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Linguistic Insecurity and Healing in the Heritage Language Classroom: A Critical Review



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Abstract

Language anxiety is a common feeling among both second language (L2) learners and heritage language (HL) learners, leading to linguistic insecurity and shame. This insecurity occurs among both language learners and language instructors, who may end up feeling emotional labor and the imposter syndrome. Therefore, this article advocates for the implementation of critical language awareness (CLA) and culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP) to fight linguistic insecurity among HL learners. The classroom and a positive and supportive learning environment can become a place of healing through expressions of authentic caring and *cariño*.

Keywords: Language shame, linguistic insecurity, authentic care, critical language awareness

Introduction

Language anxiety is a feeling of fear that language learners experience when using another language, mainly if they perceive their language as non-standard (Driver, 2023). In fact, second language (L2) anxiety is the most researched emotion in L2 acquisition (Ozdemir & Papi, 2022). This strong emotion may derive into linguistic insecurity or avoidance (Jahns, 2024). It is not only relegated to L2 learners, but to heritage language (HL) learners as well for different reasons. HL anxiety refers to negative feelings experienced when using the HL (Prada et al., 2020). Many HL learners arrive to the classroom with feelings of insecurity and shame and the classroom cannot be separated from the sociolinguistic reality they live in (Peace, 2024). However, HL learners' anxiety has been shown to be reduced when enrolled in HL learners' courses tailored for them due to a sense of belonging that was created by

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adding their reflections on their communities. This anxiety is constructed both culturally and socially, and HL learners' emotional experiences are interrelated with their pedagogical experiences and the contexts in which HLs are actually spoken or not (Prada et al., 2020).

Yet the underscoring of standardized forms does not address the socio-affective needs of HL learners including linguistic insecurity. HL learners feel pressure to sound like a monolingual speaker, which has negative consequences for them such as language loss (Tseng, 2021). Therefore, an appreciation and validation of students' linguistic practices is needed, as well as the creation of safe spaces to address these socio-affective needs. The core values of critical language awareness (CLA) such as the relationship between language and power and those of culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP) that empower HL learners to contest hegemonic ideologies and the design of course offerings at the lower level could meet the needs of these learners (Vana & Padilla, 2024). This article will review the causes underlying this issue and will offer some suggestions for instructors to reduce and cope with this language anxiety and panic in the HL classroom.

Background

Language Pride and Language Panic

Martínez (2006) argued that the reality of bilingualism that affects most Mexican Americans consists of a tension between language pride and language panic. Language panic originated in Arizona in the 90s and culminated in Proposition 203, which rescinded English as a second language programs (Cashman, 2006). Language pride, however, is needed to cope with linguistic insecurities. Pedagogical strategies should be implemented to build pride to lower HL learners' linguistic insecurities both inside and outside the classroom (Driver, 2025). According to Piccardi et al. (2022), stronger feelings of insecurity correlate with the amount of discrimination these learners receive. Ultimately, HL learners are a live example of linguistic resistance (Guerrero-Rodríguez, 2025).

Linguistic Shame

If anxiety is the most common feeling among L2 learners, shame is the most common one among HL learners (Driver, 2024). Linguistic shame entails feelings of embarrassment. Shame causes feelings of powerlessness and inhibits the ability to empathize (Brader & Marcus, 2013). Gallegos (2023) defines shame as "a form of affective injustice" (p. 149). This definition frames shame in a political context providing the tools to combat this injustice. In the same vein, she describes three types of linguistic shame: the shame of the L2 English speaker, the shame of Spanglish, and the shame of the English-only speaker. These types of linguistic shame are in the context of linguicism, where there are forms that are more privileged than others. Language shaming controls people and maintains hierarchies (Piller, 2017). Silence, consequently, is the outcome of linguistic shame (Molina, 2024). The feeling of shame that many children of migrants experience is a combination of a tension between one's identity and one's self-concept (Gallegos, 2023). HL learners often experience shame mainly due to their registers, therefore leading them to feeling discouraged to use their Spanish in public settings (Tseng, 2021).

However, Narváez Burbano and Matachana López (2026) found that the interaction between children and undergraduates managed to question linguistic shame through an atmosphere of support and collaborative learning since they were no longer afraid of making mistakes due to the natural setting that was created. In fact, linguistic shame does not only happen among students, but also among teachers, who are HL learners that have been experiencing this feeling since they were students (Winstead &

Wang, 2017). Anxiety and shame are two terms that are often intertwined, hence Wurmser (1997) created the term “shame anxiety” for a form of anxiety that includes feelings of fear of rejection and humiliation. Nevertheless, shame can be transformed into identity pride if educators are able to implement pedagogies based on empathy (Sanabria et al., 2024). Education can, then, repair these feelings.

Language Anxiety and Linguistic Insecurity

Language anxiety refers to a negative emotion because of the use of an L2 (MacIntyre, 1999). There are mainly three types of causes for this feeling according to MacIntyre (2017): academic (e.g. errors), cognitive (e.g. personality, self-esteem), and social (e.g. competitiveness, fear). On another note, extraversion was associated with lower levels of foreign language anxiety in a study conducted by MacIntyre and Charos (1996) on English-speaking students learning French since they tend to feel more comfortable in casual conversations. In the case of HL learners, they may feel othered since they are usually portrayed as homogenous bilinguals who don't have much power over their linguistic choices. As Bunk (2025) argues, HL learners' relationship with language is shaped by their awareness of the society that surrounds them rather than by anxiety itself. That is why they are especially insecure when speaking in public and reading aloud due to affective reasons and their internalized stigma (Loza & Beaudrie, 2022). In a study conducted by Prada et al. (2020), they found that the factors that had an impact on anxiety levels for HL learners were the dynamics of the classroom, the teaching methodologies, and the interaction among peers, so HL courses are needed to mitigate this anxiety.

When it comes to language anxiety, the delivery mode is a factor. Amezcua et al. (2021) conducted a study on the impact of remote versus face-to-face instruction in Spanish HL learners, and they found that 42% reported feeling more anxious in remote instruction rather than face-to-face (20%). Consequently, these researchers suggested designing an online course with activities that help students develop their metalinguistic awareness to contribute to building linguistic confidence. In the same vein, academic register is a trigger for language anxiety and hinders oral participation of language learners (Jahns, 2024).

Language anxiety and linguistic insecurity are not identical terms. Linguistic insecurity refers to the efforts of a student to reach the standard when it is not easy for them to do (Preston, 2013). Therefore, since HL learners do not feel comfortable with the standard, this insecurity is one of their main sources of anxiety (Sevinç & Backus (2017). In fact, when this insecurity comes from family criticism, it may have a long-lasting negative impact (Guerrero-Rodríguez et al., 2026). They can even refuse to speak it in public (Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018). If they do not use it in public settings, they most likely won't advocate for it (Bergeron, 2019).

If linguistic insecurity has a direct impact on the connection of HL learners with their heritage, then teaching methodologies are essential to fight linguistic insecurity (Driver, 2023). One of the sources of linguistic insecurity is the difficulty in accessing vocabulary and the student's linguistic usage (Rosenmann, 2026). Therefore, when implementing specific teaching methodologies to fight it, we should focus on helping students access the lexicon they need to communicate. The main difference between linguistic insecurity and language anxiety is that the former refers to bad feelings that a student has in their own idiolect while the latter specifically relates to a situation or to an external context from a language learning scenario. Furthermore, most HL learners' insecurities come from a self-critical perspective of their linguistic skills and their fear of being rejected by their communities (Driver, 2025).

Anxiety can be measured in three ways: behavior, physiological response, and self-reports, with this last one being the most used in education (Zheng, 2008). Millennials tend to either study too hard or

refuse to take any risks and get paralyzed by a fear of being inaccurate, which is counterproductive in language learning (Kuriscak, 2019). Among HL learners, we need to give special attention to the receptive ones, whose receptive and productive skills differ greatly, separating them from other HL learners (Beaudrie & Holmes, 2022).

It may be expected that L2 learners experience more language anxiety when engaged in oral production tasks (Goñi-Osácar & Lafuente-Millán, 2021). However, Coryell and Clark (2009) found that students' anxiety was mainly due to their past experiences in the language classroom where accuracy was more important than communication itself and this factor also impacted negatively on HL learners. Both L2 and HL learners may experience higher levels of anxiety with writing tasks though (Torres et al., 2020). In this case, a mix of L2 and HL teaching methods has been shown to be most effective for them (Beaudrie, 2009). However, they need educational spaces that address their socio-affective needs and where we can go to the root of their linguistic insecurities, where instruction should be anchored in CLA (Loza, 2024). This highlights the importance of training on CLA pedagogies for instructors of HL courses to mitigate the linguistic trauma (Carter, 2018).

Language loss leads to linguistic insecurity and is related to the fear of becoming disconnected from the community (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2013). Due to HL learners' lack of exposure to the standard, they come to the classroom with an internalized negative ideology regarding the local variety they bring with them. Hence Pak (2018) advocated for the implementation of service learning to increase their sense of belonging in higher education.

The reproduction of linguistic insecurity may have implications on US Latinx learners' abilities to maintain their panethnic unity (Zentella, 2017). The consequences of shame are not only not using the Spanish language but also developing a feeling of not belonging to their heritage background. In the same vein, identifying as American is at the expense of their heritage identities (Ali, 2021). Moreover, linguistic insecurity involves feelings that reflect the stigmatization of nonstandard forms and the idealization of the standard, which is what causes linguistic insecurity in the first place (Abtahian & Quinn, 2017). According to these authors, this linguistic insecurity is triggered by insecurity as a result of punishment, criticism, and of questioning their bilingual identities. In translation tasks, literal translation could also be considered a consequence of linguistic insecurity and of the lack of understanding of translation as act of communication, which is directly linked to anxiety due to the fear that students have of making mistakes because of the subjective interpretation that translation involves. Unfortunately, this anxiety is reflected in student performance in the classroom (Junining & Tsani, 2026).

Many US Latinx learners have believed that they are in linguistic remediation since their linguistic practices have become stigmatized, and this turns into an educational discourse of being non-academic or not ready for college (García & Solorza, 2020). Manifestations of linguistic insecurity can be the devaluation of the linguistic forms of the speaker, hiding an accent, abandoning specific linguistic forms, or conforming to prestigious linguistic practices (Bessai, 2019); even having difficulty in recognizing themselves as a member of the community (Desabrais, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to explore the classroom as a space of discomfort and retraumatization and to offer strategies to make the HL classroom a positive and safe space (Driver, 2024). For many HL learners, not performing well in a Spanish class not only leads to linguistic insecurity, but also to the lack of sense of belonging (Domínguez-Fret, 2023). We cannot ignore the fact that many Latinx students suffer acculturative stress that contributes to their anxiety and can have an impact on their performance (Cervantes et al., 2019). Hence, this article will focus on pedagogical frameworks such as CLA and CRP to address linguistic insecurity in the HL classroom.

CLA and HL Pedagogies

For L2 learners, anxiety derives from classroom-related issues, and for HL learners, anxiety derives from identity and heritage issues (Cervantes, 2023). However, L2 anxiety and linguistic insecurity are not the same. Language anxiety is related to language-learning context anxiety and situation-specific anxiety. Linguistic insecurity, on the other hand, has to do with negative feelings towards learners' idiolects (Driver, 2023). This perception of inferiority is due to the learner's language abilities, community members' language abilities, and the local variety (Foo & Tan, 2019).

According to Valdés (2015), Latinx youth has mixed feelings about their Spanish since they identify with it with pride, but they are exposed to negative ideologies that generate feelings of linguistic insecurity. These feelings are the result of discrimination and purist ideologies, hence the need for work on CLA and on HL pedagogy beyond the walls of the classroom, in the local communities (Peace, 2023). The consequences of this insecurity are particularly challenging for HL learners because their fear of making mistakes could lead them to feel judged by older generations, avoid speaking, and develop an incomplete connection with their communities (Abtahian & Quinn, 2017). These authors claim that addressing these linguistic insecurities fosters language maintenance and avoids language shift. There is a difference between the way HL learners with a high proficiency react to these insecurities and those with low proficiency. The former are more concerned about acquiring the academic register (Yanguas, 2013) and the latter about questioning their Latinx identities (Martínez, 2003).

In sum, Haroud et al. (2025) suggested the following pedagogical strategies: low-pressure activities, building student confidence, creating a supportive learning environment, and offering psychological guidance to handle anxiety.

Strategies to Fight Linguistic Insecurity and Emotion Research

The linguistic insecurity of immigrants is exacerbated by the critiques they receive in the US that contribute to 'chiquita-fication' (Zentella, 1993). This refers to the diminishment of Latinx identities and leads to stereotypes such as the following: the Spanish accent is laughable, Latinx HL learners are incompetent, and English monolinguals are superior (Zentella, 2017). Many US Latinx learners suffer double linguistic discrimination: judged as low-proficient English and Spanish speakers. This linguistic discrimination comes from more than their linguistic practices. From a raciolinguistic perspective, HL learners are devalued not because of their non-standard linguistic practices, but because of their racialized bodies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), hence the outcome of shame. Students' perceptions of others' expectations could lead to linguistic shame. That is why it is so important that instructors help HL learners become aware of linguistic ideologies, so that they can advocate for their own HL and that of others becoming HL ambassadors in their communities (Cuartero Marco, 2024). In the L2 learners' case, technology can diminish language anxiety through individualized feedback and through other instruction delivery formats such as online flipped classrooms (Gok et al., 2023).

Affective Support Strategies

Haroud et al. (2025) suggest adopting teaching strategies that support an inclusive learning environment. There is a need for emotion research in the HL field. Emotion labor is a reflection of internal feelings and external expectations (Benesch, 2020). It is directly linked to the instructor's agency to handle emotions to challenge hegemonic discourses (Benesch, 2017). The HL classroom should be a place to heal from the traumatic linguistic experiences that most HL learners have experienced (Martínez, 2024). Origin stories offer them the opportunity to ground their sense of identity (García, 2019), so allowing pain into the classroom is an act of courage (Zembylas, 2015). All this can be implemented

using humor and playfulness to connect with students' linguistic and cultural heritage within a pedagogical framework that is trauma-informed (Alessi & Kahn, 2023).

Many HL learners still feel linguistic insecurities and a sense of displacement in Spanish programs, where their local dialects are not usually validated (Alvarez, 2013). Ideologies that consider bilingualism as a problem for their learning cause negative emotions towards their HL that can ultimately result in language loss (Sevinç, 2020). HL course offerings are the first step to mitigate linguistic insecurity for HL learners since the approach is more content-focused and they discuss culturally relevant topics (González Darriba et al., 2021). Yet HL instructors need to offer opportunities in the classroom for language maintenance to overcome linguistic insecurity. These courses, along with professional courses, should have in their mission the goal of empowering HL learners to fight linguistic insecurity (Ducloux, 2024).

Expressions of care could combat linguistic insecurities such as the creation of an environment in the classroom where students feel welcomed and valued (Kemp, 2024). Authentic caring involves accepting and embracing students' linguistic practices, which would be transformative for Latinx students (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006). A curriculum based on authentic care would respond to student needs (Kemp, 2024). For example, Guerrero-Rodríguez (2023) implemented the use of telecollaboration so that HL learners could use their HL in different contexts. This strategy had multiple benefits: the development of language skills and opportunities to use the HL. Sánchez-Muñoz (2016) created a HL college course with the main objective of providing HL learners with language healing. Students reported gains in linguistic skills and feelings of confidence to use the HL in all contexts, which made a difference in HL maintenance. Another strategy that has been used with HL learners has been digital storytelling to heal from linguistic insecurity (George, 2024).

Critical Pedagogical Approaches

CRP in which local varieties are validated can reduce this linguistic insecurity among HL learners by encouraging critical discussions to promote social empowerment (Driver, 2024). Positive emotions may combat the effect of negative feelings through resilience (Fredrickson, 2003). In the same vein, Amezcua and Sánchez-Muñoz (2019) investigated the positive impact of HL courses with a critical approach and found that the use of Spanish in public spaces increased in a context of growing anti-immigrant sentiments since 2016, where Spanish was used as a tool of resistance to strengthen students' ethnolinguistic identities. Therefore, a critical Latinx pedagogy should be implemented to embrace, engage, and empower Latinx students (Casavantes Bradford & Morales, 2021). The institutionalization of Chicanx Studies has been situated within the discussion of Spanish as a HL. However, most courses and scholarship are still in English, and Spanish as a HL is not usually part of the curriculum (Flores et al., 2025).

A positive learning environment, where HL learners do not feel judged, is crucial for the appreciation of bilingual dialects and the student's linguistic self-esteem (Zalbidea et al., 2023). Nevertheless, fostering positive emotions alone is not enough to fight linguistic insecurity, hence the importance of figuring out the role that emotions play in HL learning to foster a pedagogical space to support them (Driver & Prada, 2024). In mixed classes, instructors could help mitigate feelings of insecurity by encouraging L2 learners to establish meaningful relationships with HL learners to maximize the positive impact of being in a mixed class (Henshaw, 2022). In language learning in general, speaking is the skill that triggers anxiety the most (Bashori et al., 2020). Therefore, it is key that instructors contextualize this to design their lesson plans. According to Macayan et al. (2018), there are two factors that provoke this kind of anxiety: social comparison anxiety and class anxiety. Nevertheless, those students

with higher levels of anxiety performed better on reading activities than those with lower anxiety levels (Masrul & Erliana, 2024).

Other factors that trigger anxiety are the fear of exams and the fear of negative evaluation due to the importance that students give to their public image (Goñi-Osácar & LaFuente-Millán, 2021). When it comes to writing, instructors should find a balance between understanding the connection between student affective responses and their attention to the writing process (Kuriscak, 2019). Writing anxiety produces stress, avoidance, or resignation that could be mitigated with positive feedback and numerous learning opportunities with student-centered lessons (Aula Blasco, 2016).

There are other emotions that haven't been studied in L2 language learning such as embarrassment. L2 embarrassment is an influential emotion in language learning that has an impact on the willingness of the student to communicate. Therefore, a supportive learning environment is key to decrease this embarrassment. That is, supportive teachers and peers decrease both anxiety and embarrassment (Khajavy et al., 2025).

Linguistic Insecurity Among Language Instructors

Many language instructors have been language learners as well, and they are familiar with the feeling of linguistic insecurity and emotions that are at the center of their trajectories (Vega & Fallas-Escobar, 2022). Vega and Fallas-Escobar (2024) conducted a study on teacher candidates of color's experiences of racialization. They faced raciolinguistic shame, a sense of embarrassment derived from speaking stigmatized varieties; they also engaged in emotion work to challenge these feelings through alternative identities. Unfortunately, institutions tend to enact discourses of power and teachers are subjected to this dynamic that brings emotional consequences for them. For example, they experience emotional labor, a conflict between institutional discourses and internal feelings (Benesch, 2018). In addition to the emotional labor, HL learners that are instructors of their HL fight linguistic insecurity that may affect their teaching. They may feel that advanced students may question their linguistic abilities and their capacity to teach language (Driver & DeRobles, 2024). This imposter syndrome that consists of self-doubt and lack of confidence in their HL parallels previous research on heritage Spanish educators (Domínguez-Fret & Morales, 2021). On the positive side, these instructors usually share stories of racialization with their students, and they are able to enact authentic care and *cariño* to transform their students' learning experience (García, 2024).

On another note, reading and writing were used as decolonizing tools for social justice in the teaching of future bilingual instructors of Mexican origin in the Rio Grande Valley. Students needed to write weekly reactions to readings where they were invited to disagree with the authors. These were opportunities to challenge instructors to better serve their diverse students. Students' fears towards their reading and writing could be overcome by extensive reading and expressing themselves in their local languages, which was critical to their learning process (Murillo, 2017). Linguistic insecurity, however, is not incompatible with feelings of pride teaching their HL with students of a shared background. The classroom could become a healing place for the community that teaches and learns the HL by giving space to students' voices on the path to meaningful change through understanding and empathy (Driver & DeRobles, 2024).

Conclusion

Language anxiety is a common feeling among L2 and HL learners for different reasons, in both cases leading to linguistic insecurity and shame. While anxiety is most common among L2 learners, shame is more common among HL learners. This insecurity occurs among both language learners and language

instructors, who may end up feeling emotional labor (a conflict between the standardized discourse and their internal feelings) and the imposter syndrome. Therefore, this article advocates for the implementation of CLA and CRP along with Spanish programs with HL and professional courses to fight linguistic insecurity, including strategies such as digital storytelling. Last but not least, the classroom and a positive and supportive learning environment can become that place of healing for L2 learners as well as HL learners and instructors of their HL through expressions of authentic caring and *cariño* teaching practices.

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