The Routledge Handbook of Spanish as a Heritage Language

Kim Potowski, Javier Muñoz-Basols

Outcomes of Classroom Spanish Heritage Language Instruction

Publication details
Melissa A. Bowles
Published online on: 08 May 2018

Introduction

Interest in heritage language acquisition has grown exponentially in recent years, and many aspects of the multi-faceted phenomenon have been investigated. The breadth and depth of research on heritage Spanish, the most widely spoken heritage language in the United States, is well represented in the current volume. Heritage language acquisition is a complex, socially embedded process, and as HL speakers increasingly enroll in formal classes in their heritage language, instructors must be equipped to provide high-quality instruction that helps students to achieve their goals, which, depending on the individual, may run the gamut from being able to communicate with extended family members to improving literacy skills and acquiring a second variety of the language for professional purposes. Excellent work is being done on the pedagogical front, where numerous books, chapters, and articles have been devoted to instructional techniques (Beaudrie, Ducar, & Potowski, 2014; Beaudrie & Fairclough, 2012; Fairclough & Beaudrie, 2016). Similarities and differences between HL and L2 learners’ linguistic knowledge, skills, and abilities have also been identified and described (e.g., Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2013; Montrul, 2012), and a handful of experimental studies, to be reviewed in this chapter, have been conducted to assess the learning gains made by Spanish heritage learners as a result of controlled instructional interventions on specific linguistic structures.

But two fundamental questions remain unanswered: (1) Is instruction in a classroom setting beneficial for heritage language acquisition? If so, (2) What features make such instruction most effective? In this chapter I argue that these questions are essential, although they will undoubtedly take far more research to answer. Thorough answers will require a focus on both the processes and products of heritage language acquisition and will need to make use of both descriptive and experimental techniques. In essence, a new subfield of research on instructed heritage language acquisition (IHLA) is called for. I argue that the field of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) should be used as an initial point of departure, since, although they involve different learner populations, at their cores both IHLA and ISLA seek to determine how language instruction can best be structured to maximize learning.

Below, I begin by briefly reviewing what we know based on existing research, drawing tentative conclusions and identifying areas in need of future investigation. Then, in the second
part of the chapter I outline a research agenda for IHLA, based in large part on half a century of ISLA research. Although my focus is heritage Spanish, many of the issues raised and areas of investigation are relevant for IHLA more broadly, as applied to other heritage languages.

**Previous studies of IHLA**

To date, there have been only three empirical studies examining the learning outcomes of instructed Spanish heritage language acquisition: Montrul and Bowles (2010), Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short (2009) and Torres (2013) which are reviewed in detail below. Readers are referred to Montrul and Bowles (2017) for a review of the studies on the classroom acquisition of other heritage languages.

**Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short (2009)**

Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short (2009) tested 127 Spanish HL learners who were randomly assigned to one of three groups – processing instruction (PI), traditional instruction (TI), or a control group, in which learners received no direct instruction but took all tests. The authors also tested 22 L2 learners, who were assigned to either a PI or a TI group, in order to compare the learning outcomes of the two populations. The targeted structure was the Spanish imperfect subjunctive in adjectival clauses with nonexistent or indefinite referents, as bolded in (1) below.

(1) **El año pasado no había políticos que fueran honestos.**

*Last year there were no politicians who were-SUBJ honest.*

When the referent exists or is definite, as in (2) below, the imperfect indicative is used.

(2) **El año pasado había políticos que eran honestos.**

*Last year there were politicians who were-IND honest.*

The PI instructional treatment consisted of an explicit explanation of the rule, a warning against processing strategies that could negatively interfere with noticing the target form, and structured input activities. The TI instructional treatment targeted the same form and had the same number of total activities and instances of the target form as the PI condition. However, instead of instruction about processing strategies and structured input activities, it contained output-focused practice similar to that commonly found in many Spanish textbooks.

Interpretation, production, and grammaticality judgment tests were developed to gauge learning gains as a result of instruction. In the interpretation tests, students heard a clause containing either the past subjunctive or the past indicative and had to select which of two matrix clauses could precede it, as in (3) below.

(3) [Learners hear: “. . . estuviera llorando”]  

“was-SUBJ crying”

a. No había ningún niño que . . .

*There was no child who . . .*
b. Había un niño que . . .

There was a child who . . .

In the production tests, learners wrote an appropriate ending to an adjectival clause, as in (4) below:

(4) Cuando Paula se iba de la casa de sus padres, buscaba un apartamento que . . .

When Paula left her parents’ house, she looked for an apartment that . . .

In the grammaticality judgment tests, learners had to make a binary decision about whether written sentences similar to (1) and (2) were acceptable or not.

Learners completed the three tests the day before the instruction and alternate versions of the same tests as posttests one day after the instruction. Results showed that both the HL and L2 learners showed significant pre-posttest gains on the interpretation and production tests after receiving either type of instruction (as predicted, there were no significant gains for the control group participants, who took only the tests). However, on the grammaticality judgment test, only the L2 learners in the instructional conditions showed significant pre-posttest improvement. In addition, in comparing the HL and L2 groups, the authors found that L2 learners made larger gains from pretest to posttest than their HL learner counterparts. This led Potowski et al. (2009) to conclude:

[heritage speakers’ language development may differ from that of L2 learners, although [the results] also suggest that heritage speakers can benefit from focused grammar instruction. The finding that heritage speakers respond differently than L2 learners to PI and TI instructional treatments draws attention to the need for future research with heritage learners to determine what specialized types of instruction may be most beneficial for heritage learner language development, as well as to understand the cognitive processes that underlie such development.

p. 565

Montrul and Bowles (2010)

Montrul and Bowles (2010) tested 45 Spanish HL learners on their knowledge of Differential Object Marking (DOM) with *gustar*-type verbs in Spanish using written production and acceptability judgment tests both before and immediately after instruction. Specifically, the instruction consisted of an explicit grammatical explanation of the *a-personal* with transitive verbs, indirect objects with ditransitive verbs, and dative experiencers with *gustar* verbs (see (5a-c) below).

(5a) Mi hermana vio a Carmen ayer.

*My sister saw Carmen yesterday.*

(5b) Ángela envió regalos a su novio.

*Angela sent presents to her boyfriend.*

(5c) A Juan le gusta Patricia.

*Juan likes Patricia.*
This was followed by a practice exercise in which immediate, explicit corrective feedback was provided. After reading the grammatical explanation, learners completed a 20-item practice exercise online for each of the three constructions (a-personal, indirect objects, and dative experiencers with gustar-type verbs). In each practice item, a single sentence included a drop-down menu immediately preceding the object, from which the learners chose either a or —. Following each response, participants received immediate, explicit feedback that indicated whether their response was correct and provided an explanation.

Results showed that instructed HL learners made significant pre-posttest gains on the production test with obligatory a-marking on all sentence types, whereas HL learners who did not complete the instruction did not make such gains. However, instructed HL learners’ gains were not equal in all areas or on all sentence types. Most notably, their acceptability ratings were not as affected by the instruction as their production was. On most sentence types, instruction affected acceptability ratings in the expected direction. However, on ungrammatical sentences with animate objects (missing the a-personal), as in (6) below, instructed HL learners’ pre- and post-instruction acceptability ratings were not significantly different from each other. It is unclear what this result means, but it is possible that it is an artifact of the acceptability judgment task itself, which Polinsky (2016) has argued may not be the best measure of HL knowledge.

(6)  
*Pedro conoce el chef.

Pedro knows the chef.

Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that the explicit instruction, which included positive and negative evidence, rule presentation, and feedback, had positive effects on HL learners’ acceptability and production of the targeted structure. However, as with Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short (2009), because the study did not have a delayed posttest, it is not possible to make claims about the durability of the effects of instruction. Similarly, the results of the two studies suggest that HL learners’ acceptability ratings may not be as easily affected by instruction as other areas of knowledge, such as production. Changes in instructed heritage learners’ production are also arguably more important than changes in acceptability judgments.

Torres (2013)

Like Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short (2009), Torres (2013) examined the subjunctive. He tested 34 HL learners and 49 L2 learners who were randomly assigned to a control group, or to ± complex instruction groups. All participants completed oral and written production tests prior to the instruction as a pretest, immediately after the instruction as an immediate posttest, and one to two weeks later as a delayed posttest. The format for the oral and written production tests was the same; they differed only in modality. For each item, there was a contextualizing sentence, followed by an incomplete sentence that the participant needed to complete either orally or in writing, depending on the test, using an adjectival clause either requiring the present subjunctive, as in (7), or the present indicative, as in (8).

(7)  
Contextualizing sentence: No sé si hay en la compañía.

I don’t know if there is one in the company.

Sentence to complete: Necesitas un empleado que . . .

You need an employee who . . .
Contextualizing sentence: Yes, I know there is/are.

Sentence to complete: En el centro de salud, siempre hay unos estudiantes que . . .

In the health center, there are always some students who . . .

Participants in the control group completed the tests but received no instruction, whereas participants in the two complexity groups received computerized task-based instruction during which they played the role of a resident director at a dorm at a Spanish-speaking university. Their job was to give reasons to explain some of the dorm residents’ disconcerting behavior. There were 30 different scenarios, each of which described a disconcerting behavior through images and verbal prompts, presented both aurally and in writing. The scenarios guided participants to produce adjectival clauses describing the reasons for students’ behavior, some requiring indicative and some requiring subjunctive. Participants received feedback on their verb mood. If their verb choice was correct, they saw a message simply saying, “Sí” on the screen. If their verb choice was incorrect, they received feedback in the form of a written recast on the screen (the entire sentence with the correct verb form was shown).

Results indicated that instructed HL and L2 learners showed comparable gains in oral production, but that L2 learners showed larger pre- to delayed posttest gains in written production than HL learners (similarly to the findings of Potowski, Jegerski, and Morgan-Short, 2009). Exit questionnaire responses suggested that HL and L2 learners may have approached the tasks in different ways, perhaps due to the context in which they learned Spanish. Specifically, L2 learners were more focused on language forms and frequently indicated that they had been ‘forming rules’ about when to use the subjunctive or indicative during the instruction, whereas HL learners were more focused on content and meaning-making in the tasks. Their comments also indicated that they were less likely to perceive the recast feedback as corrective. This is similar to what has been shown previously in Gass and Lewis (2007), a lab-based study that compared Italian HL and L2 learners’ responses to corrective feedback. Stimulated recall sessions revealed that HL learners were about half as likely as L2 learners to perceive feedback on morphosyntax correctly, most commonly thinking it had to do with semantics. That is, when HL learners were corrected on grammatical errors they made while they were speaking, they tended to view the corrections not as corrections but rather as comments on the content of their statements.

Since these are the only three studies to date that have systematically compared the effects of instruction on HL learners, and because there were many differences among the studies, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about what instructional techniques are most effective. It does seem overall that instruction affects heritage language development positively. In addition, all of the studies examined the effects of instruction on different points of Spanish morphosyntax. This highlights the need for additional studies on the effects of instruction on other linguistic areas such as vocabulary, semantics, pragmatics, phonetics/phonology (pronunciation), and writing. Two of the three studies lacked delayed posttests, so their findings reveal only the short-term effects of instruction. A lack of delayed measures is common in SLA as well (Norris & Ortega, 2000) due in part to the inherent difficulty in tracking learners over extended periods of time, but, as in SLA, delayed posttests are crucial in order for research to uncover the long-term effects of instruction.

Despite their limitations, the results of these studies suggest that HL learners may have a different orientation to instruction than L2 learners do, and that this may affect their language development as a product of interaction with instructed classroom language tasks. Furthermore, instruction containing input, explicit information, and feedback appears to benefit both L2 and
Toward a systematic program of study into IHLA

In order to move the field forward, what is needed is a research program of systematic study into IHLA. Before discussing a possible research trajectory for IHLA, it is important to establish that there are four main types of classroom language acquisition research that can be conducted – descriptive, ethnographic, correlational, and experimental (Ellis, 2005). Descriptive studies, as their name implies, describe aspects of the classroom environment, such as the nature of teacher or learner language in the classroom or the contents of syllabi for heritage language courses. Ethnographic studies also describe classroom environments but have the added benefit of incorporating reports from participants including teachers and learners. Correlational studies set out to establish relationships between sets of variables, such as age of onset of bilingualism in the majority language and proficiency in the heritage language in adulthood. All three of these kinds of studies can make important contributions to the field of IHLA and can highlight different aspects of the learning opportunities available to HL learners in classrooms, but only the fourth type of research, experimental studies, which manipulate aspects of instructional conditions and compare the learning outcomes of the different conditions on similar groups of learners, can directly assess the effects of instruction on learning outcomes. Ethnographic, longitudinal approaches might be called for to document qualitative changes in students’ language over time.

The research agenda for IHLA should address, first and foremost, whether classroom instruction is beneficial for heritage language learning and, second, if so, how such instruction can be made maximally effective. Each of these two questions is addressed below in turn, using ISLA research as a starting point and addressing the particularities of the questions in the context of instructed Spanish HLA.

Is classroom instruction beneficial for HLA?

In any sort of classroom instruction research, a fundamental question that must be answered is whether learners in a classroom setting make larger and/or faster learning gains than those who are not receiving instruction. Set in the context of IHLA, do learners who attend classes in their HL make gains compared to learners of similar starting ability in the language who are not attending classes in their HL but are merely exposed to the language naturalistically, in their homes, communities, and family and social networks?

In ISLA, prior to the early 1980s, there were many individual quasi-experimental studies investigating this question, largely with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Some studies were cross-sectional in nature, whereas others were longitudinal, following groups of ESL learners over time and comparing those who attended English classes to those who were exposed to English naturalistically, while living their daily lives in English-speaking countries. Long (1983), in his widely cited review paper, systematically detailed the research designs and results from 12 studies that had been conducted up to that point, concluding that instructed L2 learners made greater gains in their language skills than uninstructed L2 learners exposed to the target language naturalistically. Although the differences between instructed and uninstructed learners were not always large in magnitude, they held for both child and adult learners, for learners at a range of proficiency levels (beginning through advanced), and in acquisition-rich and acquisition-poor environments. That is, he found that classroom second
Spanish heritage language instruction promotes second language acquisition. Long (1983) details 16 different kinds of comparisons that can be made to address the efficacy of instruction, and readers are referred to these.

As Long also points out, definitive answers about efficacy of instruction require that true experimental designs be used; that is, one or more experimental (instructed) groups and a control (uninstructed) group, with random assignment of participants to each group. Such studies are ideal but would necessarily be somewhat artificial, since in real-world settings students typically elect to take Spanish (or not); the choice is not random. As in ISLA research, quasi-experimental research, whereby the experimental (instructed) groups are made up of students in their regular, in-tact classrooms, might be more feasible and ecologically valid. Of course, taking students in their in-tact classrooms means that the inherent variations within each class are not controlled for. Since both research designs have pros and cons, and given the lack of research in the field of IHLA, there is a need for both types of designs.

Given the heterogeneity of HL learners, even within the same family, it is essential for researchers to describe their sample thoroughly, using a combination of information obtained from language background and use questionnaires (e.g., amount and type of exposure to the heritage language both in childhood and at the present), and from baseline assessments of language ability. One common measure for language background information is the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) developed by Marian, Blumenfeld, and Kaushanskaya (2007); adaptations in many languages, including both peninsular and Mexican Spanish, are available on the first author’s website (www.bilingualism.northwestern.edu/leapq/). A variety of other language background questionnaires designed specifically for heritage speakers are also available on the website of the National Heritage Language Resource Center (www.nhlrc.ucla.edu/nhlrc/data/questionnaires).

As for the nature of HL learners’ linguistic knowledge, research studies have often used discrete-point written assessments, such as the Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera (DELE) to assess language ability or proficiency (e.g., Montrul & Foote, 2014). However, these likely do not provide an accurate representation of the full range of learners’ language skills, knowledge, and abilities. In order for IHLA research to adequately capture the learning gains that may happen as a result of instruction, it is crucial that the assessments be both oral and written, and that they tap into a variety of types of knowledge and domains of language. One criticism that has been made of ISLA research is that its findings are based largely on written assessments that measure knowledge of morphology and syntax and that learners can use their conscious, explicit language knowledge to complete such tests. This is certainly a problem for ISLA research, but it is perhaps even more problematic for IHLA because previous research has shown that HL learners tend to have much greater implicit knowledge of their HL than explicit knowledge, whereas L2 learners show the opposite pattern, having much more explicit than implicit knowledge (Bowles, 2011; Montrul, 2009). If a goal of IHLA is for HL learners to develop their explicit language knowledge, then certainly it is important to include tests that measure explicit knowledge, such as written grammaticality/acceptability judgment tests or metalinguistic knowledge tests. But if a goal is also to expand on their existing implicit knowledge, it is critical to use assessments that can show such gains if they are the result of instruction, such as oral production or elicited imitation tasks. It is crucial to use assessments that are sensitive enough to capture the gains that we might reasonably expect to see as a result of instruction. Furthermore, if normative use of morphology and syntax in a standard variety of Spanish is a goal of IHLA, then it is valid for assessments to target such structures. However, I would also argue that the scope of investigation should be expanded beyond just morphosyntax to include other language domains, such as vocabulary (see Fairclough, this volume), pragmatics (Pinto, this volume), use of a variety...
of written and spoken registers, and rhetoric. Researchers should expand their definition of language knowledge and should be open to using a variety of kinds of assessments that have been used with HL learners, such as speech rate (Polinsky, 2008), vocabulary knowledge (Fairclough, 2011; Polinsky, 2006), picture naming (Montrul, Davidson, De la Fuente, & Foote, 2014), and standardized oral proficiency interviews (Swender, Martin, Rivera Martinez, & Kagan, 2014).

By virtue of their context of acquisition, HL learners tend to have less ability in writing than in listening, speaking, and reading. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the focus of instruction should be solely on writing, neither does it imply that gains cannot be made in all four skills. An excellent case in point is Swender et al. (2014), which analyzed speech samples from Russian and Spanish heritage speakers’ Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs). Speakers rated as “Advanced” did not satisfy the criteria to be rated as the highest level “Superior” for a variety of reasons, including (1) their inability to speak about abstract topics, support opinions and arguments, and/or make hypotheses, (2) their lack of extended discourse, and (3) their lack of precise, specific vocabulary. Participants who had received college-level instruction in their HL tended to reach higher levels of proficiency on the OPI and have stronger reading and writing skills. This is perhaps not surprising, given the nature of the higher-level OPI tasks, which require examinees to discuss abstract issues and argue viewpoints, both of which are characteristic of higher-level cognition (Hulstijn, 2011). Indeed, Hulstijn (2011) has argued that in order to score at the higher levels of proficiency on many standardized language assessments, language users must have attained higher levels of education, although it is unclear whether such education must be in the language being tested. According to Hulstijn (2011), all native speakers of a language possess basic-level cognition, regardless of educational attainment, literacy, or equality of opportunity. Basic-level cognition subsumes basic, largely implicit language knowledge of such things as prosody, phonotactic constraints, basic syntax, and morphology, and the largely explicit knowledge of form-meaning mappings for high-frequency words in the language. To move from basic to higher-level cognition, which includes low frequency vocabulary, complex or low-frequency syntactic constructions, and complex written discourse, formal education/instruction is necessary. Hulstijn did not write specifically with HLA in mind, but his work suggests that instruction might be particularly useful and perhaps even essential for HL learners to attain skills and knowledge subsumed under higher-level cognition.

Investigation is needed at all levels of proficiency, from HL learners who are overhearers or have limited production ability in the HL, to those who have excellent command of a colloquial variety of the HL and come to the classroom with some HL literacy skills in place. Research comparing learners at the full range of ability levels to their uninstructed counterparts will reveal whether there are greater impacts for certain groups than others or whether, as in ISLA, learning is accelerated at the beginning levels compared to the intermediate and advanced levels, where learning gains are slower.

As an initial step, it is crucial that comparisons between uninstructed controls and instructed groups be conducted with the methodologies and textbooks that are common in the field of heritage Spanish. This is all the more important given the wide range of approaches adopted in different textbooks for this population of learners. Here, descriptive studies would also be of great value, since they would be able to give a clear picture of the nature of classroom instruction contexts, including a description of how much interaction there is in the classroom, whether the classroom is Focus on Form (FonF), focus on forms (FonFS), or focus on meaning (FoM), what type of corrective feedback is provided, both in and out of class, and so forth. Totally new coding schemes need not be developed from scratch for the IHLA setting; rather, existing, established coding schemes such as the Communicative Orientation to Language Teaching (COLT), could be modified and used to describe the classroom environments (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995).
In making comparisons to determine whether instructed HL learners make gains compared to their uninstructed counterparts, one caveat may be in order. Since Spanish is the most widely spoken heritage language in the United States, and since it is the most commonly taught language in US high schools, colleges, and universities it may be difficult to find truly uninstructed Spanish heritage speakers who have never received any sort of classroom instruction. However, this is certainly not a reason not to conduct studies of the sort I propose here; rather it is a challenge to be met. As long as the uninstructed and instructed groups in any given study are comparable in terms of their exposure to and prior instruction in the HL before the study, then a valid comparison can be made. Imagine, for instance, that there are two groups of Spanish HL speakers, both of whom are university students who have had two years of high school Spanish. If one group is enrolled in Spanish HL classes at the university level but the other is not (and is instead receiving just naturalistic exposure), then it would be valid to compare the two groups in a longitudinal study, testing them at the outset of instruction and again after a semester, for instance. Assuming that both groups are getting equal exposure outside of class (which can be assessed through language use questionnaires), any differences between the two groups that emerge over the course of the semester can be attributable to the recent HL instruction.

Once there is a base of empirical research addressing the question of whether HL instruction is beneficial, assuming that the answer is affirmative, the next step will be to address the second big question, which has been extensively researched in ISLA: What aspects of instruction can be manipulated so that it is maximally effective? In the next section I address this issue, again looking back to the field of ISLA for guidance.

If instruction promotes language development, what makes it maximally effective?

Not surprisingly, much ISLA research has focused on what aspects of instruction make it maximally effective for L2 learners. Broadly speaking, the research has addressed three areas: (a) whether type of instruction has a differential impact on learning outcomes, (b) whether individual learner differences have an impact on learning outcomes, and (c) whether individual learner differences interact with type of instruction. I would argue that all of these areas should also be addressed in IHLA. Since these are broad questions, I will focus on a few major ways in which these questions have been addressed in ISLA, which could be used as a point of departure for IHLA.

Effect of type of instruction

One major focus of ISLA research has been to compare the effects of various types of L2 instruction on learning outcomes. A typical distinction that is made is between so-called *explicit* and *implicit* instruction. Norris and Ortega (2000) classified instructional treatments as *explicit* if “rule explanation comprised any part of the instruction” and as *implicit* when “neither rule presentation nor directions to attend to particular forms were part of the treatment” (p. 167). In this and subsequent studies, explicit instruction was found to be significantly more effective than implicit instruction, on both simple and complex structures (Spada & Tomita, 2010). However, these results must be taken with caution because, as the authors themselves note, the tests that were used to measure learning gains favored explicit knowledge rather than use in spontaneous production. Whether the results are an artifact of the test instruments and whether a similar advantage for explicit instruction holds for IHLA are open questions for investigation.
A second major area of investigation related to effectiveness of various types of L2 instruction has to do with corrective feedback. It is well known that corrective feedback is not necessary for L1 acquisition; all that normally developing children need is to be exposed to ample positive evidence (e.g., grammatical input in the language). On the other hand, L2 acquisition requires negative evidence as well as positive evidence— that is, for at least some structures, learners need to be shown what is not correct as well as provided with examples of what is correct. The limited IHLA research suggests that HL learners benefit from instruction that contains both positive and negative evidence, but it is an open question whether the combination is essential in HLA, as it appears to be in SLA.

Extensive research on the effects of oral corrective feedback on learning outcomes in L2 classrooms (Lyster & Saito, 2010) has found positive effects for explicit correction, as well as for less explicit recasts and prompts. In the area of L2 writing, there has been extensive debate about the effects of written error correction on acquisition (cf. Truscott, 1996), with recent studies finding small gains when corrections are on many different language forms and large gains when the corrections are focused on a few target forms (Kao & Wible, 2014). Again, the extent to which HL learners respond similarly to L2 learners with regard to corrective feedback is unknown, although the limited research available (Gass & Lewis, 2007; Kang, 2010) suggests that HL learners may be less likely to perceive oral corrective feedback for its corrective intent and instead perceive it as content feedback. Perhaps, then, HL learners may need more explicit correction (see Torres 2013 cited earlier), but this remains to be tested empirically.

**Effect of individual differences/interaction between individual differences and type of instruction**

Much ISLA research has been conducted without attention to the fact that learners are not homogenous in their learning styles or language learning abilities, but rather differ in terms of numerous cognitive measures. However, Robinson (2002) has strongly argued for a research program that systematically examines the interactions between task demands, language aptitude and the various individual difference components that go into language aptitude, and language learning. Until recently there have been surprisingly few studies that have taken up this challenge in a systematic way. One strand of research spearheaded by Sanz and colleagues known as the Latin Project has been examining the interaction between pedagogical conditions (presence or absence of grammar explanation, amount and timing of grammar explanation) and individual difference variables (i.e., age, aging, cognitive capacity, learning strategies, working memory, and level of bilingualism) on the acquisition of grammatical case in Latin. A complete description of the project’s materials is outside the scope of this chapter, but readers are referred to the first chapter of Sanz (2005) for further information.

Published results to date have shown that there are indeed interesting and sometimes complex interactions between individual difference variables and instructional techniques. For instance, in an investigation between aging and pedagogical conditions, Lenet, Lado, Sanz, Howard, and Howard (2011) showed that age affects how adults respond to grammar feedback. Specifically, adults over the age of 65 learned and retained more when feedback did not include grammar explanations, whereas the opposite pattern of results was found for college-aged learners. Regarding age of acquisition, Stafford, Sanz, and Bowden (2010) discovered that participants who became bilingual after their teenage years learned Latin case declensions faster than earlier bilinguals. Finally, on the interaction between working memory capacity and pedagogical conditions, Sanz, Lin, Lado, Stafford, and Bowden (2016) showed that a traditional pedagogical approach that begins with grammar explanation, moves to practice, and provides feedback with
grammar rules is effective for learners at all memory levels. In contrast, an approach that omits the grammar lesson and directly immerses learners in practice is more effective for learners with higher working memory capacity.

Although much of the Latin Project research has focused on L2 learners, variations in cognitive capacity are not unique to that population. Rather, intensive research on the relationship between individual difference variables and instructional outcomes should be conducted with HL learners as well. In the aforementioned studies, it should be noted that participants were learning an additional language (their third language, Latin). It is therefore an important and yet open question how HL learners’ cognitive capacity differences affect their (re)acquisition of their HL in the classroom, and the ways in which their individual differences interact with pedagogical conditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what do we know from the existing research on IHLA, what do we still need to know, and what should we do to advance knowledge in the field? Just a handful of studies have been conducted to assess the learning gains Spanish heritage learners made as a result of controlled instructional interventions on specific linguistic structures, meaning that the conclusions that can be drawn are few and leave us with perhaps as many questions as answers. We do know that HL learners seem to have a different orientation to instruction than L2 learners, and that this orientation may affect both their language development and how they interact with language tasks. We also know that instruction containing input, explicit information, and feedback appears to benefit both L2 and HL learners, although L2 learners appear to make bigger gains. Whether this is an artifact of the test instruments, which tend to privilege explicit, written knowledge, or whether some aspect of the instruction is actually more effective for L2 learners, remains unknown.

In order to advance knowledge in the field, we need to be able to answer two fundamental questions: (1) Is instruction in a classroom setting beneficial for heritage language acquisition, and if so, (2) What features make such instruction most effective? To begin to answer these questions, it will be important to take a broad approach, one that includes both descriptive and experimental studies of HL classrooms with learners at a range of proficiency levels and ages. The previous research has focused mainly on university HL learners, but future studies should investigate the efficacy of instruction on child and adolescent HL learners as well. Furthermore, there should be studies not just on morphosyntax but also on other language domains. It will also be crucial to define the parameters of what we consider “beneficial for heritage language acquisition,” given the range of goals that HL learners have (see Valdés & Parra, this volume). It may be important to consider not only the effects of instruction on specific linguistic targets but also more globally as well as on learners’ attitudes and on their motivations to continue taking courses in the HL. Undoubtedly, as in SLA research (Hulstijn et al., 2014), both socially and cognitively oriented approaches to classroom research will be needed to give a full picture of the processes and products of IHLA (see also Showstack, this volume, for descriptions of such work).

Experimental studies should compare instructed groups to matched uninstructed groups to assess the extent of and benefits of instruction to determine whether, like in ISLA, instructed HL learners outperform uninstructed (naturalistic) learners. Furthermore, experimental studies should compare beginning and end of course (or course sequence) outcomes to assess in what areas learners make gains and to gauge the extent of those gains. Studies should also compare the effects of different pedagogical methods on HL learners in order to isolate which features of instruction are most effective for this learner population.
As the number of HL learners who receive classroom instruction in their heritage language increases, we as language educators have a responsibility to determine whether instruction is beneficial and, if so, what types of instruction are most effective for this diverse learner population. In this brief chapter I have sketched out a research agenda for IHLA, based in large part on the research trajectory from ISLA, which is sweeping enough to spark empirical research for decades to come. Only with a base of systematic investigation will we be able to definitively answer these central questions about classroom HL acquisition. It is a daunting endeavor, but an important one.

Notes
1 As defined in this line of research, traditional instruction (TI) involves a grammatical explanation on a particular structure, followed by opportunities to practice producing that structure in writing and in speech. It is therefore focused on output, or language production. Processing instruction (PI) is focused not on production but on getting learners to process language input correctly. The components of PI are a grammatical explanation that is informed by learners’ processing strategies and activities that require learners to process the target structure in order to get the correct meaning. Readers are referred to VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) for further information about both types of instruction.
2 The differences between [+complex] and [−complex] instruction are themselves quite complex; interested readers are referred to Torres (2013).
3 Bylund and Díaz (2012) attempted to compare uninstructed and instructed Spanish HL learners, showing that twelfth-grade students in SHL classes outperformed matched peers who had stopped receiving HL instruction a school year earlier (at the end of eleventh grade). However, they did not establish that the two groups had comparable proficiency at the time the control group stopped receiving instruction. Nevertheless, this study does provide some indirect evidence that HL instruction contributes to morphosyntactic development (albeit on very controlled, explicit tests) compared to no instruction.
4 These terms have to do with the amount of attention paid to linguistic form in language classrooms. FoM classrooms focus almost exclusively on meaning, with little emphasis on the linguistic structures used to convey messages. FonF classrooms focus learners’ attention on particular linguistic structures as they are needed in the context of meaningful communication, and FonFS classrooms focus on linguistic structure isolated from meaning. Research in instructed second language acquisition has found FonF classrooms to be most effective for language learning. Readers are referred to chapter 4 of Loewen (2015) for further information.
5 The research team chose to work with the acquisition of Latin because, unlike many modern spoken languages, it is easy to control participants’ exposure to Latin outside the bounds of the experiment and thereby determine beyond any doubt that gains must be the result of the instruction itself.

Further reading

References
Spanish heritage language instruction


