Article

Building Connections and Critical Language Awareness between Learning Communities Collaborating across Two Distant States

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Abstract: Can Critical Language Awareness (CLA) be increased through sociolinguistically based student projects in learning communities collaborating across distant states? If so, how can educators detect this increase in CLA? During the spring of 2020, students in mixed learning communities (SHL/L2) at the intermediate level at two large universities collaborated through online tools to deepen their sociolinguistic understanding of the Spanish of the United States through authentic sociolinguistic data collection. The data for the current study come from interviews with four of these students and from their final reflection papers, providing participant-based depictions of their language experience including criticality and resistance to it. We find evidence that students already expressed elements of CLA before entering the class, and that they also achieved new critical insights through participating and collaborating in class projects. To identify gains in CLA conveyed by student voices, we operationalized CLA as expressions of language experience that either challenged hegemonic paradigms (e.g., stigmatization of certain forms) or identified the role of hegemonic forces in collective or individual behavior. In order to tie CLA to widespread tools used in education, we connect it to notions of the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. Overall, we propose observable goals that can be used to understand and assess the presence of CLA in students’ discourse.

Keywords: critical language awareness; Bloom’s Taxonomy; Spanish as a Heritage Language; L2/HL mixed methods

1. Introduction

As noted by Loza and Beaudrie (2022) the field of Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHL) has seen a critical turn beginning in the early 2000s as practitioners increasingly applied critical frameworks to SHL scholarship and pedagogy. During this critical turn we have seen the emergence of a focus on critical language awareness. However, much of the focus has been theoretical and aimed at a scholarly audience, possibly disregarding the needs of practicing educators. The present effort contributes to a growing body of work that attempts to make the implementation of CLA more tangible and accessible. One of the ways in which it does so is through operationalizing CLA in a straightforward way that allows us to apply it to student descriptions of their educational experience. An equally important contribution of this study is to give a voice to students regarding elements of the educational context (e.g., Wilson and Ibarra 2015) that may indicate CLA, or resistance to it, through presenting interview and written data from four students in a brief case-study.

One way we give CLA a more concrete footing is by connecting elements of it to the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). While the taxonomy does not fully account for all the learning processes inherent in CLA, this framework has provided educators in all areas with a common language to analyze learning progression, as well as a structure to assess and develop expectations for learning and instruction. Because the
Taxonomy is a well-known tool, it provides an accessible way to discuss CLA goals and assessments (but see Stanny 2016 for a critique of the taxonomy).

The context of the present study is in a joint effort between two large public universities, one in the state of New Mexico and the other in New York, in which students, both SHL and Second Language (L2) learners, collaborated on several projects and communicated over digital platforms. For example, students began the semester by posting short videos on an online platform for educators and commenting on one another’s posts. Students participated in three sociolinguistically oriented activities, with different degrees of collaboration, and reported upon their findings in cross-university discussions. For the final project students created a podcast and the final assignment was a reflection essay. The data for this project come from interviews conducted after the class was completed and from the final reflection papers. Here, we present data from four students: one L2 learner and one heritage language learner from each institution.

The sociolinguistically oriented activities involved data collection and analysis. We implemented a mapping activity in line with perceptual dialectology and a documentation of variable community lexicon in line with more traditional dialectology. The third extracts sociolinguistic information from the census. These activities have been highlighted at conference workshops (Wilson 2021; Wilson and Schulman 2017) with the overall goal of providing concrete suggestions for raising critical awareness through involving students in basic sociolinguistic research (e.g., Leeman and Serafini 2016). These activities are described in Appendix A.

In examining student interaction with CLA, we differentiate between CLA and language awareness, or dialectal awareness. In an early discussion of the distinction between language awareness and CLA, Martínez (2003, pp. 5–6) describes the following themes from previous efforts to address dialectal awareness from a sociolinguistic perspective by Wolfram and colleagues (Wolfram 1999; Wolfram et al. 1999): (1) dialects are natural, (2) dialects are regular, and (3) variation occurs on different levels. Noting that SHL textbooks tend to include notions of dialectal awareness, Martinez argues that although it may have merits, it does not go far enough in examining indexicality between language structures and the social values pinned onto them. While awareness pedagogy fosters a scientific understanding of the linguistic elements of variation, it also permits a detachment from the emotional and prejudicial perceptions of varieties and casts them as “contained systems of human communication” (6). Arguing that dialectal awareness can serve as a base from which to expand into critical awareness, Martinez proposes adding three more goals to Wolfram’s to reveal the way language is related to social power dynamics: (1) the functions of dialects, (2) the distribution of dialects, and (3) the evaluation of dialects (Martínez 2003, p. 7). Therefore, in the present effort, we propose that language awareness (LA) and CLA may be part of a continuum of expanding awareness.

The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy allows us to place descriptors and learning objectives on the intersections of two dimensions; knowledge and cognitive processes. While lower order skills include memorization of facts and practices, higher order skills in the taxonomy require learners to analyze and evaluate not only facts and practices but also procedures and metacognitive knowledge. In relation to language learning objectives, an example of lower order skills may be “exchange basic biographical information by using memorized expressions” while higher order skills may relate to the learning objectives of CLA.

To exemplify the taxonomy in action, Appendix B presents some commonly recognized aspects of the language learning process as well as aspects related to the development of CLA. Most language learning curriculums start the learning process with acquisition of vocabulary and lexical bundles through the means of memorization. These foundational elements of the language learning process belong in the intersection of remember and factual knowledge. The learning experience may also include cultural aspects, often stereotypical notions of a Spanish-speaking culture, or facts related to Spanish speaking nations.

As students advance in their learning processes, they continue to acquire linguistic aspects in order to create their own sentences and express their own ideas. This progression
now includes procedural knowledge and moves the student beyond the remember category into understand, and then create. As the learner progresses, they move beyond facts into understanding the nuances of the different Spanish speaking cultures, applying cognitive skills, such as apply, analyze and evaluate. We propose that CLA belongs in the intersection of higher order cognitive skills and procedural and metacognitive knowledge.

According to Leeman (2005), the central goal of a critical approach to language teaching is to engage students in a critical examination of sociocultural and political issues related to the language. This higher order skill requires the refinement of other cognitive skills and a multilayer knowledge that can be correlated to the revised taxonomy. In using the taxonomy to plan learning experiences and assess learning, the educator ensures that the student is being challenged and supported towards the goal of CLA. Leeman elaborates on the relationship between language skills and CLA (Leeman 2005, p. 40):

“From a critical perspective, language awareness entails not only the explicit description of language varieties and linguistic principles, but also the forthright examination of the interplay between language and social and political issues. Thus, critical language awareness curricula should aim to help students develop linguistic resources to draw from as they see fit, together with the nonlinguistic resources to be critical social actors in whichever speech communities they choose to participate”.

The evaluation of CLA in students represents an important development. In what appears the first study to quantitatively measure CLA in the SHL context, Holguín Mendoza (2018) describes an effort to include CLA in an SHL program with a sequence of 6 courses that were modified in order to include critical notions. She also piloted a survey intended to measure CLA by proxy through attitudes held toward 30 non-standard items, from Mexican varieties of US Spanish, which was distributed to over 30 students in two courses, once at the beginning and again at the end the semester. Participants judged items in terms of correct versus incorrect and, whether or not they would say the item in question; responses that judged items as correct increased over time. Combined with evidence from open-ended responses, she found evidence that CLA increased with participation in this program.

In a subsequent effort to concretely evaluate CLA gains in the SHL context, Beaudrie et al. (2019) developed a psychometrically validated questionnaire. They arrived at a 19-item questionnaire through multiple steps including item testing and analysis for validity and reliability before final implementation. Delivered to over 300 participants in SHL classes, the preliminary version of 24 items provided robust data for item analysis. After removing items that did not contribute to reliability, they delivered it to a smaller group of students who went through an SHL class where CLA was included in curricular efforts and found evidence of an increase in CLA. They followed this up by developing a course with four modules that were designed to raise CLA and assessed changes in this construct through their questionnaire by administering a pretest and a post-test (Beaudrie et al. 2020). They found that, overall, measured levels of CLA rose in the post test, providing evidence that deliberate educational efforts may foster critical conscientization. This team also proposed four educational goals for the teaching of CLA, which we return to below.

Directly relevant to our work, Gasca Jiménez and Adrada-Rafael (2021) investigated student gains of CLA in mixed classes where there was not necessarily a deliberate effort to promote such gains. They distributed the validated questionnaire by Beaudrie et al. (2019, 2020) to 16 undergraduate students majoring or minoring in Spanish, of whom 14 were heritage learners, and divided them into two groups: students who had taken two or fewer classes and those who had taken at least three. They describe the students as being motivated, and as having productive and receptive skills in their heritage language (8). Their findings echoed Beaudrie et al. (2020) in that students generally displayed high levels of CLA in their responses, with the second group—the one having taken at least three courses—displaying a higher level than the first. However, both groups in Gasca Jiménez and Adrada-Rafael (2021) showed evidence of adhering to standard language ideologies in
preferring some varieties over others and expressed an avoidance of translingual behavior. Nevertheless, the authors propose that ongoing study in the described program raised CLA. They respond to the adherence to normative ideologies by recognizing that mixed L2/HL classes tend to cater more to the needs of L2 students and proposing that instructors explicitly address plurilingual practices and language ideologies.

While the study of CLA has been chiefly discussed in relation to SHL (e.g., Leeman 2018; Holguín Mendoza 2018), there are many reasons why it should be incorporated in Spanish as a second or foreign language teaching contexts as well. As Beaudrie and Wilson (2022) acknowledge, the inclusion of CLA in HL education should be a primary goal, but we also must recognize that there are many HLs who learn Spanish in L2 contexts. Extending CLA to those contexts may potentially support HLs, while deepening their L2 counterpart’s understanding of the social, political and historical issues related to the language studied. In our data, the L2 participants provide evidence that they were open to development of critical ideas.

Recent attempts to make the teaching of CLA more concrete and measurable draw from a variety of previous work. Leeman (2018, p. 345) provided one of the more tangible definitions of CLA, which we use in order to create measurable outcomes in this current project:

“The label “Critical Language Awareness” (CLA) has been applied both to the understanding of how language is imbued with social meaning and power relations, as well as to pedagogical approaches designed to promote that understanding among students. As part of their learning about how language works, CLA-based pedagogies encourage students to question taken-for-granted assumptions about language and to analyze how such assumptions are tied to inequality and injustice, with the ultimate goal of promoting positive social change”

Based upon this widely cited definition, which we believe is broadly representative of CLA, we operationalized measurable outcomes that could be applied to the data in this study. Note that we also included language that comes from the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). We propose that the following measurable outcomes show development of CLA:

The student is able to:

1. Contextualize the listener/reader/interlocutor on how language is imbued with social meaning and power relations
2. Critique well established assumptions and ideologies about language
3. Assess how such assumptions and ideologies are tied to inequality and injustice
4. Formulate ways to promote positive social change

These show similarities and differences to the learning goals proposed by Beaudrie et al. (2020, p. 5), which they derived through an examination of the pertinent literature and that are “crucial to a curriculum that seeks a social justice approach”:

1. Students will be able to see language variation as natural and recognize the intrinsic value of their own variety and all others.
2. Students will be able to develop a consciousness of the political, social, and economic power structures that underlie language use and the distribution of the so-classed prestige and non-prestigious varieties.
3. Students will be able to uncover dominant language ideologies that hide in daily monolingual/bilingual practices.
4. Students will be empowered to exercise agency in making their own decision about language use and bilingualism.

The main difference is that Beaudrie et al. (2020) frame theirs as learning goals, which are meant to guide educational endeavors but not necessarily to assess them, while the goals proposed here were derived with assessment in mind. While this is not a discrete division, the measurable outcomes that we created are able to be used in both analyzing data qualitatively and in providing quantitative assessment in a more institutional setting.
For Beaudrie et al. (2020), the above goals were used in designing a curricular program that had a central goal of raising CLA and in order to empirically examine the effects of this curriculum through their questionnaire (Beaudrie et al. 2019). In the following section we discuss our data, to which we apply the measurable outcomes above.

2. Study

This section describes the study, which is a brief case study of four participants. Instead of a thematic study of all of the collected materials, we chose to examine data from four individuals (see Section 2.1) in order to extract a robust description of the expression and development of each participant’s CLA (see Section 2.2). In Section 3 we present the results of the study.

2.1. Materials

The main body of data for this project comes from interviews conducted with four students, two in New Mexico and two in New York with one interviewee being an L2 learner and the other a heritage learner a Spanish from each state. By focusing on four participants, we highlight elements of their individual language experience thereby rendering a brief case study of four individuals. While there were more interviews conducted, we chose these to portray an L2 and an SHL perspective from each class, and also because they express representative, but diverse, perspectives on CLA. These students were from two upper-division courses that focused on aspects of Spanish in the US: Spanish of the Southwest in NM and Rethinking Spanglish in NY. We also examined reaction papers written at the end of the semester.

These interviews were semi guided and asked questions regarding the educational experience in the classes involved, allowing freedom on the part of the participants to delve into related topics of their choosing while responding. We began the interviews by eliciting relevant demographic information and language history. If we discovered that a student had a language background with Spanish we asked them to give us information on their experience, asking questions that revealed with whom they spoke and other contexts of using the language. The main questions asked students to elaborate on their definition of Spanglish, if they believed there was a variety of Spanish that is more prevalent than others in an educational setting, and what some of the differences between Spanish in New York versus New Mexico. These questions gave opportunities for students to craft narratives that potentially indexed CLA without asking about it directly.

The written work came from reaction papers at the end of the semester in which students elaborated upon their experiences in the class. Themes included reactions to participating in interuniversity activities, collaborative projects and how their thinking progressed in regard to sociolinguistic concepts.

2.2. Methods

We used these data in order to address the research questions: (1). How can we operationalize CLA in order to identify, analyze and assess it in student expressions? (2). Can Critical Language Awareness (CLA) be increased through sociolinguistically based student projects in learning communities collaborating across distant states?

In order to answer these questions we draw from a qualitative analysis of the data. Instead of an iterative and recursive manner of qualitative analysis in which researchers approach the data without a priori themes (e.g., Hatch 2002), here we deliberately extract segments from the data that relate to the learning goals stated above. Here, we present representative segments from the data instead of giving an exhaustive account. The extracted segments depict three overall constructs: stances that CLA attempts to challenge (e.g., standard language ideologies, deficit perspectives on translinguaging), instances of language awareness, and expressions of critical language awareness. We applied the measurable outcomes to the data to determine what construct they displayed and both authors examined all extracted segments in order to arrive at determinations. These
determinations sometimes fit clearly into one of the above constructs but some might be
between them. In the results, we present our analysis of the data partially in examining
specific examples from the data and partially in a question/answer format, in which the
measurable outcomes are formulated as questions and the answers represent our analysis.

In order to address the first research question, we used a tangible definition of CLA
(Leeman 2018) and separated it into observable goals. The search for a method to probe
these goals took us to the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). The
Taxonomy was originally created with the purposes of: developing a common language
to talk about learning goals; facilitating vertical and horizontal curriculum conversations;
determining the congruence of objectives, learning experiences and assessments of a
unit, course or curriculum; envisioning paths of growth for learners (Krathwohl 2002).
For this analysis we used the revised version, published in 2001. This revision takes
the foundational elements of the original and expands the scope of the taxonomy by
considering two learning dimensions; knowledge and cognitive skills. The first includes
factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge, while the second one draws
from the six categories from the previous version, now expressed as verbs: remember,
understand, create, apply, analyze, and evaluate (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). The
additional dimension recognizes different levels of interconnectivity in the learning process
making it much more suitable for education, and the use of verbs to categorize cognitive
skills lends itself to understanding CLA.

3. Results

Here, we discuss the perspectives expressed by the participants from the two univer-
sities. As should be expected, the results show a panorama of ideological and attitudinal
stances with many individual differences. We use pseudonyms and begin this section with
an analysis of the data provided by L2 learners, Mateo and Elena, followed by an analysis
of two heritage learners, Tina and Teri.

3.1. L2 Perspective in New Mexico: Mateo

Mateo is from a suburban community that is adjacent to Albuquerque. He was 22 years
old at the time of the interview and identifies as male and speaks only English with his
family. He started studying Spanish at the age of eleven and continued through most of
his high school. He continued studying Spanish in college and spent time in a summer
immersion program in Spain. He wants to go to medical school but in the meantime, his
short-term goal is to become a medical interpreter. Mateo has many Spanish-speaking
friends and asks them to speak Spanish with him in order to practice.

In his written reaction paper, he discusses important elements of his positionality
in regard to the class, referring to himself as a “nuevo iniciado” in the Spanish speaking
community and writes:

"Siempre soy uno de la minoría en el Departamento como un hombre güero, pero
nunca me he sentido, ni en esta clase sentí, que mis opiniones, por ser ajenas,
fueron despreciadas. Como resultado de eso, el salón de clase fue muy buen
espacio para la exploración de nuestras percepciones. . . ."

When asked during the interview what things he liked about the class he elaborates
on how his positionality has affected his language experience:

“... y aprender sobre cómo entender por ejemplo en los acosos... que realmente
está pasando con él... o sea si se trata de racismo o si se trata de dé dialectical
dominance o algo así umm... cómo cómo entender esa situación cuando antes
no pensaba mucho en eso porque... Claro que mi vida está un poco en una caja.
Porque vivo donde no se habla mucho español o no se... no no hablo como por
deber con mis vecinos . . .”

Mateo indicates that as an L2 learner with no immediate family that speaks the
language he is not an insider. Because his immediate community does not have many
Spanish speakers, his life is one that is limited or protected, which he metaphorizes as being in a box. Here, and elsewhere, he expresses that the class expanded his awareness of different issues facing Spanish-speakers and their communities in the US. While we see here, he expresses a raised level of language awareness, but, is it critical? If it is critical, did this learning experience contribute? When looking at it through the taxonomy, we can conclude that the ability to demonstrate awareness of those issues corresponds to the intersection of the cognitive skill analyze and procedural knowledge, which would make it an example of LA.

In his reaction paper, Mateo elaborates on how the activities in the class expanded his awareness of diversity, especially the ones that involved conducting interviews or collecting data with Spanish-speaking participants. He also talks about how his interactions with classmates from the other campus contributed to this expanded awareness by exposing him to varieties with which he was not familiar. At least for this L2 learner, contact with a variety of Spanish speakers promotes an important expansion of language awareness, which was a common theme among both learning communities.

There is solid evidence of critical language awareness in the interview. In talking about Spanglish, he comments:

“Creo que aquí hay, hay mucha, mucha gente con la mente abierta, pero aprender sobre esos acosos a hispanohablantes o gente que usa spanglish. No sé, no es, no es justo eso.”

Here, he depicts a situation where there are many people with open minds but connects it to the idea of learning about acosos almost as if he were surprised that they would happen in a place with so many open minds. He then goes on to say that these acosos are not fair.

In another segment of his discussion of Spanglish, Mateo brings up a topic studied in the class during readings on Mock Spanish (e.g., Hill 2008), Donald Trump’s usage of bad hombres during the 2016 debates when talking about immigration.

“... sí leimos muchos articulos sobre el spanglish uuuu. Y muchos, muchos, muchas perspectivas sobre las que no había pensado, por ejemplo, de cuando Donald Trump, dijo he’s a bad hombre. Y creo que, creo que dijo, y ese tipo de tonterías como examinándolos de este ... un punto, de punto de vista analítico ¿no? Porque, porque está diciendo eso, porque está empleando como despectivamente el spanglish.”

Here, we see that Mateo engages with the implications of bad hombre and references class materials. In the class, the learning community applied the concepts of Mock Spanish to this deployment of such in a group discussion. One of the tenets of Hill’s work on Mock Spanish is that it both suppresses and appropriates Spanish and that “…what is at stake is White privilege, their right to control the symbolic resources of Spanish and shape these to their own purposes” (Hill 2008, p. 126). While Mateo’s description here is brief, it reveals an impact of the materials, especially considering that the interview was conducted about six months after Hill’s reading was assigned.

Returning to the proposed learning goals, which we paraphrase here as questions, does Mateo demonstrate an ability to contextualize the interlocutor on how language is imbued with social meaning and power relations? Yes. He shows a sensitivity to social meaning and power relations throughout and demonstrates to a degree, especially through discussing the Mock Spanish event, that he understands this. Does he critique well established assumptions and ideologies about language? Yes. He recognizes that speakers of Spanglish might be bullied and that it is unfair. Is Mateo able to assess how such assumptions and ideologies are tied to inequality and injustice? Most likely. While he talks about coming into a new awareness regarding language bullying, and states that it is unfair, he stops short of making an explicit connection between language ideologies and justice in the interview. Lastly, does he formulate ways to promote positive social change? In the data here, he does not explicitly elucidate on change. However, he expresses a desire to use his Spanish in the medical profession in order to better facilitate access to healthcare.
In all, it appears that Mateo’s perceptions of the class contain expressed elements of CLA. Through those exchanges, we can also trace the evolution of his language learning; from analyzing, in the first examples, into evaluating procedural knowledge. The student also shows his ability to analyze metacognitive knowledge when he goes beyond listening to the speech to understanding the implications of the word choice. Those higher order thinking skills build on his L2 learning experiences and foment development of CLA.

3.2. L2 Perspective in New York: Elena

Elena, who identifies as female, is originally from Long Island and was 21 years old at the time of the interview. She describes being raised by her babysitter who was from Colombia and spoke only Spanish, which her mother also spoke, but not her father. This provided a contrast to the rest of her community, which she describes as predominantly English-speaking, “very segregated and whitewashed”. She did not realize she spoke two languages until she went to preschool and realized that no one understood what she said “half the time”. In elementary school she remembers being told to only speak English, causing her to come to the conclusion that since she is not Hispanic that she should not speak Spanish, which she abandoned until high school and college, where she has been trying to regain it. We tentatively describe Elena as an L2 learner while acknowledging that she has a language experience that is similar to that of heritage learner. Beaudrie and Ducar (2005) argue that non-Hispanic students who have been raised by Spanish speaking caregivers potentially belong in heritage language classes.

In the interview, Elena demonstrates an awareness of language hierarchies and racialization imposed in educational contexts in which Peninsular Spanish is most pure and only Hispanics speak Spanish. In terms of racialization in high school she states:

“... some of my teachers thought that [...] because I wasn’t Hispanic like they thought I was kind of just like [...] she’s some white girl who like gets good grades in Spanish class and thinks that she can speak Spanish. Like to the point where, like some teachers would tell me that. Like I would answer a question perfectly fine and I would be incorrect, but then my Guatemalan friend would answer the question in the exact same way and she would be correct. So I think that, like in terms of oh, like you can’t speak Spanish unless you’re Hispanic definitely plays into it.”

She goes on to describe language hierarchies that span all of her educational contexts:

“And another part which I’ve witnessed like throughout my entire foreign language education is there’s like a really strong emphasis on like pure Spanish, or like Spaniard version of Spanish versus like, you know, you never learn anything about any sort of like dialect when it comes to like other countries speaking Spanish.”

These statements reveal elements of critical thinking that Elena brought with her into the learning environment discussed here; since the beginning, she demonstrates ability to analyze procedures and to evaluate conceptual knowledge. They also show areas where Elena might grow in her critical consciousness. In discussing the different activities Elena expressed that they were interesting and that she liked them but did not express any transformational ideas. However, she did express a transformation in perspective regarding translngual practices. Throughout the interview she expressed an appreciation of Spanglish but also recognized that there are many stigmas, “There’s like a very strong emphasis to speak either, or, and that Spanglish is kind of this ... Like you’re being lazy”. She goes on to say that she does not subscribe to that perspective and that it is a skill that allows speakers to “effectively communicate and be understood”. However, the way it was included into her class was a symbolic validation:

“... it like put Spanglish in an academic context which I feel like Spanglish is always put in a colloquial context and its kind of put as this unprofessional, informal slang kind of a way of talking. Like I do not even think a lot of people
even consider it a language whereas being able to contextualize it in an academic setting...kind of shows that like people who speak Spanglish are not alone. Like there are so many people who speak Spanglish that are effectively able to communicate in academic settings as well ummm and I thought that that was something that was really special cuz that was the first time I’ve ever encountered that in my entire life, being told like, no this is a space you can speak however you wanna speak and we’re not telling you how to speak.”

Elena expressed similar views about Spanglish in her reflection paper and described how the group overall held a positive view toward it, which contributed to validation. She found interesting contrasts between the two states, however, and writes that the New Mexican context appeared to be one in which Spanish was more prevalent and how in New York it was always surprising to know someone who spoke it. This observation led her to express a change: “Este ha expandido a mi percepción cultural y como si existe lugares con menos segregación racial que Nueva York”.

Considering Elena’s perspectives, does she demonstrate an ability to contextualize the interlocutor on how language is imbued with social meaning and power relations? Yes. She articulates a recognition of segregation and prejudice against Spanish speakers in her home community. However, this awareness comes from her lived experiences and not the class. Does she critique well established assumptions and ideologies about language? Yes. She recognizes standard language ideologies in prioritizing certain varieties above others but, once again, was already aware of these before taking the class. Is Elena able to assess how such assumptions and ideologies are tied to inequality and injustice? Yes. Her newly acquired perspectives on Spanglish present a context in which she recognizes negative views are unjustified. Additionally, throughout the interview she comments upon how Dominican Spanish is unfairly positioned as inferior in educational contexts, an observation that she had made before the class. Lastly, does she formulate ways to promote positive social change? Almost. At the end of the interview she talks about how the segregation and prejudice in Long Island needs to be changed, yet she does not know how to change it. She also mentions an expanded awareness in her paper.

Her background knowledge granted her initial skills such as the ability to analyze conceptual and procedural knowledge. By the end of the semester, she demonstrated advancement from conceptual and procedural into metacognitive knowledge when, through reflection, she came to terms with Spanglish and recognized its value beyond her own precognitions.

3.3. HL Perspective in New Mexico: Tina

Tina is from an area of Albuquerque known for having a deeply rooted Hispanic population. She was 32 years old at the time of the interview and identifies as female and emphatically states that she is Chicana. She describes being raised in a multi-generational and multilingual household in which the grandparent generation was Spanish dominant and subsequent generations increasingly dominant in English. She comments on household languaging, “A la mayor í a la mayor í fue de inglés, pero con, cómo se dice, como de gotitas de español, a mis abuelos no querían enseñarme español”. Throughout the interview she depicts Spanish as being a private language used in her home but that she and other members of the family would avoid it in public places because “Si alguna persona hablaría en español fue como looking down on the person”. She goes on to mention being followed in stores, feeling as though it was due to racial profiling, and worries that it would be even more of a problem if she spoke Spanish.

Throughout the data analyzed, Tina offers perspectives that might appear to be in conflict, or difficult to reconcile with one another, but that demonstrate some of the internal strife that Spanish speakers face in the US. On one hand she expresses a consistent awareness of injustice while on the other she firmly maintains standard language ideologies. Her expressions convey both an expansion of critical awareness and a resistance to some of its tenets, stating “all of us are still struggling with, like, our language and what it means”.
Her dualistic attitudes toward Spanish in the US appear in her reaction paper:

“Cuando empecé este curso yo pensé que no aprendería nada nuevo del español de suroeste. Tenía muchos prejuicios a la lengua hablada aquí en Nuevo México y por alrededor del suroeste; también pensé que sabía todo de nuestro dialecto. Pero, después de leer las lecturas de la primera semana realicé que mis pensamientos y mis juicios eran mal informados. Desde entonces tengo una nueva perspectiva de los factores socioculturales, lingüísticos y económicos que afectaban, y por su puesto todavía afectan, el complejo cuestion de español en el suroeste.

Here, we see an acknowledgement of prejudice, judgments and thoughts about regional Spanish that she recognized were not well-informed, and that she gained new perspectives about the different factors facing Spanish speakers. She moves beyond the understanding of procedural knowledge into analyzing metacognitive preconceptions.

Tina goes on to write about how she was able to share her perspectives and gain new information about experiences and beliefs held by other Spanish speakers through her collaboration with New York students. She also claims that she gained new perspectives on the conditions facing Spanish speakers through the sociolinguistic activities and comments upon the perceptual dialectology mapping:

“...en la primera investigación con los mapas aprendí que factores como el estatus socioeconómico, etnicidad y lengua afectan las creencias y pensamientos de cada una persona. Es necesario de crear etiquetas para ubicarnos entre nuestra comunidad, familia, raza, país, etc. La construcción de identidad no existe de manera lineal. Es fluido y es capaz de evolucionar con el paso de tiempo.”

In both of these examples, and elsewhere, Tina describes an expansion of her perspective through engagement with the course materials, activities and other students. These expansions of language awareness contain critical elements by including new perspectives on a variety of sociolinguistic components, such as identity, ethnicity, and economical and sociocultural factors.

At the same time, she displays a resistance to an expansion of critical language awareness regarding Spanglish and dialectal hierarchies. She expresses throughout the interview that Spanglish is fine in her mother’s kitchen and her neighborhood but that students in a Spanish class should only use Spanish, despite acknowledging that there is pedagogy that argues in favor of permitting translingual behavior. In regard to dialectal hierarchies, she states:

“Sigo con mi opinión en que los españoles de España hablan lo mejor español porque obviamente es su propio idioma y también allí ellos tienen el RAE, la Real Academia Española, so siempre siguiendo con este opinión y no sé si voy a cambiarme.”

She describes other dialects as well stating that Colombian Spanish is “bonito y correcto”, that it is hard for her to understand varieties of Caribbean Spanish, and that the Spanish from Mexico has a lot of slang, adding that, “…para mí, el español mexicano es normal”. Tina comments on Mexican perspectives of New Mexican Spanish stating that many of her friends view it as undesirable because it is “like very country como un country twang y eso is not desirable, and I’m like that’s the only accent I understand. I guess I speak like a country baby”.

Tina’s expressed perspectives provide an interesting case when we apply the learning goals. Does she demonstrate an ability to contextualize the interlocutor on how language is imbued with social meaning and power relations? Yes, in a variety of ways. For example, she describes potential reactions to using Spanish within a retail context in which personnel follow her, which is from her lived experiences, but relevant the class. However, she mentions coming into a new realization regarding language and other factors, including economic factors and identity. Does she critique well established assumptions and ideologies about language? Yes, but in a contrary way. She recognizes that one thrust
of the class was to question standard language ideologies, tacitly recognizing them as a problem, but holds firm in maintaining a hierarchy that elevates Spain Spanish above other varieties. This might interact with what Elena describes above: the prevalence of L2 programs k-16+ that portray the Spanish of the United States as an improper variation of the language. This lack of cultural understanding of the evolution of the language has caused the proletarization of the Spanish of the United States and places the ideal Spanish language in a foreign country (Marcin 2016). Is Tina able to assess how such assumptions and ideologies are tied to inequality and injustice? As above, yes, but in a contrary way. Lastly, does she formulate ways to promote positive social change? Perhaps. She does not give a specific avenue but also describes a great deal of resistance to dominant paradigms of prejudice against Spanish speakers from the US despite contrary views.

3.4. HL Perspective in New York: Teri

Teri is from Long Island. She was 22 years old and working on a Master’s degree at the time of the interview. Her family came to the US from Ecuador and she identifies as female. She reports speaking both English and Spanish in her home and describes interactions as occurring in one language or the other, never mixing them. She speaks almost always in Spanish with sisters in her Latina Sorority and always with her grandmother, who lives with her and her parents in Long Island. Although Teri belongs to a family that spans three generations and in which grandparents and parents speak Spanish, no cousins or siblings younger than her speak. She describes her brother and others of his age as not learning to speak but being able to “understand for the most part”, an indicator that they may be receptive bilinguals. One of the reasons her brother does not speak is because the parents did not want him to be tracked into English as a Second Language glasses, so they instructed him to claim he spoke no Spanish and to avoid speaking it. Teri is conflicted about her own Spanish and describes that while her family criticizes her for not having a perfect accent, many friends in Long Island view her as “exotic” because of the Spanish she does speak.

In the interview Teri says that prior to the class, she thought that Spanglish was for “… students, white people, non-native speakers. Basically I didn’t think that native speakers spoke Spanglish”. As such, she attributed it to a deficit perspective in which learners used Spanglish because they did not know the word, or how to say something, in Spanish. However, her view toward Spanglish transformed through participation in the class, according to her final reflection:

“En este curso pensé que aprendería sobre los aspectos negativos del spanglish y cómo afecta la percepción de las personas de quienes hablan spanglish. En realidad, lo que aprendí fue mucho más de lo que esperaba. Aprendí que el spanglish no es un idioma mixto que carece de la falta de comprensión o conocimiento de cualquiera de los dos idiomas, sino es un recurso que muchos hablantes utilicen para comunicarse mejor. Aprendí cómo el lenguaje afecta la identidad y cómo el spanglish es algo utilizado en los Estados Unidos.”

Although she describes this transition, she does not attribute it to only one activity and, instead, gives the impression that it was from the overall experience.

Turning to our CLA outcomes, does Teri demonstrate an ability to contextualize the interlocutor on how language is imbued with social meaning and power relations? Yes. She describes a transformation in her point of view regarding Spanglish that changes from a deficit perspective to one that includes identity. Does she critique well established assumptions and ideologies about language? Yes. As above, she comes to a new consciousness about Spanglish as something that expands linguistic abilities. Is Teri able to assess how such assumptions and ideologies are tied to inequality and injustice? Yes. As with Elena, her newly acquired perspectives on Spanglish present a context in which she recognizes negative views are unjustified. Lastly, does she formulate ways to promote positive social change? Yes. Through the various experiences of the class, she decided
to join a Spanish club on campus to be able to help other speakers in a way that she was helped by a “compañero de Colombia”.

4. Discussion

The incorporation of sociolinguistic activities like those in this project undoubtedly lead to advancement of CLA. After building background knowledge to facilitate informed discussions, the activities related to the exploration of language variation in their communities gave many students a deeper exposure to language variation and issues facing Spanish speakers. Through their discussions and reflections, participants demonstrated a problematization of topics that many had never considered. The interuniversity discussions amplified the impact of these activities by putting them in contact with other perspectives of the same reality they were studying. In general, providing opportunities for students to connect with learners in other contexts, multiplies the classroom assets as their natural curiosity leads their individual learning into places that regular classroom instruction cannot reach. In our case, the overall result was much more relevant than we anticipated. In the case of the students from both locations, even the classroom dynamic was highly impacted by those interactions; they were eager to use the class time to discuss their new findings and to enrich the classroom learning with their insights. Our very different contexts created an umbrella under which they scrutinized and challenged language stigmas and preconceptions that were deeply rooted in their minds. In conversing with their interuniversity peers they refined their knowledge by discussing their empirical and theoretical understandings.

The student descriptions of their learning process also highlight the fact that each individual will have an individual experience with the language. At the same time, there are differences in the way that L2 students and SHL students express these experiences. Mateo and Elena have very different language experiences despite both sharing the characteristic of not having an ancestral connection to Spanish. Both express that they aspire to use Spanish as a way of participating in communities where it is spoken and both express a positionality in which they are outside of these communities. Mateo describes himself as a “nuevo iniciado” who never felt alienated in Spanish classes, implicitly recognizing his positionality as a language learner and not someone who may have closer familial or community ties to the language. While Elena’s experience is aligned with the heritage experience in that she was raised speaking Spanish by a monolingual Spanish speaking babysitter from Colombia, and whose mother is an L2 learner, her positionality represents a conflict site. On one hand, the language is inherently tied to her upbringing and she has a very strong tie to the language as part of her identity, as many SHL students do. On the other, she describes a racialized language experience in which her lived experiences were unrecognized by educators who responded to her as though she were “some white girl who like gets good grades in Spanish class and thinks that she can speak Spanish”. This racialized experience provided a perceptual barrier in which L2 learners are on one side, where Elena locates herself, and in which speakers with heritage connections are on the other. This perceptual barrier is reinforced by depictions of her New York context as one that is segregated. Both Elena and Mateo showed a willingness to expand their perceptions. Mateo became more aware of racism hidden in Mock Spanish and also in abuses toward Spanish speakers through dialectical dominance. Elena expresses a newly acquired recognition and criticism of standard language ideologies and hierarchies as she questions hierarchies that uplift Peninsular Spanish while marginalizing Spanglish.

Looking at the data from Tina and Teri, we also see very different language experiences and important commonalities. Both are in families that are experiencing intergenerational language loss, with Tina having fewer family members to speak Spanish with than Teri. Both also describe situations in which standard language ideologies were deeply rooted. While Teri comes to new critical awareness of Spanglish, Tina expresses critical developments in some ways while emphasizing that she will always hold onto hierarchies that privilege Peninsular Spanish. Neither of the L2 learners expressed a transmission of standard language ideologies through a family, as did Tina and Teri. It appears that for Tina and
Teri, the abandonment of certain ideologies is more of a challenge than for Mateo and Elena. Their reticence raises questions as to whether the cultural competence attributed to SHL learners, and to which many L2 learners aspire, provides a greater challenge for fomenting CLA. Cultural competence for heritage learners comes from their language experience, which also may bring exposure to negative attitudes and detrimental ideologies. At the same time, this challenge may also be seen as a potential for greater gains. Further study beyond the present could shed light upon these differences. However, for the present endeavor, we highlight that there is not just one way of seeing CLA or one monolithic way of developing it. Instead, we must keep in mind the individual differences and commonalities present in our learning communities.

While not every student reached the same end result, every one of them advanced their LA and CLA. Utilizing the Revised Bloom’s taxonomy as a tool to analyze their learning and using a reliable definition (Leeman 2018) to guide our tangible goals, gave us a verifiable way to assess their progress. In dividing and paraphrasing the definition we were able to locate tangible goals of LA and CLA and place them in the taxonomy. These goals are broad and are meant to allow for fluidity in the approaches to teaching and learning LA and CLA. What is more important about them is the level of depth and order skills that are asked of the learners. While other aspects of language learning in SHL and L2 curriculums target lower level skills, LA and CLA challenges the students to develop higher order skills in order to deepen their understanding of the intricacies of the language and cultures they seek to know.

In the courses studied, SHL students, especially, came into the course with some degree of LA, mostly derived from their personal experiences, very few of them showed traces of CLA. On the other hand, the great majority of L2 students came with very low levels of LA, while linguistically they were at a proficient or higher level, many of them had superficial understanding of factual, conceptual knowledge of cultural practices, but had never analyzed or questioned those topics. As stated in the results section, by achieving the course objectives, the students advanced their LA and CLA at different levels. The Revised Taxonomy allowed us to map their progress and to find gaps that need to be addressed in future courses. This opens the door for further research in the refinement of the learning goals of LA and CLA through the use of the Revised Taxonomy with the purpose of developing assessable goals that can be easily incorporated into L2 and SHL programs.

While this study contributes to a more concrete and implementable conceptualization of CLA, it also has some limitations, which point to future research. One limitation is that this is a brief case study. Future directions could present either a more in-depth case study of a small number of students or include data from the entire group in order to arrive at more generalizable results. Another limitation is in the paucity of research conducted on CLA that highlights student expressions of it, rendering the present without a large body of work to draw upon for comparison. We hope that the work presented in this Special Issue, and the expanding body of work on CLA, inspire more work that puts student expressions at the center.

5. Conclusions

We conclude by briefly returning to the guiding research questions. Can Critical Language Awareness (CLA) be increased through sociolinguistically based student projects in learning communities collaborating across distant states? We find ample evidence that the activities both provided avenues for students to engage in research activities that allowed students to arrive at their own conclusions. While the majority of the expressions of student voices documented here focused on the class overall, we also found ample evidence of the contributions of the different activities. The dialectology project (Variación de palabras) provided examples of language variation and revealed attendant ideological concerns, especially in gathering the data. In the perceptual dialectology mapping project students engaged with data designed to reveal unconsciously held beliefs toward language. By studying the census, students were able to assess macro concerns such as language loyalty.
As a reaction to these course activities, our participants here all expressed expanded critical awareness while, in some cases, expressed an adherence to standard language ideologies. We believe that the inclusion of sociolinguistic activities set the tone for group discussions and individual realizations that, at the very least, put dominant ideologies into question.

How can we operationalize CLA in order to identify, analyze and assess it in student expressions? By taking Leeman’s (2018, p. 345) definition, we broke it into segments that were applicable to the data, especially with modifications based upon the language of Bloom’s Taxonomy. This operationalization could easily be used by other educators and we would also hope that others would add their own innovations. Above all, we have found that CLA is not a monolithic construct that towers over a binary model in which students either gain or do not make gains in CLA. Each student will have individual circumstances that come into play, which may hinder or promote gains in CLA. For some, small gains will amount to major transformations whereas for others, we may project inflated hopes upon them because of a constellation of perceptions that we might hold about their lived experiences. Regardless, we know that we can promote student-centered activities that allow them to interact with data and arrive at important critical perspectives.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is available only to scholars approved by the IRB listed above.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

This appendix describes the sociolinguistically oriented activities that the two learning communities engaged in.

Variación de palabras: Using techniques from traditional dialectology, students document lexical items used in their communities. Based on the dialectological work of Garland Bills and Neddy Vigil (Bills and Vigil 2008) in New Mexico and Southern Colorado, students show images to Spanish speakers in order to elicit terms hypothesized to show variation in Spanish-speaking language communities. While the instructor may use their knowledge of the communities accessible to their students, the students also come up with terms they believe will show variation. Showing a turkey to speakers in the southwest, for example, will yield terms such as: guajalote, guijalo, cócono, gallina de la tierra, chompipe, torque and pavo. The brainstorming itself allows for important conversations on language variation and on the prescriptive notion of what the “correct word” may be. The instructor creates a document with the images (typically 8–10) and basic socio-demographic information (gender, place of origin, age, etc.). The students ask 5–10 participants what words they use to describe these objects and collect the demographic information. Students share their findings in small groups in order to explore connections between demographic information and the documentation of variable lexicon, share general thoughts, and discuss the data collection, which tend to provide examples of respondents applying standard language ideologies to their own lexicon.

Perceptual dialectology mapping: Drawing from perceptual dialectology (e.g., Preston 1999, 2002), this activity begins by passing out blank maps of a determined region to students, here the states of New York and New Mexico, and asking them to indicate on the map where people speak differently and to give examples if they can (it is important that the instructions allow for maximal freedom and interpretation). Through this task we gain
access to students’ mental maps, which tell us where people perceive imagined speech communities to be distributed. The determined perception of what speech groups exist and where they belong, combined with the attendant examples, provide a great deal of ideological and attitudinal no data. Students share their maps and comment on them before distributing 5 to 10 maps among participants that they recruit on the basis of having some type of knowledge of the area in question. Collected maps are shared among the learning community in one large file and students identify different dimensions that they want to analyze, such as *spanglish*, identity labels, or influences from other states. Overall collecting and analyzing this data provides students with many documented instances of hierarchical ideologies, providing excellent starting points for discussing topics related to critical language awareness.

**Spanish speakers in the census:** Students use the census to collect important data regarding Spanish speakers and learn how to use it as a critical tool that they may employ in a variety of future endeavors. Using census measures employed in well-known studies (e.g., Jenkins 2009, 2013; Hudson et al. 1995) students determine raw count (# of Spanish speakers), density (Spanish speakers as a percentage of the overall population), and language loyalty (% of Spanish speakers among respondents who claim Hispanic/Latinx). Note, retention (inter-generational transmission) is discussed in the above literature but requires a much more complex maneuver to calculate. Beginning with state-level calculations, students determine how many respondents to the census claim to speak Spanish and what percentage those account for in addition to finding figures on Hispanic population growth overall. In groups, or individually, students focus on one county and calculate the above figures. In order to fill out this snapshot of Spanish, students supplement the sociodemographic information by determining whether there are easily-identifiable resources centered upon Spanish speakers, thereby revealing preliminary levels of ethnolinguistic vitality (cf. Cashman 2009 for Spanish in AZ). This study often reveals surprising information, such as lower language loyalty in counties with high relative numbers of Spanish speakers, especially when juxtaposed to counties with higher levels of loyalty. By combining census data and data for ethnolinguistic vitality, students have the opportunity to engage in critical discussions as to why the state of Spanish maintenance may be higher or lower than expected in a particular place.

**Appendix B**

**Table A1.** Samples of World Language and CLA Objectives on the Revised Bloom Taxonomy Framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Skills</th>
<th>Remember</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Create</th>
<th>Apply</th>
<th>Analyze</th>
<th>Evaluate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factual:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Lexical bundles</td>
<td>Geographical facts</td>
<td>How to use formal and informal address</td>
<td>Hold conversations using memorized phrases</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conceptual:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>When to use a specific tense</td>
<td>Create original samples (oral/writing) focusing on specific rules</td>
<td>Apply concepts learned to complete tasks</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedural:</strong></td>
<td>Cultural bite size facts</td>
<td>Spanish is an umbrella for many different varieties.</td>
<td>Putting into practice the use and recognition of different varieties</td>
<td>Language differences in regions of the US</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language proficiency &amp; Cultural awareness</td>
<td>Those varieties are valid and represent a healthy evolution of the language.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Metacognitive:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>CLA</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

"... Question taken-for-granted assumptions about language and analyze how such assumptions are tied to inequality and injustice, with the ultimate goal of promoting positive social change" (Leeman 2018, p. 345).
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