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HOLISTIC PROFILE OF SPANISH HERITAGE LEARNERS: A KEY PIECE IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE DIDACTIC MATERIALS

**PERFIL HOLÍSTICO DE LOS ESTUDIANTES
HISPANOHABLANTES: UNA PIEZA CLAVE EN EL
DESARROLLO DE MATERIALES DE ESTUDIO EFECTIVOS**

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Holistic Profile of Spanish Heritage Learners: A Key Piece in Developing Effective Didactic Materials

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a holistic profile of the students enrolled in the Level II Spanish for Native (Heritage) Speakers (SNS) course at South Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, United States. The portrait of the local student is a key piece of the national puzzle because it uncovers the reality of young Latinos in one of the states with the highest Hispanic population growth in the country in the last three decades; and also, it provides a solid basis for the design of effective teaching materials. The characterization of this student segment was one of the central objectives of a doctoral research that proposed life stories as an effective tool for improving the writing skills of Spanish heritage learners. The data was collected using questionnaires, and provided information on their linguistic heritage, metalinguistic awareness, notion of Latino identity, and socioeconomic characteristics. Recognizing linguistic and cultural heterogeneity is essential for optimizing teaching practices (Potowski, 2015), and is aligned with Mecklenburg County's Action Plan 2020-2025, which promotes equity, bilingualism, and the preservation of cultural identity in the education of Hispanic minorities. This qualitative study, based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), involved 60 student researchers who defined the details of the survey, ensuring relevance to the dialectal variety in the classroom. The results revealed three different profiles of students raised in Spanish-speaking households, including heritage speakers born in the United States, those who have been educated in English, and newly arrived Spanish speakers. The research concluded that the profile of the Spanish-speaking student at SMHS is heterogeneous in nature and requires educational resources specifically designed to value and celebrate dialectal diversity, bilingualism and biculturalism.

Keywords: profile, heritage speakers, writing, life stories, high school

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Perfil Holístico de los Estudiantes Hispanohablantes: Una Pieza Clave en el Desarrollo de Materiales de Estudio Efectivos

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta el perfil holístico de los estudiantes matriculados en el curso de Español para Hispanohablantes (SNS) en la escuela de Bachillerato South Mecklenburg en Charlotte, Carolina del Norte, Estados Unidos. El retrato del estudiante local es pieza clave del rompecabezas nacional porque revela la realidad de los jóvenes latinos en uno de los estados con mayor crecimiento de población hispana en el país en las últimas tres décadas; y al mismo tiempo, proporciona una base sólida en el diseño de materiales didácticos efectivos. La caracterización de este segmento estudiantil fue uno de los objetivos centrales de una investigación doctoral que propuso los relatos de vida como herramienta eficaz para mejorar las habilidades de escritura de los hispanohablantes. La recopilación de datos se llevó a cabo mediante cuestionarios, y arrojó información sobre su patrimonio lingüístico, conciencia metalingüística, noción de identidad latina y características socioeconómicas. Reconocer la heterogeneidad lingüística y cultural es esencial para optimizar las prácticas de enseñanza (Potowski, 2015), y está alineado con el Plan de Acción del Condado de Mecklenburg 2020-2025, que promueve equidad, bilingüismo y preservación de la identidad cultural en la educación de las minorías hispanas. Este estudio cualitativo, basado en la Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP), involucró a 60 estudiantes investigadores que definieron los detalles de la encuesta asegurando pertinencia ante la variedad dialectal en el aula. Los resultados revelan tres diversos perfiles de estudiantes criados en hogares de habla hispana, incluyendo hablantes de herencia nacidos en los Estados Unidos, aquellos que han sido educados en inglés y los nativos recién llegados. La investigación concluyó que el perfil del estudiante hispanohablante en SMHS es de naturaleza heterogénea y exige recursos educativos diseñados puntualmente para valorar y celebrar la diversidad dialectal, el bilingüismo y el biculturalismo.

Palabras clave: perfil, hispanohablantes, escritura, historias de vida, bachillerato



INTRODUCTION

The instruction of Spanish to heritage speakers in the United States has failed to foster the high level of linguistic competence necessary for academic and professional success. Research attributes this gap to the absence of engaging and effective instructional materials and the lack of specialized educators capable of motivating students to refine the language they acquired at home. Developing appropriate didactic resources remains an unresolved challenge. A logical starting point for addressing this issue is the creation of a national learner profile—one that is flexible and comprehensive enough to account for diverse proficiency levels and dialectal variations, yet precise enough to inspire educators to specialize in the field and encourage the development of materials that resonate with students' linguistic and cultural realities (Lacorte, 2016).

As a contribution to this effort, this article examines the student profile of those enrolled in the Level II Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) course at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS), the high school with the largest Latino population in Charlotte, the largest city in North Carolina. This study seeks to bridge the gap between student realities and instructional materials, ensuring that curriculum design aligns with the evolving demographics and linguistic needs of heritage and native Spanish-speaking students.

These are the preliminary results related to the research question: What is the holistic profile of Level II Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) students at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS)? This question is explored in the author's doctoral dissertation, which proposes life story narratives as a didactic tool to enhance writing skills in Spanish native and heritage speaker courses. Additionally, the study examined the key question: What are the didactic and content-related characteristics of the materials currently used in SNS instruction at SMHS? These questions are interconnected, emphasizing the importance of understanding students' linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds to design effective instructional materials.

The holistic profile was constructed through a qualitative study employing Participatory Action Research (PAR), engaging students as active collaborators in identifying their educational challenges. A questionnaire was used to collect data on students' linguistic backgrounds, language use, and self-assessment of their academic Spanish proficiency. Understanding these factors is essential for



optimizing instructional strategies and fostering bilingual literacy in an increasingly diverse and multilingual educational landscape.

Given the diverse composition of SNS classrooms, which include U.S.-born students, those schooled in English since the age of five, and newly arrived students, educational resources must be tailored to reflect and celebrate their linguistic and cultural diversity. The diverse linguistic backgrounds of heritage speakers significantly influence their language development. Some are sequential bilinguals, meaning they were exclusively exposed to their heritage language in early childhood before encountering the dominant language later (Armon-Lotem et al, 2019). Others are simultaneous bilinguals, acquiring both languages from birth, often due to having parents who speak different languages.

These differences extend beyond initial linguistic exposure. Some heritage speakers have lived in their family's country of origin, while others have never visited. Some use their heritage language exclusively at home, while others live in communities where Spanish is widely spoken. Additional factors, such as family structure (e.g., number of siblings), the availability of weekend community schools, or bilingual programs in local education systems, also shape language proficiency.

Trying to understand why students from Spanish-speaking households exhibit varying levels of proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, experts have concluded that the answer lies in language exposure and input quality. Based on empirical evidence, Polinsky and Scontras (2020) argue that heritage speakers receive a reduced quantity and different quality of linguistic input compared to native speakers, as their exposure is typically restricted to family and personal interactions. Additionally, they highlight that heritage speakers have fewer language processing resources available, further influencing their linguistic development.

Each of these factors—individually or in combination—plays a critical role in shaping the linguistic development of heritage speakers, defining the academic profile of SNS students at SMHS. Understanding these variables is crucial for designing curriculum and instructional materials that reflect students' realities, fostering meaningful engagement and academic success in SNS courses.

Compared to other states, North Carolina's Hispanic migration is relatively recent. Between 1990 and 2000, Mecklenburg County's Hispanic population grew nearly 500%, rising from approximately 7,000 to over 45,000 residents (U.S. Census, 2020). Statewide, the Latino population experienced a similar



surge of almost 400% during the same period, largely driven by employment opportunities in construction, agriculture, and service industries. By 2020, North Carolina’s Hispanic population had increased by one million, with Charlotte alone adding 150,000 Hispanic residents (Pew Research Center, 2017).

The rapid and unforeseen arrival of immigrants from Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador since the 1990s has reshaped North Carolina’s socioeconomic and educational landscape. In response, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) launched Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) courses in 2001 to support students who spoke Spanish at home but received formal education in English (Carreira, 2007). Around the same time, universities introduced Spanish for Heritage Speakers (SHS) courses to promote linguistic diversity and academic literacy (Montrul, 2016).

Figure 1. Mecklenburg County racial and ethnic diversity 2010-2020. Source: Mecklenburg County Pulse Report 2022

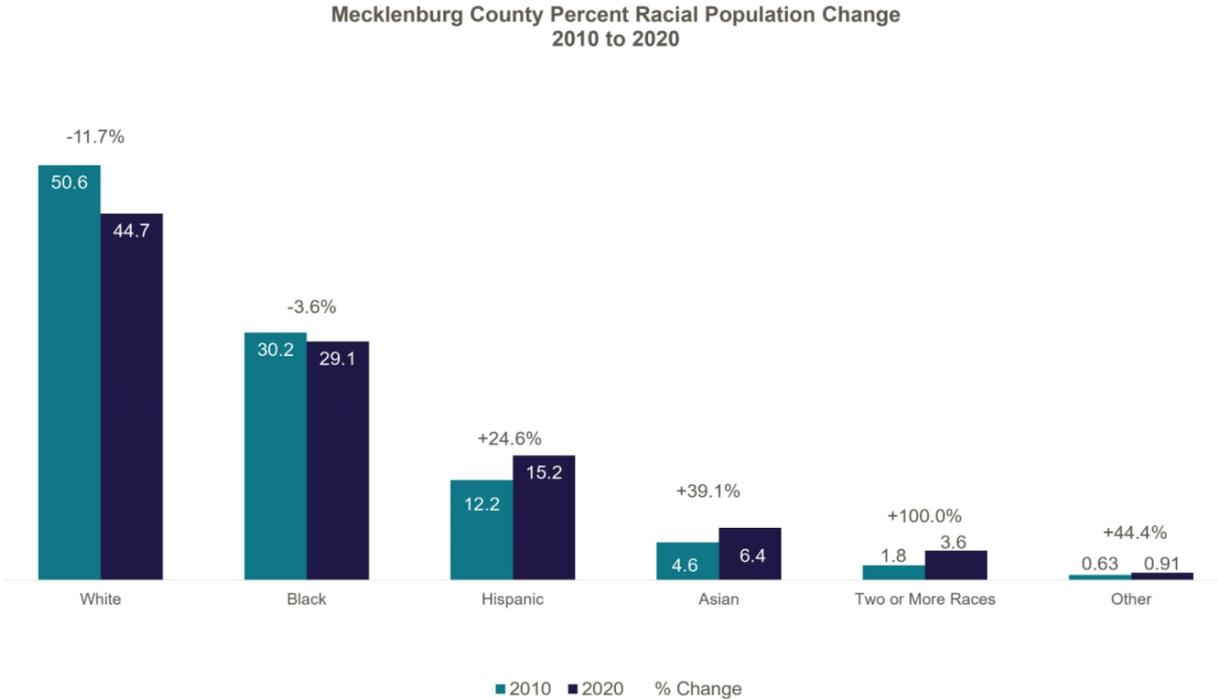
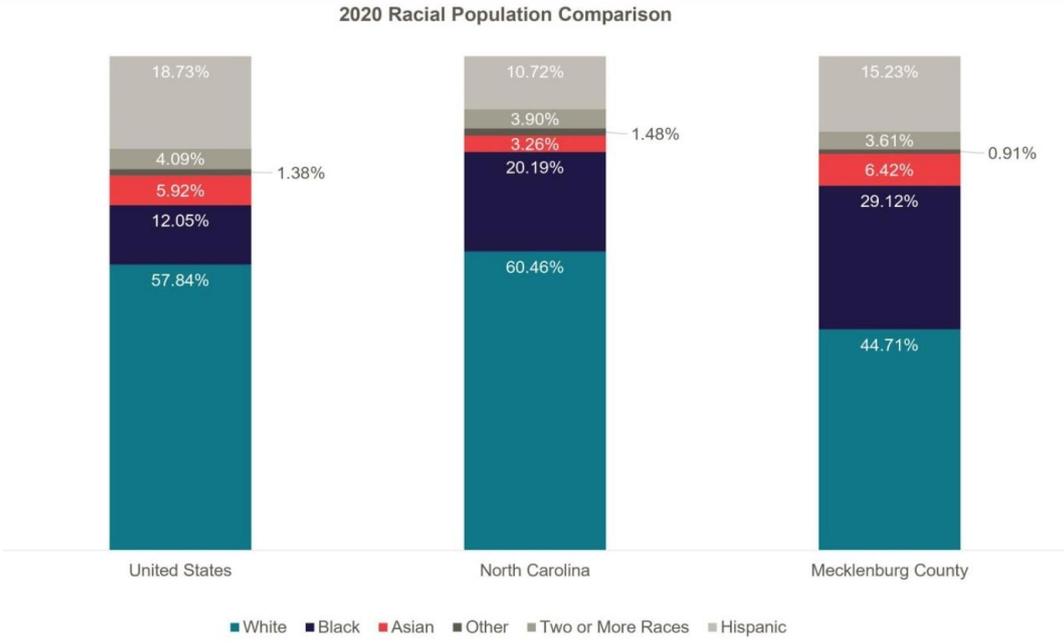


Figure 2. United States, North Carolina, and Mecklenburg County racial and ethnic diversity 2020. Source Mecklenburg County Pulse Report 2022



During Charlotte’s Latino population boom in the early 2000s, educators Jennifer Pearsall, Kelly Price, and the author of this article, Nhora Gómez-Saxon, advocated for SNS courses in North Carolina high schools. The author co-wrote the first SNS curriculum, piloted the program at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS), and trained teachers statewide. When SNS courses began at SMHS in 2001, instructional materials were borrowed from states with longer migratory traditions, such as Texas, New Mexico, and California. These resources, designed primarily for students with Mexican backgrounds, did not engage the SMHS student population, who felt unrepresented in the content.

By the early 2010s, North Carolina universities, including the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and North Carolina State University, expanded their SHS programs, aligning with national efforts to adapt Spanish instruction for heritage learners. These initiatives emphasized both Spanish instruction and the preservation of regional dialects and linguistic diversity (Leeman, 2005).

By the 2023-2024 school year, 35% of North Carolina high schools offered SNS programs—an increase of 20% since 2018—led by districts such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake County (NCDPI, 2023). However, despite this growth, instructional materials had not been updated since 2008, leaving a critical gap in curriculum relevance and effectiveness (Potowski, 2005). At SMHS, most SNS students were U.S.-born, spoke English as their dominant language, and navigated the complexities of 21st-century



education, including pandemic-related disruptions. The second-largest group consisted of recent arrivals, primarily from Honduras.

As of 2023, a typical Spanish for Spanish Speakers classroom at SMHS includes students with varying levels of linguistic proficiency. The majority are heritage speakers who, according to Valdés' canonical definition (1997:38), are "individuals who have been raised in a home where a language other than English is spoken, who speak or at least understand that language, and who are, to a certain extent, bilingual in that language and English." Additionally, there are newcomers, primarily from Honduras and Mexico, some of whom have experienced interrupted education. Ortega (2020) provides a comprehensive review of heritage speaker characteristics from the perspectives of sociolinguistics, education, and linguistics, highlighting features such as unbalanced bilingualism, stronger proficiency in the majority language, limited literacy in the heritage language, and the hierarchical relationship between the two languages.

Although the NCDPI continues to promote and fund SNS courses, the lack of updated instructional materials has resulted in a disconnect between classroom content and students' lived experiences. Demographic trends highlight the increasing enrollment of Latino students, yet they fail to capture the cultural and linguistic diversity that should inform curriculum design. Addressing this gap is crucial to making SNS courses more relevant and effective for today's students. Ideally, the needs of HHs should be addressed from primary education onwards. In many cases, students who reach university have never received instruction in the language they use at home to a greater or lesser extent.

As courses for Spanish speakers or "*Hispanounidenses*", continue to expand, it becomes increasingly evident that the curricula do not reflect the student population's demographics, linguistic abilities, or cultural identities. The growing number of SNS and SHS courses acknowledges the importance of heritage language education, yet a disconnect persists between instructional programs and students' lived experiences (García, 2007). By incorporating students' linguistic backgrounds, identities, and real-world experiences into the curriculum, SNS and SHS courses can better support bilingual literacy, academic achievement, and long-term professional success.

By developing a comprehensive profile of Spanish-speaking students within the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System, this research contributes a critical piece to the national understanding of heritage and



native Spanish speakers. As one of the fastest-growing Latino populations in the United States, Charlotte provides a microcosm of the linguistic, cultural, and educational challenges faced by heritage speakers nationwide. A nuanced understanding of these students—rooted in empirical data—can inform more inclusive and effective instructional approaches, bridging the gap between their lived experiences and academic expectations. This study serves as a foundational step toward a more holistic view of Spanish-speaking students across the country, ensuring that curriculum design, teacher training, and educational policies reflect the realities of bilingual learners in an evolving linguistic landscape.

METHOD

This research follows an interpretive paradigm, analyzing students' actions, reactions, and educational experiences in the Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) course at SMHS. Rather than simply collecting and tabulating data, this approach seeks to describe real-life situations, identify relationships between variables, and provide a deeper understanding of the observed phenomena. The study employs a hermeneutic qualitative method, which is particularly suited for analyzing classroom dynamics and adolescent behavior. This method prioritizes reflective analysis over numerical measurement, making it essential for understanding the diverse linguistic profiles, educational needs, and sociocultural realities of SNS students at SMHS.

The research is based on qualitative inquiry, which focuses on interpreting social and educational phenomena by examining the processes shaping students' linguistic and academic challenges. Qualitative research is adaptable, allowing methods to evolve based on emerging questions and findings (López, 2017).

To construct a holistic profile of SNS students, researchers developed a Google Forms survey with closed and open-ended questions. The survey was designed taking into consideration the recommendations and existing studies of various researchers regarding topics that reflect both the individual characteristics of the students and their cultural and educational context (Ali, 2010).

The survey covered key areas such as sociodemographic background, family origin, language use in different contexts, and attitudes toward Spanish and cultural identity. Before finalizing the questionnaire, students participated in a pilot review, ensuring clarity and inclusivity across dialectal



variations. Their feedback led them as investigators to adjust the wording and question structure, making the survey more relevant to their lived experiences.

Students engaged in class discussions to refine terminology and ensure that survey categories accurately represented their realities. For instance, when defining family structures, students conducted research using classroom projectors and guided discussions, ultimately expanding the classification to include nuclear, single-parent, and extended families. Their active involvement in shaping the survey underscored their commitment to accurately representing their identities.

Ethic considerations

This research adheres to strict ethical considerations to ensure protection, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of all students involved. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and their consent was obtained before data collection. Since the study involved minors, parental or guardian consent was also secured, following institutional and legal guidelines.

Confidentiality and anonymity were prioritized throughout the research process. Students' identities were protected by using school-assigned identification numbers rather than personal names in the survey responses. Only the instructor had access to identifying information, and it was safeguarded to prevent unauthorized disclosure.

The study adhered to principles of fairness and respect, ensuring that all students, regardless of linguistic proficiency or background, were given equal opportunities to participate. Measures were taken to avoid bias in data interpretation, and students were actively involved in shaping survey questions to ensure accuracy and relevance to their lived experiences (Beaudrie, Loza, 2021). This research followed institutional ethical guidelines and complied with educational research standards. The study was conducted in a manner that minimized potential risks to participants, ensuring that their well-being, dignity, and cultural identities were respected at all stages of the investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The preliminary results of this doctoral research outline the profile of Level II Spanish for Native Speakers students at South Mecklenburg High School, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Analyzing their cultural and linguistic characteristics provides valuable insights into the state's rapidly growing Latino population. Understanding these factors is essential for developing instructional materials that



effectively address the needs of native and heritage Spanish speakers at both the state and national levels (Martínez, 2012).

Figure 3. Word cloud describing heritage and native Spanish speakers in the USA. Author's own creation



Findings provided a comprehensive understanding of SNS students' linguistic backgrounds, academic skills, and cultural identities. This research informs the design of more relevant and effective instructional materials, addressing the needs of SNS students and ensuring that teaching strategies align with their linguistic and cultural realities (Leeman, 2016).

Demographic

Surveys conducted among 60 Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) students during the first semester of the 2022-2023 school year at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS) revealed that the majority of SNS students were born in the United States (65%), with 55% of them being native to North Carolina. Among foreign-born students, 18.3% are from Honduras, and three students are from Ecuador. Additionally, the cohort includes one student each from Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela.

In terms of gender distribution, there is a notable disparity, with 20% more female students than male students enrolled in the course. Regarding age, most students (45%) are 14 or 15 years old. The second largest group comprises 16-year-old students, representing 36.5% of the cohort. Notably, the class includes a 19-year-old student of Central American origin with an interrupted educational trajectory and a strong motivation to learn.

An analysis of grade levels indicates that 76.7% of students are in ninth and tenth grades. In secondary education, students in North Carolina may remain enrolled until the age of 20 to complete the required 24 academic credits.

The profile of Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) students at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS) is characterized by a majority of U.S.-born students, accounting for 65% of the class, most of whom are originally from North Carolina. The remaining 35% are native Spanish speakers from various Latin American countries, predominantly Honduras. In terms of gender, female students make up 60% of the class. When it comes to age, the majority are 14 or 15 years old, representing 45% of the cohort. Concerning grade level, most students are in ninth and tenth grades, accounting for 76.7% of the total enrollment.

Socioeconomic Profile

The socioeconomic background of Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) students at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS) reveals key factors influencing their academic experiences. Household composition varies, with 43.3% living in nuclear families, while 56.7% come from single-parent or blended households. These structures impact the level of academic support students receive. Although national data suggest larger Hispanic families, 38.3% of students come from two-child households, 26.7% from three-child families, and only 13.3% have four or more siblings, indicating a shift toward smaller family units.

Extended family presence plays a role in 16% of households, where students live with relatives such as cousins, aunts, uncles, or grandparents. This reflects strong family ties and economic adjustments typical of immigrant households. While additional family members may provide support, shared financial responsibilities and space constraints can present challenges.

Student employment is significant, with 43.3% holding jobs in restaurants, cleaning services, construction, and childcare. Many balance academic demands with work obligations, which may limit their study time and engagement in school. Younger students (14–15 years old) face legal work restrictions, but those eligible often contribute financially to their families.

Parental employment follows national trends, with 55% of fathers working in construction and most mothers in cleaning, food services, or office jobs. These labor-intensive roles require long hours, limiting



parental availability for academic support. The financial pressures on families mean some students prioritize work over school, affecting academic performance.

These findings highlight the need for instructional programs that accommodate working students and families with limited parental involvement. Flexible scheduling, targeted academic interventions, and stronger outreach to working parents could enhance student success. Understanding these socioeconomic factors is crucial for supporting bilingual literacy and long-term educational achievement.

Linguistic Wealth

The linguistic wealth of SNS students at SMHS reflects a complex interplay between language retention, bilingualism, and sociocultural adaptation. While Spanish remains the dominant language at home, Spanglish has emerged as a prevalent linguistic mode, particularly in interactions with siblings and peers. This indicates a transition in language use across generations, where English gains prominence outside the household while Spanish maintains its role in family communication. However, a significant percentage of students report using Spanglish even with their parents, signaling a shift towards hybrid linguistic practices that reflect both linguistic fluidity and gradual assimilation.

The data also highlights disparities in language transmission. While most students communicate in Spanish with their mothers (66.7%) and fathers (61.7%), nearly a third use Spanglish at home, demonstrating the influence of English in Hispanic households. The presence of nine students who did not respond regarding their fathers suggests potential absenteeism, which may limit their exposure to Spanish and impact language maintenance.

Peer interactions reinforce English dominance, as students overwhelmingly prefer English when speaking with friends and cousins, despite their Hispanic backgrounds. This aligns with research on heritage language attrition, where social environments shape linguistic choices, often favoring the majority language. The generational gap is further evidenced by one student whose Hispanic mother, born in the U.S., prefers English, reflecting a weakening intergenerational transmission of Spanish.

The length of residence in the U.S. further contextualizes students' bilingual development. The 65% classified as heritage speakers demonstrate varying proficiency in Spanish, influenced by their exposure to English through schooling and peer interactions. Meanwhile, native speakers, who make up 35% of



the SNS population, navigate different linguistic challenges, particularly in academic Spanish. The data suggest that instructional strategies must address the Spanish maintenance for heritage speakers, and support for native Spanish speakers integrating into an English-dominant academic environment.

Overall, the linguistic reality of SNS students at SMHS underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that acknowledge hybrid language use, reinforce Spanish proficiency, and bridge the gap between home and school linguistic practices. The results highlight the urgency of developing instructional materials that reflect students' bilingual realities, ensuring that both heritage and native speakers strengthen their academic Spanish while navigating an English-dominant society.

The linguistic profile of Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) students at South Mecklenburg High School (SMHS) reflects a complex bilingual reality influenced by heritage, family background, and social interactions. A total of 65% of students are heritage speakers, comprising U.S.-born second-generation Latinos (58.3%) and foreign-born students who have been schooled in English since kindergarten (6.7%). The remaining 35% are native Spanish speakers, consisting of foreign-born students who received prior schooling in Spanish before arriving in the U.S.

Spanish remains the dominant home language, with 66.7% speaking it with their mothers and 61.7% with their fathers. However, Spanglish is prevalent, particularly among siblings and in conversations with mothers (31%) and fathers (21.7%). English becomes the primary language in peer and school interactions, reflecting the influence of an English-dominant environment.

This linguistic composition highlights the necessity for instructional materials that reinforce Spanish literacy while recognizing the bilingual realities of students. Addressing the varying levels of exposure to Spanish is crucial for fostering linguistic proficiency and academic success in an educational system that primarily operates in English.

Metalinguistic and Hispanic Identity

As part of the profile of the student in the Level II Spanish for native Speakers course at SMHS the research characterized the students' reasons for enrolling in SNS courses to provide critical insights into their language learning priorities. The data reveal that 56.6% of students prioritize improving their Spanish writing skills, underscoring the widespread challenge of academic literacy in heritage language



learners. This aligns with studies highlighting the need for structured writing instruction tailored to the linguistic realities of heritage speakers (Polinsky, 2011).

Additionally, 48.3% of students express a desire to enhance their oral proficiency, indicating an awareness of sociolinguistic variation and the importance of formal spoken Spanish. Reading skills are a priority for 43.3% of students, demonstrating a need for stronger comprehension strategies and exposure to complex texts.

Beyond linguistic goals, 31.6% of students value learning about Hispanic culture, highlighting the intersection between language and identity formation. These findings confirm that cultural engagement is integral to heritage language retention and reinforces bilingual identity. However, 21.6% of students report enrolling in SNS due to parental expectations, and an additional 21.6% cite the course as a graduation requirement. While these external motivations may initially influence enrollment, well-structured curricula can transform obligatory coursework into meaningful language development experiences.

Related to the Hispanic Identity, the findings confirm that Spanish is not merely a subject of study but a core component of students' identity. U.S.-born second-generation Latinos, as well as foreign-born students schooled primarily in English, constitute the majority of SNS students, making Spanish a heritage language for 83.3% of the cohort. While most students express cultural pride in their bilingualism, many also struggle with linguistic insecurity, particularly in academic Spanish (Holguín, 2018).

This duality reflects the broader reality of heritage language learners, who navigate pressures to meet both academic and community language expectations. The prevalence of Spanglish in informal contexts further illustrates how students negotiate linguistic hybridity in daily interactions.

These results highlight the urgent need to adjust the SNS curriculum at SMHS to better reflect students' linguistic realities and academic needs. Writing instruction should be prioritized, as students express a strong desire to improve their written proficiency. Strengthening oral proficiency is also essential, as many students seek to enhance their formal spoken Spanish skills.

Course materials must be culturally relevant, aligning with students' identities and lived experiences to increase engagement and motivation. Incorporating metalinguistic awareness training will help students



navigate language variation, register, and context-appropriate usage, fostering confidence in their bilingual abilities.

By integrating these elements, SNS courses can bridge the gap between home language practices and academic Spanish, ensuring heritage speakers develop the linguistic competencies needed for academic and professional success.

CONCLUSIONS

The socioeconomic profile of SNS students at SMHS reflects a community balancing academic responsibility with family and work commitments. While most students come from nuclear families, a significant portion live in single-parent or blended households, affecting the level of academic support available at home. The presence of extended family members highlights both cultural interconnectedness and economic necessity. Nearly half of SNS students work in labor-intensive sectors such as food service, construction, and childcare, often contributing financially to their households. The demanding nature of these jobs limits parental involvement in education and requires students to be self-reliant in their academic success. To support these learners, SNS programs must incorporate flexible instructional strategies, culturally relevant materials, and stronger school-family connections.

Beyond socioeconomic factors, the linguistic profile of SNS students is characterized by bilingual fluidity. Most students use Spanish at home, primarily with parents, but shift to Spanglish or English when interacting with siblings and peers. This dynamic reflects a natural adaptation to their social environments but also signals a decline in formal Spanish literacy, particularly in writing. While students recognize the value of bilingualism, many feel insecure about their proficiency in formal Spanish, especially in academic contexts. SNS curricula must address these gaps through structured literacy development that reinforces formal Spanish without disregarding students' linguistic realities.

Metalinguistic awareness plays a crucial role in shaping linguistic confidence. Although 85% of SNS students express awareness of their Spanish skills, many experience linguistic insecurity due to discrepancies between informal home Spanish and academic Spanish. This perception of deficiency discourages some students from actively engaging with the language. To mitigate this, SNS instruction should incorporate metalinguistic reflection, enabling students to analyze their bilingualism critically, recognize their strengths, and refine their ability to navigate different registers.



Hispanic identity significantly influences students' connection to Spanish and their motivation to maintain the language. While many view Spanish as integral to their heritage, their relationship with the language is shaped by social perceptions and personal experiences. Some take pride in bilingualism, while others feel pressure to meet external expectations of fluency. Polinsky and Scontras (2019, 2020) highlight that heritage speakers receive a different quantity and quality of linguistic input compared to native speakers, often limiting their access to formal Spanish instruction. This underscores the importance of integrating identity-affirming components into SNS curricula, ensuring that students feel validated regardless of proficiency level. A holistic instructional approach that integrates linguistic, cultural, and identity development will not only strengthen Spanish skills but also reinforce a sense of belonging within both their Hispanic heritage and the broader bilingual community.

By documenting the linguistic and socioeconomic realities of SNS students at SMHS, this research provides a critical perspective on heritage language education. The development of a student profile for Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Latino population adds a crucial piece to the national discussion on bilingual education, curriculum design, and teacher training. Understanding the factors that shape heritage speakers' bilingualism, educational experiences, and identity formation will inform future policies and instructional strategies.

Several areas warrant further investigation. The influence of Southern U.S. English on heritage Spanish, particularly among Honduran and Mexican communities, deserves closer examination to track dialectal evolution and sociolinguistic attitudes. Additionally, intergenerational language transmission, the role of Spanglish, and the impact of bilingualism on academic and professional success remain key areas of study. Examining how metalinguistic awareness affects students' confidence in Spanish will help refine pedagogical approaches. Finally, the role of technology in Spanish language development—through social media, online communication, and digital learning tools—should be explored to determine its potential in reinforcing literacy and oral proficiency.

By expanding research on SNS students, heritage language education can move toward a more inclusive and effective framework that acknowledges the realities of bilingual learners. A curriculum that embraces linguistic diversity and identity will not only enhance Spanish proficiency but also empower students as bilingual professionals and contributors to an increasingly multilingual society.



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