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Examining the Influence of Spanish Heritage Language Learners’ Critical Language Awareness (CLA) Development on Ethnic Identity Formation

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Abstract: As critical language pedagogies are being implemented in heritage language (HL) settings, there is an increasing need to examine the impact of critical approaches in Spanish HL speakers. The present study examines how the development of HL learners’ critical language awareness (CLA) influences ethnic identity formation in a university-level course that adopts a critical approach to HL instruction. As part of the curricular content, a CLA instructional intervention, consisting of a 4-week unit (10 h), was implemented. First, to measure ethnic identity, at the beginning (pre) and at the end of the semester (post), students completed the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) and provided comments with their answers. Additionally, in order to examine CLA development before and after the intervention, participants completed an existing questionnaire, which addresses topics such as language variation, language ideologies, and bilingualism. Overall, the results show that students’ CLA levels increased from “somewhat high” to “high”. Furthermore, participants reported different ethnic–racial identity statuses, which moved toward ethnic identity achievement. Higher CLA levels were associated with an achieved positive status. These findings can contribute to a better understanding of the link between students’ CLA and ethnic identity in HL educational settings, where a critical language pedagogy is applied.

Keywords: heritage language; critical language pedagogy; critical language awareness; ethnic identity

1. Introduction

Speakers of Spanish as a heritage language (HL), those “raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken” and who are “to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language” (Valdés 2000, p. 1), are increasingly present at postsecondary institutions in the United States (Martínez and Foulis 2022). However, in this educational context, Spanish language programs and departments are based on a hegemonic model of language (Licata 2021), which typically reproduces the existing language attitudes and ideologies that privilege monolingual Spanish speakers but delegitimize others, typically HL speakers who are bilingual or use local varieties of the language (Fuller and Leeman 2020).

Although there has been an increase in the number of courses aimed at HL students over the last two decades (Carreira 2017), previous studies (Beaudrie 2015) reveal that the teaching of the standard language continues to be the main goal, which contributes to the maintenance of the status quo (Licata 2021). As a result, by presenting Spanish as a neutral and standard variety, free from the influences of other languages, the linguistic reality of heritage speakers becomes invisible (Bernal-Enríquez and Hernández-Chávez 2003). When heritage speakers enroll in these courses, their legitimacy as Spanish speakers is questioned, since they do not feel represented by the language used in such spaces. Therefore, it is essential for these speakers that their linguistic repertoires and language practices are included and validated in the classroom. Nevertheless, this is not only a matter of linguistic representation and inclusion, which evidently is of vital importance, but, in the heritage
language classroom, HL speakers’ legitimacy is also called into question through the notion of Spanish proficiency, traditionally associated with language ideologies on correctness and standardness. Leeman (2015) points out that the construct of Spanish is limited and erases HL speakers’ translingual repertoires and practices.

Thus, the recognition of the rich linguistic diversity of Spanish, with special attention given to sociolinguistic variations, which reflect social extraction, and those derived from contact with English, provides an opportunity to validate the students’ linguistic knowledge so that they can challenge their delegitimation and subordination (Holguín Mendoza 2018; Leeman 2018; Parra 2020; Parra 2021; Beaudrie et al. 2021). This goal can be achieved with a critical language pedagogy to develop critical language awareness (CLA) (Leeman 2014, 2018), which provides an understanding of the sociopolitical reality of language use. A central aspect of a CLA-based approach is “the examination of language variation and the reasons and mechanisms by which certain varieties—those associated with low socioeconomic status or racialized speakers—are stigmatized, as well as the sociopolitical implications of such stigmatization” (Leeman 2018, p. 345). Leeman also reminds educators that to implement CLA, they should place “students’ linguistic and life experiences” at the center of instruction, “in order to validate those experiences as worthy of study” (p. 353).

The challenges experienced by second- and third-generation HL speakers to acquire and maintain their heritage language are the result of existing power dynamics and linguistic ideologies in the United States (Leeman 2012). In fact, second-generation HL speakers generally remain highly connected to their Latinx heritage, although they prefer the English language (Perez 2001). This situation typically translates into differing levels of Spanish proficiency and language loss over time. Therefore, although speaking Spanish is not a prerequisite of ethnic identity (Leeman 2015), it is one aspect that all heritage language learners, irrespective of their level of Spanish proficiency, have in common when they enroll in an HL course.

A CLA pedagogy also provides students with the tools to challenge taken-for-granted ideas regarding Spanish. One of these ideas is that native-like linguistic behavior embodies ethnic identity authenticity and legitimacy. Leeman (2015), in her review of empirical studies on heritage language and identity, found that HL speakers’ ideologies sometimes linked linguistic proficiency to ethnic identity. Similarly, HL speakers in Martínez Mira’s (2019) study showed that differences in HL linguistic proficiency were associated with a lower/higher sense of ethnic identity; however, the author suggests that “higher linguistic competence” is based on the standard. Lacorte and Magro (2022) argue that CLA pedagogies “expose these racist ideologies by questioning purist and standard language ideologies associated to them in the language classroom” (p. 28). A CLA-based approach also seeks to develop students’ agency so that they can contest the existing concept of Spanish proficiency. For example, when HL speakers learn that U.S. Spanish is systematic, rule-governed, and shares patterns with other Spanish monolingual varieties (Bessett and Carvalho 2022), they become aware that they are legitimate speakers of Spanish and have the right to their ethnic identity.

A comprehension of issues involving language and power, specifically addressing in the classroom what Spanish is and how it is experienced in the U.S., helps students reaffirm their ethnolinguistic identity. Martínez and Foulis (2022) report that CLA has had “a proven impact on [students’] self-concept, motivation, and feelings of inclusion” (p. 213). Further, they argue that CLA-based pedagogies promote HL students to be successful in the higher education context. More importantly, in agreement with Carreira (2007), Martínez and Foulis hold that HL courses that implement CLA-oriented content “have the potential to address disparities and inequities that produce achievement and attainment gaps for Latinx students” (p. 214). This has important implications beyond the context of higher education because, as Kondo-Brown (2001) highlights, having higher levels of ethnic identity increases the chances of succeeding in mainstream society.

Considering that heritage language is a key aspect of ethnic identity and also that the college transition process increases an individual’s identification with their ethnic
group (Phinney and Ong 2007), it is essential to explore whether Spanish HL courses can impact Latinx students’ awareness of their ethnicity and perception of their ethnic identity. Specifically, it is important to study the extent to which a critical language pedagogy and the development of CLA is linked to ethnic identity formation in HL speakers, as this connection remains unexplored.

1.1. Critical Approaches in Heritage Instruction and the Development of CLA

The first contributions to the field of heritage Spanish from a critical perspective are those of Martínez and Leeman (Martínez 2003; Leeman 2005). Leeman (2005) points out that the goal of critical approaches is to promote students’ critical awareness of the connections between language and social identities and how Spanish can function as a mechanism of discrimination and exclusion. The application of critical pedagogies in the teaching of Spanish makes it possible to incorporate diversity through a more complete vision of linguistic variation (Leeman 2018). A critical approach, according to Beaudrie et al. (2021), recognizes “the need to be inclusive and respectful of the learners’ varieties, while promoting the learners’ appreciation of linguistic diversity” (p. 62).

Leeman and Serafini (2016) propose a critical model for students to develop an understanding of the social, cultural, and political aspects of language, linguistic variation, and multilingualism. To do this, these authors describe the essential sociolinguistic concepts that must be incorporated into programs aimed at heritage speakers. Leeman and Serafini discuss the importance of including activities that focus on social variation and identity. For example, movie clips can be used to examine the link between certain varieties and certain social groups. To explore this activity even further, students could analyze how they themselves use language and the factors that determine their linguistic choices. All these activities have the ultimate goal of “fostering students’ agency and their understanding of linguistic knowledge as a creative resource for performing identities, negotiating social relationships, and navigating political hierarchies” (Leeman and Serafini 2016, p. 72).

Subsequently, Holguín Mendoza (2018) carried out the design and implementation of a six-course Spanish program based on a critical approach and evaluated its effectiveness by measuring the sociolinguistic awareness of students through the analysis of their attitudes. As an assessment tool, a linguistic attitudinal survey, which consisted of 30 sentences carrying stigmatized words from Mexican Spanish, was designed. Students were asked to complete the survey at the beginning and then again at the end of the term. The results show that, overall, students’ attitudes were more accepting toward non-standard forms.

One of the most relevant and complete proposals to incorporate a critical approach to HL pedagogy is that of Beaudrie et al. (2019, 2021). These researchers carried out the design, implementation, and evaluation of a four-module curriculum to develop Spanish CLA in an intermediate-level course at a university in the southwestern United States. The curriculum addressed the following main areas: language variation and linguistic diversity; language ideologies and linguistic prejudice; Spanish in the United States and bilingualism; and language maintenance. To measure its effectiveness, students completed a questionnaire (Beaudrie et al. 2019) before and after the curricular intervention. The results reveal that the critical modules effectively improved the students’ levels of CLA. Students became aware that all linguistic varieties have the same value and they also became more tolerant toward bilingual varieties.

More recent studies have also contributed empirical evidence of the effectiveness of CLA. For example, Hudgens Henderson (2022) implemented a CLA approach in a college classroom and measured HL students’ attitudes toward language variation, bilingual practices, and language ideologies. Consistent with previous studies, students’ CLA increased; however, the author found that students’ qualitative answers to the CLA survey reproduced the critical content of the course, without having modified their previous ideas. Quan (2020) also reports increased CLA levels in a course for L2 learners of Spanish, which shows that different types of students can benefit from CLA-oriented pedagogies.
Taken together, these studies clearly indicate the importance of applying a critical approach to develop HL speakers’ CLA. In fact, Beaudrie and Wilson (2022) propose CLA as a pivotal goal of HL instruction. Despite the fact that the integration of CLA-based approaches has received the support of experts in the field of HL instruction in recent years, as Beaudrie et al. (2021) point out, the adoption of critical approaches is still minimal. Moreover, Beaudrie and Loza (2021) uncover in their study the challenges faced by HL program directors in their efforts to undo hegemonic taken-for-granted assumptions among Latinx students in the educational setting. The acknowledgement that HL programs have been strongly influenced by a standard language ideology is the first step in validating students’ linguistic identities and, equally importantly, supporting students’ identity construction.

1.2. Identity in the Critically Aware Heritage Language Classroom

In the educational setting, what is at stake is the strengthening of students’ ethnonomistic identities (Parra 2021). It is precisely the presence of traditional approaches to HL teaching and language ideologies that delegitimizes local varieties of the heritage language and bilingual repertoires, which can have a negative impact on and damage students’ ethnomological identity. According to Parra (2016), for most Latinx parents, using Spanish is very important for socioaffective reasons, to create a strong emotional bond with the family. Thus, language becomes one cultural aspect many families try to preserve. Therefore, when Latinx youth receive positive or negative messages on their linguistic heritage, it has a direct impact on their sense of identity (Parra 2021, p. 22).

Identity has always been linked to heritage language education based on an assumption that language embodies ethnocultural identity (Leeman 2015). For example, in the context of the student and Civil Rights movements, Spanish became a symbolic language and it was firmly linked to Latinx ethnic identity and inheritance (Leeman and Martínez 2007). Nevertheless, the concept of identity has changed over time. In recent years, the essentialist views have been overcome and identities are no longer conceived as a static category, but instead as dynamic, shifting, and contextual. Leeman (2015) points out that identities “are not fixed within the individual but instead are shaped and constrained by the macro- and micro-level sociohistorical contexts, including societal ideologies, power relations, and institutional policies” (p. 102).

The process of identity formation in the case of Latinx youth is very complex, since it involves two cultures with a very different status in terms of prestige and power (Parra 2021). Heritage speakers identify not only with the dominant culture through the use of English, but also simultaneously with their Latinx culture. However, this identification with their Latinx culture is not successful when they lack the linguistic resources and skills in Spanish to meet their family expectations and, as a consequence, their language is perceived as deficient (Parra 2021).

In the past few years, empirical research on identity and heritage language education in the United States has moved away from the initial essentialist understanding of the relationship of language and ethnic identity, and has focused on how speakers make sense of themselves in a given context (Leeman 2015). Recent studies in the field of Spanish as a heritage language have paid attention to the impact of critical language pedagogies on students’ identity construction and language use.

The relationship between linguistic and ethnic identity is the focus of Sánchez-Muñoz’s (2016) study. Sánchez-Muñoz argues that “the HL classroom is for many HLS the first real chance to develop other HL registers while increasing linguistic confidence and engaging in an ethnomlinguistic identity exploration” (p. 208), which this author considers key for HL maintenance. In Sánchez-Muñoz’s study, linguistic self-esteem and confidence were examined in a group of university students to find out if a critical course had a positive effect on the perception of participants as Spanish heritage speakers. Students were asked at the beginning of the academic year to report on their confidence in oral and written production and listening and reading comprehension. At the end of the academic year, they judged whether their linguistic skills and confidence had improved as a result of
taking a course in their HL. Additionally, students answered reflection questions about whether there had been a change or negotiation of ethnic identity in connection to their language skills. The results show that most students linked perceived fluency in the HL to linguistic confidence, this in turn provides evidence of the important role of HL courses in developing a healthy linguistic and ethnic identity.

Subsequently, Sánchez-Muñoz and Amezcua (2019) made a similar point in their study, in which they investigated the positive impact of HL courses based on a critical approach on the linguistic confidence of Latinx as Spanish heritage speakers. The most interesting finding is that the course increased HL speakers’ Spanish use in public spaces in the context of increased anti-immigrant sentiments in Arizona and California since the 2016 elections. Students’ written reflection reveals the potential use of Spanish as a tool of resistance, which suggests that a critical perspective in HL instruction strengthened their ethnolinguistic identity.

A relevant contribution to understanding HL speakers’ nuanced and contextual linguistic identities is that of Showstack (2012, 2017). Showstack’s (2012) research focuses on how HL students construct their linguistic identities in the HL classroom. Participants assumed a connection between language and identity and did not always acknowledge non-hegemonic linguistic practices, and as a result the prevailing discourse privileged monolingualism. Depending on the interactions taking place in the classroom, students positioned themselves as deficient or authentic speakers. Contrasting with Showstack’s findings, in the context of a mixed HL/L2, Leeman and Serafini (2020) investigated language ideologies and learner identities. They found that HL students challenged discourses of deficit that represent them as linguistically limited and positioned themselves as language models for their L2 classmates. However, as the authors note, “HL students’ claiming of linguistic expertise did not entail absolute resistance to the standard language ideology” (p. 11). This is a reminder of the profound impact of discourses of deficit and language ideologies on students’ language use and identity construction.

Together, these studies provide important insights into HL speakers’ agentive role in constructing their own linguistic identities, which is essential to understanding the complex process of identity formation in Latinx students. These results illustrate just how important a critical approach is to help students to see themselves as Spanish speakers in a positive light.

1.3. Ethnic Identity Formation

Ethnic identity is thought to have a direct impact on identity formation (Phinney and Rosenthal 1992). For Phinney and Ong (2007), ethnic identity “derives from a sense of peoplehood within a group, a culture, and a particular setting” (p. 271). Furthermore, these authors pointed out that “one’s ethnic identity is constructed over time, the actions and choices of individuals are essential to the process” (ibid.). According to Phinney (1992), ethnic identity seems to be more salient for members of ethnic minority groups. However, the task of identification can be challenging, since minority groups are less powerful compared to the majority European American culture and have to face negative stereotypes linked to their ethnic group (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2002). Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) argue that “although individuals’ social selves are composed of a number of component social identities (e.g., gender, occupation), in ethnicity-conscious societies like the U.S., it is imperative to more sufficiently address issues of ethnic identity formation and its relation to the broader social self” (pp. 9–10).

Ethnic identity has been traditionally conceptualized using two primary perspectives: identity formation theory (Erikson 1968) and social identity theory (Tajfel 1981). Tajfel’s social identity theory posits that individuals’ self-concept is a result of a sense of belonging to a specific social group, and the affective component that comes with that group membership. For Erikson, identity development occurs through a process of exploration and commitment to particular identities within a broader self-concept. The operationalization of Erikson’s theory by Marcia (1980, 1994) offers the possibility of classifying individuals
into an identity status, based on their degree of exploration and commitment. There are four identity statuses: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved. Diffuse describes an individual that has not explored or committed to an identity; individuals who have not explored, but have committed to, a particular identity, are considered foreclosed. In contrast, an individual who has explored, but not committed to, a particular identity are considered to be in moratorium. Lastly, achieved describes someone who has both explored and committed to a particular identity.

Consistent with Erikson’s original formulations and Marcia’s operationalization, Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) propose a new typology for examining ethnic identity statuses, the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS). The EIS assesses three domains of ethnic identity formation (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004): (a) exploration, the degree to which individuals have explored their ethnicity; (b) resolution, the degree to which they have resolved what their ethnic identity means to them; and (c) affirmation, the affect (positive or negative) that they associate with that resolution. Moreover, the EIS uses the identity statuses described earlier (diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved) and, based on individuals’ scores on affirmation, assigns them a positive or negative label. In this way, the EIS captures variability within the ethnic identity formation process. For example, an individual that scores low on exploration but high on commitment and affirmation is categorized as foreclosed positive; on the other hand, an individual who scores high on the three domains is considered as achieved positive.

Pabón Gautier (2016) reviewed the literature on ethnic identity and Latinx youth and concluded that ethnic identity is mostly examined in connection to psychological well-being, and not environmental factors such as language, which is not one of the variables most often studied (9% of studies). However, there is some recent research that focuses on the role of language for Latinx students and their ethnic identity in the university context.

In the context of Spanish heritage language instruction, Torres and Turner (2017) investigated the experiences acquiring and maintaining Spanish of 11 university-level Latinx heritage speakers, in order to explore the role of Spanish language learning in their ethnic identities. Participants’ Spanish language background (family, generation, birth order, multiethnic community, and friends) had a direct influence on their perceptions of their heritage ethnic identity, which in turn influenced the level of importance they placed on acquiring the language. Motivated by their ethnic identity, all participants expressed a desire to become more proficient in Spanish. However, they reported experiencing high levels of anxiety and self-doubt in Spanish during their HL class due to their low levels of heritage language proficiency, caused by a lack of formal Spanish-language education experiences.

Considering the students’ perceptions of learning about the grammatical and linguistic aspects of Spanish, it is evident that the HL course took a traditional approach and focused heavily on aspects such as accent rules, spelling, conjugations, and grammatical rules. As a result, students’ comments showed that they had internalized negative discourses regarding their bilingual repertoires. For example, all participants indicated that many of their language transfer errors were due to language interference. Similarly, Spanglish and code-switching were seen as a communication strategy to overcome their limited Spanish, instead of understanding it as a contextual meaning-making resource. Moreover, students shared the belief that some varieties (Cuban, Puerto Rican) were inferior to others, such as Peninsular and Colombian dialects.

Torres and Turner’s study is limited in that it fails to provide detailed information on how completing HL coursework influences students’ ethnic identity. However, from the students’ comments, it seems students’ self-perceptions of their language abilities may have been negatively impacted by a traditional approach to HL language teaching and these classroom experiences, in turn, may determine their ethnic identity development. Instead of valuing their varieties and linguistic repertoires as an indicator of proficiency, students perceived their lack of formal educational experiences as the main reason that prevented them from developing advanced levels of Spanish language skills.
Martínez Mira (2019) addresses the association between linguistic proficiency in Spanish as a heritage language and ethnic identity more directly. Participants \((N = 50)\) were born in the United States and were students in a university-level HL course in New Mexico. Based on students’ perceived proficiency of Spanish, they were divided into two groups: Group 1 (“more advanced level”) and Group 2 (“less advanced level”). Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed (using a 5-point Likert scale) with statements regarding the link between linguistic proficiency in Spanish and identity, such as: “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me” and “It is important for me to maintain my heritage language”. The results in this study reveal that, for both groups, it was important to maintain their heritage language, and they agreed on the idea that a higher command of Spanish contributed positively to their Latinx identity.

Lastly, Hudgens Henderson et al. (2020) investigated the influence of students’ proficiency and ethnic identity labels on language attitudes toward Spanish as an HL. Participants, enrolled in first-semester and fourth-semester HL courses, rated twelve items which indexed language attitudes toward Spanish (Instrumental, Sentimental, Communication, and Value). With regard to ethnic identity, the ethnic identification of students was a predictor for various language attitudes. For example, first-semester students who self-identified as “Hispanic”, “Mexican American”, and “Spanish” rated higher in the Value dimension than “Anglo” students, whose results were negative for the Value and Communicative dimensions. An interesting finding is that the self-reported ethnic identity labels had different meanings—for example, the label “Hispanic” meant different things to different individuals.

From the studies reviewed here, it is evident that proficiency in HL Spanish is understood by HL speakers to be a condition for ethnic identity. It is important to highlight that no previous study has measured whether CLA-based methodologies can positively impact ethnic identity development, as they challenge established assumptions regarding what it means to be proficient in Spanish. Additionally, the EIS has not been used to measure ethnic identity formation in HL instruction settings. Using this tool in future research could offer researchers and practitioners valuable information, because as Pabón Gautier (2016) points out, an understanding of the processes involved in the development of a positive Latinx ethnic identity serves to support the Latinx community.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The previous sections have shown that in recent years, the integration of CLA-based approaches has received the support of experts in the field of HL instruction. Nevertheless, more research is needed, as studies on their application and impact are scarce. Additionally, having a positive ethnic identity is beneficial for heritage learners, but there is little published research that has examined it in the context of CLA instruction. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to analyze the influence of a CLA instructional intervention on the development of students’ CLA and on their ethnic identity formation. To do so, the CLA questionnaire developed by Beaudrie et al. (2019) was used to measure CLA, and the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004) to measure ethnic identity. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the CLA intervention module increase students’ levels of CLA?
2. How do the students’ ethnic–racial identity statuses vary before and after the CLA intervention module?
3. How do the students’ CLA levels influence their ethnic identity development?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants, Instructor, and Educational Context

The participants in this study were undergraduate students who self-identified as HL speakers of Spanish and were self-enrolled in an intermediate-level 14-week course for Spanish heritage speakers. The only requirement for students to join the course was
possessing at least intermediate level skills in Spanish and being able to communicate effectively in their home and community.

Regarding the educational context, this course was offered at a private university in the Northeast U.S., where the Latinx population constitutes 11% of the total student body. It is important to note that this is the only course specifically designed for bilingual students, since there is not a specific course track for HL learners at this institution. Additionally, the course applies a CLA-based approach and carries a ‘Race, Power and Privilege’ curricular designation, which provides HL students with an opportunity to engage with issues of race and power. The rest of the courses in the Spanish language program and upper-division courses do not use CLA as an instructional approach.

A comprehensive background questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the course via Google Forms. All of the participants (N = 18; Male = 7; Female = 11) were second-generation heritage speakers who were born in the United States, except one student who was born in a Latin American country and arrived in the United States at a young age. In total, they self-reported different ethnic backgrounds (Mexican, Guatemalan, Puerto Rican, Dominican, etc.). Regarding patterns of language use, the majority of participants had used Spanish since birth, but English was also incorporated early in their lives, so they were exposed to both languages. Participants were also asked to rate their language skills in Spanish. Overall, self-ratings for productive skills were higher for speaking (native or near native fluency) than writing (basic/intermediate fluency). Regarding receptive skills, self-ratings for reading were at the intermediate level and for listening at the native and advanced level.

For this study, I was the researcher and instructor of the course, which was informed by my educational and personal background. On the first day of class, students learned through my linguistic autobiography that I am a speaker of Peninsular Spanish, but also that I was raised by Deaf, signing parents and that I am a heritage signer of Spanish Sign Language. Similarly to them, I learned a minority home language from birth, but I became dominant in the official language, Spanish. Sharing that I have also suffered language loss and experienced linguistic insecurity in my heritage language was important to connect with the students.

2.2. Description of the Course and CLA Intervention Module

The heritage language course from which the data were obtained for this study adopted a critical approach and, therefore, content had a focus on issues of inequality, racial formations, and systems of power. As one of the main goals was to develop students’ critical language awareness, CLA was applied as a pedagogical framework and curricular content.

The CLA intervention module had a total duration of 4 weeks (approximately 10 h) and students met for 80-min classes twice a week. It was designed and developed considering the main thematic components of CLA (Beaudrie et al. 2021, p. 66) and the curriculum to develop CLA, which includes learning objectives, content knowledge, and suggested activities (Beaudrie et al. 2021, pp. 66–74). Beaudrie et al. (2019, 2021) examined the effectiveness of this curriculum with a CLA questionnaire, which the present study also used (see Section 2.3.1). Each of the themes for CLA (Beaudrie et al. 2021) was addressed during the same week of the course (Theme 1 “Language variation and linguistic diversity” in week 6; Theme 2 “English hegemony, language ideologies and prejudice” in week 7; Theme 3 “Spanish in the U.S., bilingualism, and code-switching” in week 8; and Theme 4 “Language policies and language maintenance/shift” in week 9). In the following, an example of some activities used during the implementation of the intervention module are shared.

To explore language variation (Theme 1), students investigate their own Spanish using resources such as the “Catálogo de voces hispánicas” and corpora of U.S. Spanish (e.g., Corpus of Spanish in Texas) and become experts who share in class about their varieties. This is also an opportunity to explore how Spanish varies and to see the Spanish spoken by their
community represented. This material can encourage critical discussions on sociolinguistic concepts such as language/dialect, variation, the “best Spanish”, the “standard”, etc. An excellent activity to bring students’ experiences to the center of instruction is writing linguistic autobiographies and using them as a reflection tool to uncover language ideologies (Theme 2) that have impacted students’ experiences and that they may reproduce without being aware. Furthermore, exploring the main characteristics of U.S. Spanish (through code-switching, calques, lexical borrowings, etc.) (Theme 3) is essential to validate students’ translinguaging practices. After having been exposed to language contact phenomena, students can contribute to create a collective poster with examples found in commercials, songs, series, signage, etc., and critically analyze, for example, the context, the purpose, and the message. Lastly, students can read articles that present experiences connected to subtractive schooling and also research on education approaches in the U.S. (English-only legislation and Bilingual legislation) (Theme 4). This helps students to reflect on how language policies impact bilingual students and then share their own experience. Finally, to assess the CLA knowledge gained during the module, students complete a final project, a sociolinguistic interview (adapted from Beaudrie et al. 2021, pp. 68–69). This project focuses on the critical analysis of the interviewee’s Spanish (including examples of U.S. Spanish and bilingual practices), language ideologies, experiences with language policies, etc.

Considering that this course adopts a critical approach, it is important to note that the CLA themes were not only present during the curricular intervention. The CLA-based knowledge was applied and integrated in the last module of the course (on Latinx History and counter-narratives) in combination with social justice topics (Weeks 10–14). For example, the activities suggested by the lesson El corrido “El Deportado” (included in the open educational resource, Empowering Learners of Spanish project; Holguín Mendoza et al. 2018), which include an analysis of regional variation, are used to discuss songs as counter-narratives in connection to Mexican–American immigration and deportation.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. CLA Questionnaire

The CLA questionnaire (Beaudrie et al. 2019, 2021) was used to measure changes in the levels of CLA in the context of heritage instruction. This is a psychometrically adequate instrument aimed at documenting participants’ intended behavior and attitudes toward Spanish in the United States. The questionnaire contains a total of 19 items and is divided into three main parts, which address language variation, language ideologies, and linguistic prejudice (items 1–8); Spanglish, bilingualism, and code-switching (items 9–16); and language maintenance (items 17–19) (see Appendix A for a complete list of survey items).

All items were rated using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/very unlikely) to 6 (strongly agree/very likely). In cases of ‘reversed scoring’ (items 1 to 16), strongly agree/very likely was scored as 1 and strongly disagree/very unlikely was scored as 6. Further, according to Beaudrie et al. (2019), in terms of levels of CLA, scores from 1 to 6 were interpreted as follows: 6: very high; 5: high; 4: somewhat high; 3: somewhat low; 2: low; 1: very low.

2.3.2. Ethnic Identity Scale

The Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004) was used to measure the ethnic identity variability within the ethnic identity formation process. This instrument contains 17 items, which assess the three dimensions of ethnic identity: exploration (7 items), resolution (4 items), and affirmation (6 items). Exploration concerns the level of participants’ engagement with activities, events, and experiences (e.g., “I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity”). Resolution refers to the extent one has a sense of the meaning of their group identification (e.g., “I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me”). Affirmation reports the affect (positive or negative) one holds toward their ethnicity (e.g., “My feelings about my ethnicity are mostly negative”).
Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Does not describe me at all” (1) to “Describes me very well” (4) (see Appendix B for a complete list of survey items and reverse scored items). Individuals were considered “high” on a specific subscale if they scored above the cutoff value (exploration: 19.5; resolution: 9.5; affirmation: 20.5). Conversely, following this scheme, individuals who score at or below these values were considered “low”.

Based on the individuals’ scores on these dimensions (low or high), the EIS categorizes students into ethnic-identity statuses of diffuse (low exploration, low resolution), foreclosed (low exploration, high resolution), moratorium (high exploration, low resolution), and achieved (high exploration, high resolution) (see Section 1.3). Furthermore, these ethnic-identity statuses are assigned a positive (high affirmation) or negative label (low affirmation). For example, achieved positive refers to an individual who obtained high scores on all subscales as achieved = high exploration and high commitment and the label positive = high affirmation.

When completing the EIS, the self-identification question was open-ended, and students were asked to self report what they considered to be their ethnic identity. They had to refer to their ethnoracial self-identification when they answered the questions included in the EIS. Additionally, in order to collect qualitative data to better understand ethnic identity development, students were offered the option of explaining their answers and sharing more information for each of the answers they provided. The answers are shared maintaining students’ original linguistic choices in Spanish and a translation into English is provided.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

The heritage language course from which data were collected lasted a total duration of 14 weeks. Table 1 includes the timeline of procedures. Google Forms was used to collect all of the data (pre and post). Prior to the curricular intervention, both the EIS (Week 3) and the CLA questionnaire (Week 5) were distributed online through the course learning management system. The CLA intervention module had a duration of 4 weeks (Week 6–9). Following the completion of this module, students were asked to complete the CLA questionnaire (Week 10) and, during the last week of the course, students submitted their answers to the EIS (Week 14).

Table 1. Timeline of procedures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week #</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Ethnic Identity Scale (pretest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>CLA questionnaire (pretest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6–9</td>
<td>CLA intervention module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>CLA questionnaire (posttest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 14</td>
<td>Ethnic Identity Scale (posttest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Results

3.1. CLA Development

Table 2 presents students’ measures of CLA pretest and posttest for each of the parts of the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Overall, students in this study showed a somewhat high level of CLA before the intervention and a high level of CLA after it. In the pretest scores, the mean score is 4.87/6 (SD = 1.01), and in the posttest, the mean score is 5.04/6 (SD = 0.64). Part 1 received the highest score both in the pretest (M = 4.98, SD = 0.73) and posttest (M = 5.29, SD = 0.77). This section also shows the highest increase in the posttest compared to the pretest results (M = +0.31). Regarding the individual performance of students, 50% of the students experienced an increase in their CLA levels posttest.
Table 2. Critical Language Awareness Questionnaire Results (N = 18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 1: Language variation, linguistic diversity, English and language ideologies</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>+0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2: Spanish in the U.S., bilingualism, and code-switching</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>+0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3: Language maintenance</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>+0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>+0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, what emerges from the results reported in Table 3 is that students show positive attitudes (scoring somewhat high to high levels of CLA in the pretest and posttest) regarding topics such as language variation, linguistic diversity, and non-standard forms (items 1–4), as well as an agreement with the public role of Spanish in the U.S. context (item 7) and support of bilingualism (item 8). For example, the majority of students disagreed with the idea that Spanish-speaking Hispanics in the U.S. do not speak correct Spanish (item 3: pretest \( M = 5.39, SD = 0.92 \); posttest \( M = 5.06, SD = 1.51 \)). For this specific item in the pretest, 15 out of 18 students showed high and very high levels of CLA. Moreover, a positive attitude toward Spanish as a valid language was shared regarding item 4 (pretest \( M = 5, SD = 1.71 \); posttest \( M = 5.06, SD = 1.47 \)). Although some students (8 out of 18) agreed with items 1 and 2 and did not question the notion of the standard and the idea that Spanish from Spain is superior, students’ attitudes toward these topics improved in the posttest scores, specifically item 1 (from \( M = 4.5 \) to \( M = 5.56, DM = +1.06 \)).

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation Results for CLA Questionnaire Part 1 (N = 18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items Part 1</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. People from Spain speak the purest form of Spanish.</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>+1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In my opinion, people should use standard Spanish to communicate all the time.</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>+0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I believe Spanish-speaking Hispanics in the U.S. don’t speak correct Spanish.</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>−0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I feel speaking Spanish is less prestigious than speaking other foreign languages such as French.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>+0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In my opinion, speaking English is an essential element of being American.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>+0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. In my opinion, it’s more important for immigrants to learn English and adopt the American culture than to keep their own language and culture.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>+0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In my opinion, families can speak Spanish among themselves at home but when in public they should speak English to each other.</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>−0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I believe growing up with both Spanish and English confuses children.</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>+0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ linguistic attitudes were clearly opposed to English hegemony (item 7: \( M = 5.89 \) pretest, 5.67 posttest) and the existent language ideologies such as monolingualism (item 8: \( M = 5.44 \) pretest, 5.83 posttest). However, the idea of English linked to citizenship was pervasive, as the scores for items 5 and 6 show (\( M = 3.89 \) and 4.83, respectively). These
scores changed in the posttest, showing an increased disagreement with these ideas after instruction (item 5: $M = 4.72, DM = +0.83$; item 6: $M = 5.17, DM = +0.34$).

The overall results in Part 2 (see Table 4) reveal that students have positive attitudes toward Spanish and Spanglish in the United States, as well as bilingual practices (pretest: $M = 4.86, SD = 0.85$; posttest: $M = 5.01, SD = 0.93$). Students do not agree with the common linguistic attitude that views the mixing of English and Spanish as a deficit, as shown in items 10, 11, and 12, which reveal a high level of CLA in the pretest and posttest. It is interesting to note that some students (6 out of 18, who showed very low to somewhat low levels of CLA) disagree with bilingual practices when Spanglish takes place in an academic setting (items 13 and 16). When asked about their behavior regarding code-switching, students (11 out of 18 scored very low to low) expressed their personal avoidance of plurilingual practices (item 15, $M = 3.22, SD = 1.70$). Although the posttest scores show a slight increase, which is positive, in terms of levels of CLA, students are still somewhat low for item 15 and somewhat high for items 13 and 16.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation Results for CLA Questionnaire Part 2 ($N = 18$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items Part 2</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. If I were to give a professional presentation, I would try to avoid working with a partner who has a strong foreign accent in English.</td>
<td>$M = 5.67, SD = 0.59$</td>
<td>$M = 5.72, SD = 0.57$</td>
<td>+0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I believe people who speak Spanglish should switch to just Spanish or English.</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>+0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I don’t like it when people say ‘parquear’ instead of ‘estacionar’.</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>+0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I don’t like it when people code-switch because it is not a proper way of speaking a language.</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>+0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I believe Spanglish should not be allowed in Spanish classes.</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>+0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I would tease a friend when speaking Spanish if they forget or invent words.</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I would try to avoid mixing Spanish and English in the same conversation as much as I can.</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>+0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I would not code-switch in front of my teachers because they may think I am less intelligent.</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>+0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows the results for Part 3, which focuses on the participants’ commitment to the promotion and advocacy of their heritage language. Overall, students have a somewhat high level of CLA (pretest: $M = 4.78, SD = 1.01$; posttest: $M = 4.83, SD = 0.88$). Specifically, item 19 reveals a high level of CLA (pretest: $M = 5.22, SD = 1$; posttest: $M = 5.11, SD = 1.02$) and the scores show that students are willing to contribute to the HL maintenance by promoting the importance of using Spanish language to Latinx students at their university context. Students seem to be less engaged with the idea of joining a club to discuss how to maintain Spanish (item 17, pretest/posttest: $M = 4.39$), but showed an increased interest (from somewhat high in the pretest to high in the posttest score) in continuing the development of their heritage language after college (item 18, pretest: $M = 4.72, SD = 1.64$; posttest: $M = 5, SD = 1.14$).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items Part 3</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I would be willing to join a club who meets every week to discuss how</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to maintain Spanish within the family and community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. After college, I would commit to reading, writing, speaking, and</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening in Spanish every day to continue developing my language.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I would speak to Hispanic students at my university about the benefits</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of keeping Spanish alive in the U.S.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Ethnic Identity Formation

The distribution of EIS Scale scores is presented in Table 6. It is interesting to note that only one student (5.56% of the sample) reported low scores on the affirmation subscale in the pretest measures. The majority of students fell into the positive categorization, reporting high scores on the affirmation subscales in the pretest (95%) and in the posttest (100%). Furthermore, scores in the pretest show that 45% (eight students) were categorized as foreclosed positive—that is, those who had not explored but had resolved issues about their ethnicity and also felt positively about it. The second largest group was achieved positive (39%, seven students), those who had explored and had resolved issues about their ethnicity and also felt positively about it. Lastly, 11% (two students) were diffuse positive, as they reported not having explored or resolved issues regarding their ethnicity, but felt positively about it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Ethnic Identity Scale Results (N = 18).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subscales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse (low exploration, low resolution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosed (low exploration, high resolution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moratorium (high exploration, low resolution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieved (high exploration, high resolution)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Posttest scores revealed an increase in the number of participants who were classified as achieved positive, becoming the largest group, with 12 individuals (67%). Foreclosed positive became the second highest with five students (28%) and, lastly, one student, who reported having explored but not resolved issues about their ethnicity, was moratorium positive (5.6%).

As for individual student performance, almost half of the participants (8 out of 18) moved toward ethnic identity achievement. Specifically, six students moved from diffuse positive (n = 1) and foreclosed positive (n = 5) to achieved positive in the posttest scores. One student moved from diffuse positive to foreclosed positive after having resolved issues regarding their ethnicity. Additionally, another student reported positive affect toward their ethnicity, moving from foreclosed negative to foreclosed positive in the posttest scores. Furthermore, half of the students did not experience a change in the posttest (achieved positive: n = 6; foreclosed positive: n = 3), and this seems logical considering six students fell into achieved positive in the pretest. Interestingly, one student who was classified as
achieved positive in the pretest moved back to moratorium positive in the posttest. In the cases where there was a change in ethnic status from the pretest to the posttest, it was due to an increase in the exploration dimension (six students), resolution dimension (three students), and affirmation dimension (one student).

In addition to classifying students into the EIS types, Table 7 presents individuals’ levels of CLA (means and standard deviations) by their typology classification. Interestingly, results indicate that students who were classified as achieved positive (high exploration, high resolution) show a high level of CLA (pretest: $M = 5.13, SD = 0.616$; posttest: $M = 5.14, SD = 0.706$). Furthermore, students classified as foreclosed negative and foreclosed positive (low exploration, high resolution) in the pretest have a somewhat high level of CLA. Additionally, one student classified as moratorium positive has a somewhat high level of CLA. However, from the data, it is also apparent that students who fell into diffuse positive (low exploration, low resolution) also reported a high level of CLA ($M = 5.31, SD = 0.007$).

Moreover, the group classified as foreclosed positive (low exploration, high resolution) in the posttest has an almost high level of CLA, but it is important to note that three students in this group have a somewhat high level of CLA.

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations of levels of CLA by Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) Type (N = 18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse negative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffuse positive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosed negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosed positive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.607</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moratorium negative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moratorium positive</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieved negative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieved positive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>0.616</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, these results suggest that students who are classified as achieved positive (high levels of exploration, resolution, and affirmation) seem to have higher levels of CLA. Conversely, students who reported positive affect toward their ethnicity, but not exploring (foreclosed positive) or resolving (diffuse positive) seem to have somewhat high levels of CLA. Taken together, these initial results are suggestive of a modest link between CLA and ethnic identity, which means that CLA could be one contextual factor contributing to students’ ethnic identity achievement over the course of the semester.

3.3. Students’ Comments on Ethnic Identity Dimensions: Exploration, Resolution, and Affirmation

The comments students shared to expand on their answers to the EIS provided additional information on what elements or aspects contributed to their ethnic identity formation. In connection to the exploration dimension, the majority of participants explored their identity by eating food, attending events (e.g., Día de los Muertos), listening to music, reading newspapers/articles or following the news on social media, watching films/series, and course readings. Further, several students reported having traveled to their family’s country of origin to learn about their roots. Additionally, their participation in Latinx clubs and organizations on campus were also mentioned by the students as an activity that contributed to the exploration of their identity. The activities in the course were also brought up under the exploration dimension, item 2 “Creo que todas las actividades
The responses to the resolution dimension referred to culture and family connection, and family and community support as elements that help students resolve what their ethnic identity means to them. Students also brought up traditions and values, and having visited their family’s country of origin as aspects that determined what their ethnicity meant. Furthermore, the course also provided students with an opportunity to commit to their ethnic group membership. One student stated that “este curso me ha dejado explorar temas que nunca pensé que iba ser expuestos a” (“this course has allowed me to explore topics that I never thought I would be exposed to”). Another student commented that “he aprendido más sobre la mezcla de ser puertorriqueño y honestamente me siento más orgulloso debido a todas las luchas por las que ha pasado mi familia” (“I have learned more about the mix of being Puerto Rican and honestly feel more proud because of all the struggles my family has been through”). This student is alluding to the oppression and linguistic discrimination his family faced when coming to the U.S. from Puerto Rico.

Lastly, for the affirmation dimension, the majority of students in the pretest and all students in the posttest reported positive affect toward their ethnicity. Their comments highlighted how proud they felt. For example, one participant said about item 7 “Yo creo que ser Mexicana es un honor muy grande con mucha historia y cultura muy rica” (“I believe that being Mexican is a great honor with a lot of history and a very rich culture”). However, other responses to this dimension included: item 1, “cuando era niño, me daba pena decir que era mexicano o guatemalteco porque a las escuela donde asistía a la gente no le gustaba las personas de color” (“as a kid, I was embarrassed to say I was Mexican or Guatemalan because the schools people attended didn’t like people of color”) and item 13, “sería mas facil no tener que enfrentar el racismo pero no deseo cambiar quien soy” (“it would be easier not to have to face racism but I don’t want to change who I am”). Despite having experienced racism and disparaging situations, these students felt positively about their ethnicity.

Throughout the dataset, language also emerged as one important aspect that is closely connected to ethnicity. Some students explicitly referred to language when sharing comments under the resolution dimension. Regarding item 3 (“I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me”), one informant said: “entiendo mejor cómo la lengua es algo muy único que funciona para diferenciar mi identidad étnica con otros” (“I understand better how language is something very unique that works to differentiate my ethnic identity from others”). Commenting on the same item, another participant said: “Pienso que veo el español como parte más importante de mi identidad étnica” (“I think I see Spanish as the most important part of my ethnic identity”). This view was echoed by another informant (item 14, “I know what my ethnicity means to me”), who also considered Spanish, together with family and food, as a factor that contributed to resolving the meaning of group identification.

Spanish was also mentioned with regard to the affirmation dimension. For example, as a response to item 1 (“My feelings about my ethnicity are mostly negative”), one participant ascribed negative feelings toward her ethnicity due to thinking as a child that speaking Spanish was bad: “Creo que estos sentimientos negativos eran más cuando era una niña porque todavía no entendía porque hablar el español era cosa mala” (“I think these negative feelings were more when I was a child because I still didn’t understand why speaking Spanish was a bad thing”). In the case of this participant, negative affect was linked to feelings toward Spanish, which were influenced by existing ideologies that see Spanish in a negative light. Particularly revealing is how the same participant addressed the same item in the posttest. The answer to item 1 went from “Describes me a little” to “Does not describe me at all”, which shows ethnic identity achievement. The comment this student provided illustrates how a critical approach contributed to a new understanding of Spanish. As the student put it: “Sí, creo que me siento mejor y tengo más confianza sobre mi habilidad y conocimiento sobre mi misma. Ahora no tengo pena porque hablo spanglish, y se que es...
consecuencia de muchas cosas que fueron fuera de mi control” (Yes, I think I feel better and have more confidence in my ability and knowledge of myself. Now I am not ashamed because I speak Spanglish, and I know that it is a consequence and result of many things that were out of my control”). The main characteristics of U.S. Spanish were part of the content of the CLA instructional module. This comment reveals this student now sees Spanglish as a valid way of speaking and herself as a legitimate speaker of Spanish. The student also understands that there are mechanisms and power dynamics that privileged some varieties and marginalized others. This change in perspective contributed to the development of positive feelings toward her background.

Another student, as an answer to this question (item 1), said:

"En mi familia, se usan palabras que son parte del dialecto guatemalteco, como “ishto” o “chucho,” y nunca los he visto ser usados en las escuelas que atendí en el pasado. Por un tiempo, pensé que eran palabras imaginarias que me enseñó mi familia, pero después de tomar este curso, me enseño que son parte de mi dialecto. Mi dialecto es valorado, y aunque no recibe lo mismo atención que otros dialectos españoles, como el español “estándar”, reciben en las escuelas, todavía es valido y no debo dejar de usarlo. Dejando de usarlos me quita parte de mi identidad, y es conformándome a una sistema que no soporta la diversidad que yo ofrezco, entonces es mi responsabilidad de mantener estos aspectos que ofrezco”.

(“In my family, words that are part of the Guatemalan dialect are used, such as “ishto” or “chucho,” and I have never seen them used in the schools I attended in the past. For a while, I thought that they were imaginary words that my family taught me, but after taking this course, it taught me that they are part of my dialect. My dialect is valued, and although it does not receive the same attention that other Spanish dialects, such as “standard” Spanish, receive in schools, it is still valid and I must not stop using it. Stopping using them takes away part of my identity, and it is conforming to a system that does not support the diversity that I offer, so it is my responsibility to maintain these aspects that I offer”).

This specific student had somewhat low levels of CLA (3.88) in the pretest and high levels (5.52) in the posttest. Furthermore, the EIS results reveal this participant moved from foreclosed positive to achieved positive in the posttest. The comment shows that this student found out that the Spanish variety spoken by his family and community exists and it is valid. Not only did he learn about language variation and linguistic diversity, but also about the existing ideologies that have traditionally positioned his way of speaking as deficient. Additionally, this student also shows agency, and he decided to maintain his Spanish.

Students’ responses indicate that the critical content addressed in the course changed their concept of what speaking Spanish means. Taken together, these results suggest that a CLA-based approach contributes to ethnic identity achievement.

4. Discussion

A number of recent studies have implemented CLA pedagogical approaches and measured their effectiveness in the HL classroom setting (Quan 2020; Beaudrie et al. 2021; Hudgens Henderson 2022). However, no data were found on the influence of students’ increased CLA levels on their ethnic identity development. The present study was designed to determine whether higher levels of CLA are conducive to ethnic identity achievement. Therefore, as stated in the first research question, the first step was to measure change in CLA levels after a CLA intervention module. Overall, the results show that learners had a somewhat high level of CLA before the intervention and a high level of CLA after it (half of the students improved their CLA levels). These results are similar to the levels of CLA shown by the group of learners in Beaudrie et al.’s (2021) study (somewhat high and high level in the pretest and almost a high level in the posttest). Similarly, Hudgens Henderson (2022) reports somewhat high levels of CLA before instruction and a statistically significant
change over the course of a semester. However, the qualitative analysis this researcher carried out shows that some students did not experience a deep change in their attitudes toward Spanish.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that students had higher levels of CLA in Part 1, which focuses on language variation, linguistic diversity, and English and language ideologies. This was also the part where students experienced the highest increase after the intervention. Students became more critically aware of the importance of valuing and respecting all versions of Spanish and their speakers. These results are also consistent with those in Holguín Mendoza’s (2018) study, which shows that students’ attitudes overall were more accepting toward non-standard forms.

Although the change in Part 2 on Spanish in the U.S., bilingualism, and code-switching was also noticeable, the reality of the classroom was not a reflection of it. Students expressed positive attitudes toward Spanish in the U.S., but students’ bilingual practices were rarely present in classroom interactions. This may be due to the fact that linguistic ideologies are pervasive and longer exposure to critical content is necessary. CLA levels regarding Part 3 on language maintenance did not increase much. A possible explanation for this might be that the items involved students’ intended behavior and they did not seem committed to taking action, which is also a very important component of a critical consciousness. To address this point, the first step in courses without a service-learning component would be to use a youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) approach to create language activist projects that empower students so that they advocate for change regarding the use of Spanish in the university context.

In summary, the results highlight that critical content addressing linguistic diversity and variation, language ideologies (the standard language ideology), and the systematicity and recognition of U.S. Spanish were essential in promoting CLA change. For example, especially relevant for challenging the idea of proficiency linked to the standard is bringing examples of translanguaging as successful communication. Students could analyze the samples and apply the sociolinguistic concepts that they learned.

With respect to the second research question, it was found that the majority of students held a positive affect toward their ethnicity. Additionally, students reported different ethnic–racial statuses. The largest group was made up of students categorized as foreclosed positive (45%), followed by achieved positive (39%), and diffuse positive (11%). The most important finding was that students’ identity statuses moved toward ethnic identity achievement. The results in the posttest show an increase in students reporting an achieved positive status (67%). The move toward ethnic identity achievement, revealed by the pretest and posttest measures in this study, may be due to students exploring and resolving issues in connection to their ethnicity during the course. These results further support the idea that CLA-based content can create valuable opportunities for heritage speakers to explore, resolve, and affirm their ethnic group membership. Research has demonstrated that the college transition process is a sensitive time when the identification of college students with their own ethnic group intensifies, as a result of the many changes in personal relationships that an individual experiences and also to identity exploration and negotiation that influence self-perception (Phinney and Ong 2007). In this period, another opportunity to become aware of their ethnicity is students’ experiences with their peers and courses, for example through the materials and the content presented (Syed and Azmitia 2008).

In the present study, students pointed to the critical content of the course as a driving force for change, as they learned about the power dynamics that reproduce the status quo and marginalize Latinx communities. Nevertheless, these results must be interpreted with caution, as it may also be that the changes were the result of other interactions. As an example of interactions outside of class (e.g., campus engagement) that improved their self-perception, students mentioned partaking in Latinx-specific student organizations. The course content could have promoted such experiences, for example through the reading of Yosso’s Model of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso 2016) in Spanish. This was an opportunity to discuss and share personal examples of the different capitals students bring
to the classroom (aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance) and, when talking about social capital, students shared information on what networks and resources were available to support them as they navigated their university. This activity was also an excellent aid to start talking about CLA through students’ linguistic capital.

After the CLA curricular module, there was an increase in students’ CLA levels and ethnic identity achievement. The third question in this research sought to determine the link between CLA levels and ethnic identity development. An interesting result is that students categorized as achieved positive seem to have higher levels of CLA, which could be suggestive of a link between CLA and ethnic identity. This finding suggests that critical approaches that implement a CLA-based methodology promote a positive effect on ethnicity. This result may be explained by the fact that a CLA approach challenges and questions the established concept of Spanish and what it means to be proficient in Spanish to include the students’ linguistic repertoires. Further, CLA also contests speakers’ ideologies that link their identity to linguistic proficiency, so that they become aware that regardless of their proficiency, they can claim their identity.

Students shared in their comments that language was a relevant aspect of their ethnicity (resolution and affirmation dimensions). These results are in agreement with Martinez Mira’s (2019) findings which linked language and ethnic identity. Her study shows that for students, irrespective of their linguistic proficiency, the maintenance of their heritage language was important. Furthermore, 44% of students with “more advanced level” of Spanish (self-reported) had a clear sense of their ethnic background and what it meant for them. Therefore, it seems relevant to continue exploring in the classroom what impacts what it is that students understand by “linguistic proficiency”.

Students’ qualitative responses to the EIS affirmation dimension reveal that the content that developed students’ CLA levels, as well as an achieved ethnic self-perception, was the validation of their varieties and translanguaging practices, the inclusion of U.S. Spanish, and an understanding of language ideologies (notions of correctness and standardness). One student reported feeling better, having more confidence, and not being ashamed of using Spanglish. Another student felt that his language variety was valued and he highlighted that it was an important aspect of his identity. These comments show how students changed their previous assumptions about linguistic proficiency in Spanish and how their repositioning contributed to feeling positively toward their ethnicity.

5. Conclusions

The present study was designed to determine the effect of a curricular intervention on students’ levels of CLA and ethnic identity in a university-level HL course. The findings indicate that approaches designed to engage HL students in critical work regarding their language and identity may have a positive impact on CLA levels but also on ethnic identity. These are rather encouraging findings because “studies show positive associations between ethnic identity, socio-emotional health and academic success” (Arredondo et al. 2016, p. 245).

For heritage students, the heritage language classroom can be a space for transformation and interaction with students with a shared background. A critical approach can create opportunities for students to see themselves as legitimate speakers of the language. Thus, a critical perspective can challenge the idea that Spanish proficiency defines their ethnic identity and validate the many resources to communicate these speakers already possess. It is precisely this type of awareness that can influence the way they see themselves.

Considering the benefits for students of having a positive ethnic identity, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between a CLA-based approach and ethnic identity formation in the HL instructional setting can be more clearly understood.

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Appendix A


Part 1: Language variation, linguistic diversity, English and language ideologies
1. People from Spain speak the purest form of Spanish. *
2. In my opinion, people should use standard Spanish to communicate all the time. *
3. I believe Spanish-speaking Hispanics in the U.S. don’t speak correct Spanish. *
4. I feel speaking Spanish is less prestigious than speaking other foreign languages such as French. *
5. In my opinion, speaking English is an essential element of being American. *
6. In my opinion, it’s more important for immigrants to learn English and adopt the American culture than to keep their own language and culture. *
7. In my opinion, families can speak Spanish among themselves at home but when in public they should speak English to each other. *
8. I believe growing up with both Spanish and English confuses children. *

Part 2: Spanish in the U.S., bilingualism, and code-switching
1. If I were to give a professional presentation, I would try to avoid working with a partner who has a strong foreign accent in English. *
2. I believe people who speak Spanglish should switch to just Spanish or English. *
3. I don’t like it when people say ‘parquear’ instead of ‘estacionar’. *
4. I don’t like it when people code-switch because it is not a proper way of speaking a language. *
5. I believe Spanglish should not be allowed in Spanish classes. *
6. I would tease a friend when speaking Spanish if they forget or invent words. *
7. I would try to avoid mixing Spanish and English in the same conversation as much as I can. *
8. I would not code-switch in front of my teachers because they may think I am less intelligent. *

Part 3: Language maintenance
1. I would be willing to join a club who meets every week to discuss how to maintain Spanish within the family and community.
2. After college, I would commit to reading, writing, speaking, and listening in Spanish every day to continue developing my language.
3. I would speak to Hispanic students at my university about the benefits of keeping Spanish alive in the U.S.

Appendix B

Ethnic Identity Scale (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004)

Following Umaña-Taylor et al. (2004) all items were scored 1–4, with 1 indicating “Does not describe at all”; 2 “Describes me a little”; 3 “Describes me well”; and 4 “Describes me very well”. The notation after each item indicates the subscale (A = affirmation, E = exploration, and R = resolution). Positively worded items are indicated with + and negatively worded items with −. In the case of negatively worded items, the score should be reversed so that a higher score indicates higher levels of affirmation, exploration, and resolution.

1. My feelings about my ethnicity are mostly negative (−A).
2. I have not participated in any activities that would teach me about my ethnicity (−E).
3. I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me (+R).
4. I have experienced things that reflect my ethnicity, such as eating food, listening to music, and watching movies (+E).
5. I have attended events that have helped me learn more about my ethnicity (+E).
6. I have read books/magazines/newspapers or other materials that have taught me about my ethnicity (+E).
7. I feel negatively about my ethnicity (−A).
8. I have participated in activities that have exposed me to my ethnicity (+E).
9. I wish I were of a different ethnicity (−A).
10. I am not happy with my ethnicity (−A).
11. I have learned about my ethnicity by doing things such as reading (books, magazines, newspapers), searching the internet, or keeping up with current events (+E).
12. I understand how I feel about my ethnicity (+R).
13. If I could choose, I would prefer to be of a different ethnicity (−A).
14. I know what my ethnicity means to me (+R).
15. I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity (+E).
16. I dislike my ethnicity (−A).
17. I have a clear sense of what my ethnicity means to me (+R).

References


