

## Are Heritage Speakers of Spanish Significantly Better at Speaking than at Writing?

### What this research was about and why it is important

It is often assumed that heritage language learners (HLLs) speak better than they write—by themselves and by educators alike. This article draws on data from writing and oral proficiency ratings plus self-evaluations of 35 Spanish HLLs to investigate: (i) whether Spanish HLLs actually tend to receive higher ratings in speaking than in writing; (ii) if this is the case, how large the distance in proficiency is; and (iii) to what extent HLLs are accurate in identifying their better modality. Results do show higher ratings in speaking on average, but to a degree that is smaller than might be expected: Ratings indicate that subjects performed the same functions in both modalities even when one of the two was rated higher than the other. Additionally, fewer than half the subjects were able to accurately evaluate whether or not they are better at speaking or writing. Implications for instruction are also discussed.

### What the researchers did

- They recruited 35 Spanish HLLs enrolled in a course for heritage learners at public universities in New York City.
- They had all subjects complete both the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) in Spanish, receiving official test ratings.
- They also gave the subjects a 37-item biographical questionnaire to find out about their demographic backgrounds, language acquisition and educational experience, language practices, and how the subjects self-rated their language abilities in speaking and in writing, using a Likert scale.
- They compared the subjects' actual ratings in writing to speaking, and their actual ratings to their self-ratings.

### What the researchers found

- The subjects (all Spanish Heritage Learners) had Spanish proficiency in writing ranging from Intermediate High to Advanced Mid, and in speaking from Intermediate Mid to Advanced High.
- On average, they technically were better at speaking than at writing (63%, 22/35); however, unexpectedly, one quarter (26%, 9/35) were balanced across abilities, and four (11%) actually had a higher writing proficiency.
- The average degree of difference between writing and speaking was smaller than might be expected (around one full point on the 10-point ACTFL scale from Novice to Superior).
- Many subjects who were better at writing or speaking were in fact able to perform the same kinds of ACTFL functions in their speaking and writing proficiency levels.
- Less than half (44%) of the subjects were able to accurately evaluate whether they were better at speaking or writing.

### Things to consider

#### *Conclusions and implications for teaching:*

- This paper tentatively concludes (1) that HLLs do indeed tend to be better at speaking than writing, but not by a large amount, and (2) that like existing work on bilinguals in general, this population of HLLs are not highly accurate at evaluating the relationship between their proficiency domains.
- Based on these findings, the authors recommend the following to instructors: (1) Construct activities that use speaking tasks as a scaffold for writing tasks; (2) Use information on writing abilities to build up learners' confidence, and (3) Avoid relying on learners' self-assessment of abilities in lieu of placement or other diagnostic instruments.

#### *Potential limitations and future directions:*

- It is possible that HLLs whose proficiency in one or both modalities falls below Intermediate Mid might present a different profile than the one found in this study.
- The study would reveal even stronger data if it were replicated with more subjects.
- An additional limitation of this study is the nature of the subject pool: The study only investigated Spanish. Heritage learners of other languages might present a different profile in terms of their stronger proficiency, as would heritage learners of a language with a non-Roman alphabet.
- A promising direction for future work is to examine the relationship between oral and writing proficiency in English.

**Materials available at** <https://www.iris-database.org/>

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