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"A 'Gringa' Is Going to Teach Me Spanish!": A Nonnative Teacher Reflects and Responds

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AT THE close of the semester my advanced Spanish grammar students[1] invited me to join them at a local restaurant to celebrate the completion of the final exam. The class was held once a week in the evening. Many of these students were native or heritage speakers who fit university classes into already demanding schedules, schedules that included families and full-time jobs.

Engaged in conversations that alternated between English and Spanish, we all gathered around a large table. One of my students asked me how I had learned and where I had practiced Spanish. Our conversation eventually turned to this student's background, and we chatted about family, academic experiences, and future plans. My student explained that the grammar course had been a requirement for the Spanish major and, with a smile, confessed initial surprise on discovering that I, a native English speaker, would be the teacher. In fact, this student good-humoredly reported having called a friend after our first class session and having exclaimed, "Una gringa me va a enseñar español" ("A gringa is going to teach me Spanish"). We laughed about our odd situation; the student politely affirmed the adequacy of my Spanish, and I acknowledged the rather awkward position of power in which I had taught all semester.

Pleasant memories of this informal get-together still linger, yet it is this student's comment that stands out most in my mind. It confirmed that the discomfort I had experienced throughout the semester was not a product of my imagination. For good reason I was unsettled by the implications of a gringa's teaching Spanish grammar to a group of literate, educated Spanish speakers. And it wasn't just me; my students also perceived the irony of the situation.

As a language teacher and linguist, I am well acquainted with discussions about the advantages of studying a second language with native as well as nonnative instructors (Árva and Medgyes; Ellis;

Lasagabaster and Sierra). For instance, Guadalupe Valdés raises the following issue:

> Does the second language acquisition environment require an instructor who is largely indistinguishable from a native speaker in regard to phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and pragmatics, or does it demand an enthusiastic, committed individual who is likely to motivate young undergraduates to pursue further language study? (156)

She explains that in an ideal world a teacher would possess both sets of qualifications: a high level of L2 proficiency and excellent teaching skills.

As a new teacher of beginning language courses at the university level, I internalized the arguments surrounding this debate and found myself excessively concerned about the shortcomings in my own L2 skills and overwhelmed by the challenges of being a nonnative teacher (see Byrnes, Crane, and Sprang). I wrestled with the question of my legitimacy and my abilities as a nonnative and worried about a variety of possible scenarios. For example, would I commit grammatical errors as I conducted class? Or would students ask me about vocabulary I did not know (see Horwitz for a discussion of anxiety among nonnative language teachers)? Time and experience gradually convinced me that my personal insights and empathy as a language learner outweighed my gaps in L2 vocabulary or lapses in grammatical accuracy.

Internally resolving the issue of my status as a nonnative L2 teacher was easiest at the beginning and intermediate levels, and eventually my confidence extended to third- and fourth-year courses. I felt less and less threatened by advanced students; a language learner myself, I could anticipate their struggles and was usually able to contribute to their linguistic development. However, I now work with a highly diverse student population; the ethnicity and linguistic heritage of many of them are anchored in the language I teach. Consequently, the once-resolved issue of my nonnative status must be revisited, not so much from the perspective of L2 proficiency as from that of power and identity.

Valdés notes that "ideologies about language—that is, commonsense notions about what is correct, appropriate, and necessary—directly depend on structures of power" (159). "Correct" varieties of language reflect the norms that are followed by persons in positions of power or prestige. Certainly all language teachers, both native and nonnative, must respect dialectal variation. Yet, while native teachers must be careful not to impose their own variety of Spanish, claiming it as standard when differences arise between it and the dialect of their students, the nonnative teacher's position is more awkward and potentially offensive.

The imperfect Spanish spoken by a nonnative teacher in an academic context may correspond more closely to normative standards than do the informal varieties employed by some heritage speakers on a daily basis. In a sense, this notion of correctness puts the nonnative in a position of superiority. Added to this advantage is the power inherent to the position of teacher. Unless a course is highly learner-centered, the teacher not only determines what will be taught and how the material will be presented but also has sole authority to evaluate or grade student performance. Paulo Freire urged teachers to reject the banking model, a view of students as receptacles or empty accounts into which information must be deposited. His call to recognize and value the knowledge that learners already possess is particularly relevant in the context of a nonnative teacher working with native and heritage learners. Professional qualifications and status give teachers a license to exercise their authority in a

heavy-handed way, but they would be wise to recognize the legitimacy, and in some cases superior utility, of learners' background and practical language knowledge.

Though concern over the power dynamics at play in the classroom is well justified, it is both unfair and shortsighted to presume that nonnative instructors should not teach heritage or native speakers in any context. Such a viewpoint is in fact not common. My colleagues, all of whom are aware of the significant number of heritage and native speakers in our student body, expressed no reservations about scheduling me to teach the grammar course. Many courses in Hispanic literature, culture, and linguistics are taught by professors whose native language is English. But while students may not perceive the content of these specialized courses as a threat to the adequacy of grammatical judgments made by their experienced heritage or native ear, they may find such a threat in a grammar course.

My students' background as Spanish speakers forced me to reconsider my approach to teaching grammar. I had been accustomed to working with nonnative learners of Spanish, whose errors both of omission and commission frequently reflected direct translations from English to Spanish. Their weaknesses in grammar were often blatant and hindered comprehensibility. My heritage and native learners, however, had no trouble producing comprehensible language; their struggles centered on register, mechanics, and other formalities of written language. Though I expected a mix of students in this particular grammar course, I did not anticipate that only three of twenty would be nonnative speakers of Spanish. Heritage language courses were offered each semester, and my course was not one of them.

The fair and appropriate placement of nonnative speakers in this type of diverse environment is a complicated issue that requires serious consideration by both the language teaching profession and individual language programs. Heritage and native speakers expose their nonnative classmates to rich linguistic input, but their language skills, particularly their speaking ability, can be intimidating to their peers and may create anxiety. Though one can propose offering separate sections of a particular course for nonnative students, universities in regions with high numbers of heritage and native speakers may not be able to fill such sections. The unique nature of each instructional context plays a central role in determining how students' needs are best met.

I struggled with how to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of the large heritage and native population without overlooking the needs of those students who did not share their linguistic and cultural background. I recognized the offensive implications of my presuming to correct the heritage speakers' Spanish grammar, and I knew that the native speakers already followed common usage norms. Thus it seemed most appropriate for me to focus on developing in my students the ability to explain how, when, and why particular grammatical structures are used. I sought a balanced approach, avoiding an excessive, empty focus on terminology while requiring that students, many of whom were language majors, manipulate the most basic grammatical concepts. I believed that these future teachers and translators needed to be able to identify parts of speech and explain fundamental differences between verb tenses.

I found this approach to be beneficial in several respects. First of all, it allowed students to consider differences of opinion about standard usage. But, by focusing on knowledge rather than production, it prevented any controversy from becoming the focal point of the course. This cognitive focus was enabling. Most students could already edit a text by merely crossing out errors and writing what

sounded right. But I wanted them to be equipped as teachers, able to identify, explain, and address weaknesses in their own writing or in that of their peers. In our class, several students planned to pursue a career in education, and the ability to explain grammatical concepts instead of merely correcting errors or rewriting a text was particularly important for them. Finally, this approach capitalized on my strengths as a nonnative instructor and took advantage of what I could offer. My ability to explain grammar was greater than theirs, and, quite frankly, this pedagogical emphasis preserved my utility; the students could produce grammatically accurate language, but without instruction they had difficulty explaining its grammaticality.

To show respect for the heritage-native-speaker status of my students and also to avoid an authoritative approach to the course material, I began our first class session with a discussion about the gray areas of grammar. We talked about the differences between written and spoken language, the sources of established grammatical norms, and the consequences of not following what is perceived to be standard grammar. While I sought to defend the legitimacy of all varieties and affirmed the role of sociolinguistic context in determining what constituted appropriate language, my students insisted on the unqualified value of correct grammar. On a theoretical level, I was never able to change their view about the supremacy of standard Spanish; yet, paradoxically, when we studied specific grammatical concepts in class, these students were quick to defend their innate sense of what sounded right.

There were several instances, for example, when students engaged in discussions among themselves about vocabulary that I, the nonnative instructor, had used in model sentences. Once a student interrupted me, ignoring the grammatical point that was the focus of the lesson, to question aloud whether a particular word could be used the way I had used it. Interestingly, in this case and in others, the question was not directed to me but uttered as the student looked around the room to elicit the opinions of classmates, many of whom immediately responded. Needless to say, class participation was outstanding.

As an uneasy spectator, I had plenty of opportunity for observation during these brief exchanges and noticed that some students seemed annoyed, viewing the inquiries as interruptions that slowed down the class. In fact, several students privately expressed their impatience and apologized to me for their classmates' behavior. I was, they argued, the teacher and should not be second-guessed, especially from an accusatory posture. Though initially disconcerted, I came to see that questioning an instructor was both natural and appropriate, especially when the instructor was a nonnative speaker, and I grew less threatened by these episodes as the semester progressed. When such questions were raised, I tried to be receptive, to listen to students' comments; then I redirected attention to the matter at hand as efficiently as possible, whether or not the debate had been conclusively resolved.

Both my nonnative grammatical system and nonnative vocabulary seemed to be an issue, to some degree, in almost every class session. I sometimes wondered if my greatest contribution as a nonnative teacher was putting my students on alert, thereby priming them to look for errors. Whether in a sentence on the blackboard, an example on the overhead projector, or an item on an exam, students drew attention to anything they thought was an error, and rightly so. On one occasion I omitted a reflexive pronoun from an example on a handout, a typically nonnative error, and until a student signaled the problem, I was oblivious to it. I still remember the sentence: it was about a tree that moves (reflexively!) in the wind. Embarrassed, I acknowledged the missing pronoun and, as had become my habit in these situations, quickly moved on. Later I wondered if my students saw my

omission as an oversight, a random error, or evidence of a flawed understanding of Spanish grammar. Native teachers also commit errors or use grammatical forms that deviate from the norm, but such usage is not likely to cast doubt on their linguistic competence. In my case, such doubt was possible.

This is not to say that my students were disrespectful, that they picked at every piece of language I produced, or that they inappropriately questioned my qualifications. The atmosphere in our classroom was positive, energetic, and polite. The instances on which I reflect here were occasional and may have passed unnoticed by most of the students. While on the one hand I felt somewhat threatened, on the other I was thrilled that students felt comfortable enough to correct me and that they were attuned to the language used in handouts, exams, and transparencies as sources of grammatical data.

Of course, many teachers, regardless of subject matter or educational level, are subject to their students' correction and must manage it appropriately, but handling such confrontation in the context of the heritage or native classroom requires particular sensitivity. The situation also provides a unique opportunity to defer power and affirm the validity of students' knowledge base and personal experience.

Thus I found that my nonnative status contributed to my pursuit of a student-centered pedagogy. Though I believe in acknowledging learners' voice, encouraging independent thinking, and minimizing the role of the instructor, there is often a gap between beliefs and teaching practices (Buzzelli and Johnston). Despite my good intentions, I do not always elicit student input or sufficiently acknowledge the wealth of knowledge and experience that my students possess. Yet, in an environment in which my students' linguistic production was more intuitive than mine, it was easier for me to keep my students, and their strengths, at the center of my attention.

Being assigned to teach these students had placed me in a position of authority; how I handled that authority, however, was up to me. I found the situation a difficult balancing act. Because the students communicated in Spanish with tremendous ease, I felt at first a greater need to establish and maintain my authority than I had felt in classes with nonnative students. At the same time, the thought of taking a heavy-handed approach with heritage and native speakers seemed especially inappropriate.

Perhaps the distribution of knowledge or distinct areas of expertise in our classroom helped neutralize, so to speak, the potential for academic imperialism. Less-than-native language skills stripped a certain degree of power from the English-speaking gringa assigned to teach a group of Spanish speakers about the grammar of their own language. It is true that native or heritage speaker status and cognitive access to grammatical knowledge do not go hand in hand. Most native speakers of any language are at a loss to explain the rules underlying the structure of their daily expressions, sometimes even after instruction. Nevertheless, as a member of a culture that is known for oppressing minority groups and is only beginning to recognize the value of languages other than English, I felt uncomfortable.

What kinds of messages about language and power are communicated to native or heritage Spanish-speaking students in the classroom of a nonnative teacher? Daniel Villa expresses concern over what he calls the sanitizing of United States Spanish, specifically in academic contexts. He explains that heritage learners may be "confronted by certain language experts who either explicitly or implicitly assert that their Spanish language skills are inadequate for any meaningful educational experience and

are best reserved for talking with grandma and grandpa back home" (228). Negative attitudes toward particular varieties of Spanish could be expressed directly by an instructor or conveyed through subtle, even unconscious, means.

My instructional practices and attitude sought to affirm the value of my students' language skills, but who was I to convince students, on a practical level, of the value of all varieties of Spanish? Certainly I could tell them how I thought the world should be and argue that people ought to recognize the adequacy, utility, and sophistication of all Spanish dialects. However, our experiences and current roles speak clearly about the varieties of Spanish that are associated with privilege or opportunity and those that are not.

The growing Hispanic population in the United States suggests that nonnative teachers in the classroom with heritage or native Spanish-speaking students are likely to become more common. While I as a nonnative teacher cannot dismantle the power structures that surround us or the occasional awkwardness of the arrangement, I can enter the classroom humbly, with a heightened awareness of the academic nature of my preparation and of the rich linguistic and cultural background that my students bring to class.

One might conclude that pedagogical awkwardness is not always counterproductive or undesirable. A Latin American friend once admonished me never to forget that I made my living from her language and culture. I have not forgotten. We nonnative teachers should have enough reservations about exercising our authority over heritage and native students that, at some point, we pause to consider the power dynamics at play in our classrooms. Those occasional awkward moments may serve to help both teacher and students respect each other's contribution to the joint experience of language learning.

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[1]Details have been altered to protect the identity of all students.

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