la orientación propia en los cursos de literatura y estudios culturales. En consecuencia, este modelo es difícilmente compatible con la integración propuesta por el informe de MLA (2007), la cual no solo implica reformar el currículum para superar la división entre lengua y literatura, sino además replantearse la manera de entender la enseñanza de L2 y el lugar de la lingüística en los departamentos.

En este sentido, habría que distinguir también entre dos visiones alternativas del rol de la lingüística. Autores como VanPatten (2015) y Del Valle (2014) coinciden en reclamar más puestos de tenure para “expertos” en lengua. Ahora bien, VanPatten sigue dentro del paradigma que ve la lengua como hecho empírico, y así exige más especialistas en SLA y mayor conocimiento de escalas como las de ACTFL, todo ello para entender mejor “the nature of language, its representation in the mind-brain of humans, and how language is processed, acquired, and used” (2015: 2). Del Valle (2014), en cambio, advierte que el estudio del lenguaje como objeto empírico y formal tiene escasa afinidad con “las prácticas literarias y culturales que se han convertido en objeto central de los departamentos de lenguas modernas” (87). Por tanto, entiende que la integración pasa por ver la lengua “como artefacto cultural y constructo cognitivo de contornos imprecisos, como significante que remite a prácticas de interacción con significados sociales disputados que se definen y descodifican siempre en relación con el contexto histórico material de su producción y recepción” (98).
La visión de la lengua ante todo como objeto cultural, y no ya tanto como categoría administrativa o hecho empírico, podría favorecer la creación de puestos para especialistas en análisis del discurso, historia lingüística e intelectual, lingüística e inmigración y políticas del lenguaje, líneas de investigación que, a diferencia de la lingüística formal o SLA, se prestan al diálogo con los colegas de estudios culturales y literarios (Del Valle 2014; Labrador Méndez 2016). Obviamente, esto debería reflejarse también en el currículo. Así, la enseñanza de L2 en un contexto universitario debería trascender la visión instrumental que se tiene de ella, incluyendo reflexión crítica sobre la lengua y las categorías lingüísticas que indican distinciones sociales y políticas (Del Valle 2014; Kramsch 2014) y atendiendo a cuestiones sociolingüísticas como el prestigio, la relación entre lengua e identidad y las prácticas y experiencias multilingües (Leeman y Serafini 2016). Es decir, debería asumir como objetivo legítimo el desarrollo de habilidades reflexivas como la “competencia translingüística y transcultural” (MLA 2007), la “competencia simbólica” (Kramsch 2014) o la “competencia translingüística crítica” (Leeman y Serafini 2016).

OBRAS CITADAS