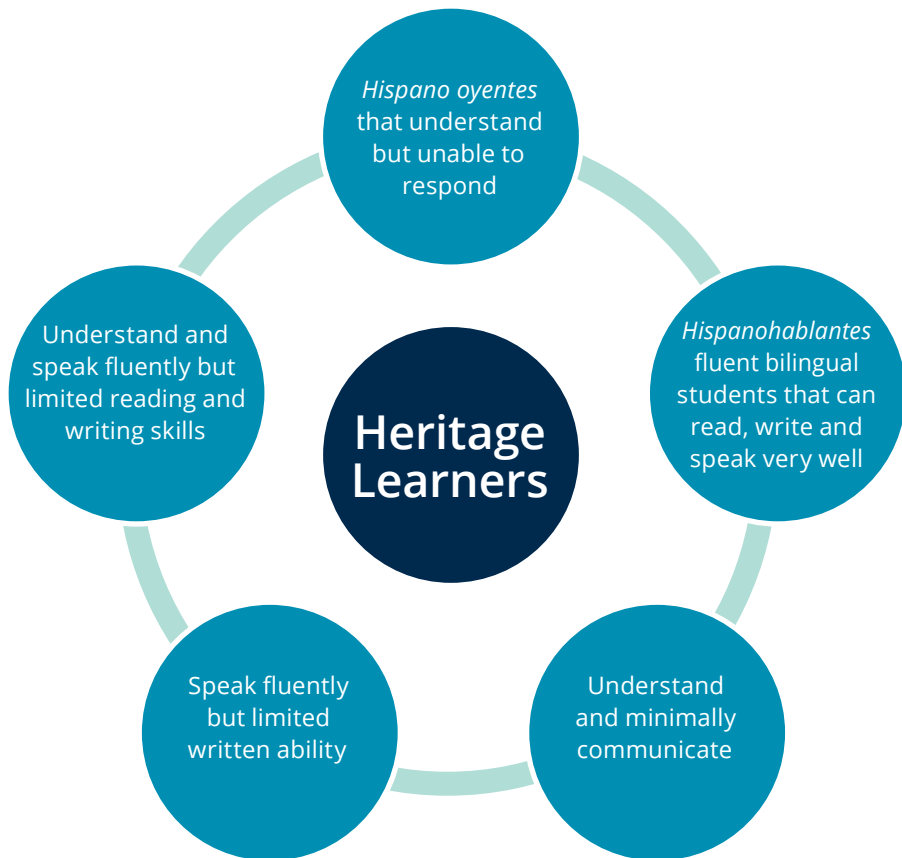


# Supporting Heritage Speakers in Today’s Spanish Classroom

BY RICH SAYERS

Those who have a home language other than English bring a wider range of language abilities to the classroom. These abilities range from minimal functioning in the language to complete fluency and literacy. It is important for teachers to assess the language skills of the different heritage speakers in the classroom. This diversity includes:

- Students who are able to understand the spoken language, but are unable to respond in the language beyond single-word answers.
- Students who are able to understand the language and communicate at a minimal level. These students may be able to read some items, but because of their limited vocabulary, they may not comprehend much information. They may write what they are able to sound out, but errors are evident.



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- Students who can speak the language fluently but who have little to no experience with the language in its written form.
- Students who have come to the United States from non-English-speaking countries. They can understand and speak the language fluently; however, their reading and writing skills may be limited due to lack of a formal education in their country of origin.
- Fluent bilingual students who can understand, speak, read, and write another language very well and have possibly received formal instruction in that language in the United States or in another country.

### **DUE TO THEIR DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS, HERITAGE SPEAKERS DIFFER GREATLY IN LANGUAGE SKILLS AND MAY NEED INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION.**

Here are a number of strategies that may be helpful for heritage speakers:

- **Provide a Placement Test** to determine the correct level of study or the skills that need to be developed.
- **Build upon their background knowledge.** Develop instructional units around themes and topics that relate to their life experiences. Encourage students to use these experiences as the foundation for building language skills through vocabulary development, reading, and writing.
- **Base your curriculum on themes that are relevant** to the experiences of the young heritage learners. Choose literary works and other content that will appeal to and engage your students.
- **Help students connect aural with written language.** If students do not understand a word in a reading, have them read it aloud or ask a friend or teacher to read it aloud. Often they can recognize the word once they hear it. Allow for opportunities for students to follow along as a story is read aloud.
- **Use strategies that are effective in a language arts classroom,** such as building schema, teaching language-learning strategies, using graphic organizers, and incorporating pre- and post-reading tasks. Use the writing process to develop good writers.
- **Encourage students to begin communicating, especially in writing.** Have them write down their thoughts in the way that the words sound to them. Then have students work with the teacher or

another student for corrections. Students can also look through textbooks and dictionaries to assist with error correction.

- **Scaffold writing** by providing opportunities for “short bursts of writing” in response to what they have read or discussed. Utilize these short writing experiences to later develop a more complete essay or composition.
- **Maintain high standards.** Require students to focus on accuracy and proficiency of communication. Many heritage speakers experience frustration with reading and writing in the home language when they have good aural/oral skills. Building language skills takes time.

### **IN MANY OF TODAY’S CLASSROOMS, TEACHERS ENCOUNTER CLASSES THAT CONTAIN A MIXTURE OF BEGINNING-LEVEL STUDENTS AND HERITAGE SPEAKERS. THESE GROUPS NEED DIFFERENT MATERIALS, DIFFERENT INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES, AND DIFFERENT OBJECTIVES.**

Below are some additional strategies to employ when supporting your heritage speakers:

- **As much as possible provide authentic resources** that include:
  - An authentic literature selection or video.
  - Teacher’s lesson plans to suggest ways to utilize the authentic resources with heritage speakers.
  - Strategies to understand and appreciate literature and videos with before, during and after viewing activities.
  - Instruction to introduce and build awareness of literary study (e.g. the use of irony, foreshadowing).
  - Integration questions for asking students to discuss, make comparisons, draw conclusions, and synthesize ideas related to different authentic resources.
- **Provide multiple readings per theme.** These support heritage speakers with:
  - Models of language usage that will influence their own ability to write and speak.
  - Vocabulary development and reading activities that build critical thinking skills.
  - Extensive writing and speaking activities that extend the reading experience.

- **Provide resources to heritage speakers which give explanations and practice that focus on the unique needs of Spanish heritage learners**, including:
  - Grammar sections to address errors or weaknesses that are common to heritage speakers and that are connected to relevant themes being explored in class.
  - Language exploration to understand the Spanish language system and identify similarities and differences in vocabulary and syntax throughout the Spanish-speaking world.
  - Meaningful performance-based tasks to develop the presentational mode of communication, both oral and written, that make the language-learning process relevant.
  - Cultural studies with questions to make comparisons between the cultures of heritage speakers and many parts of the Spanish-speaking world.

- Practice tests using the format of the AP® Exam and level-appropriate content.
- Additional content that you select from the web and other sources, that enriches the language experience and provides further opportunities for exploration and learning.

While supporting a diverse group of heritage speakers can be challenging, it can also be as exciting as the multitude of cultural backgrounds and richness that they bring to the classroom. Diversity in cultures, perspectives, and viewpoints makes for a more engaging learning environment.

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