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Mantaining biliguism and biliteracy: challenges for heritage speakers of Spanish in U.S. higher education

The rapid demographic changes that have taken place in the U.S. due to the massive arrival of immigrants in the last 50 years have posed many challenges to the educators. The “English only” laws that are gaining support by the public opinion and policy makers along with the status of English as the language of power have had, as one of their consequences, the partial or complete loss of the heritage languages (HL) both linguistically and academically. This problem affects the Hispanic population, the largest minority in the U.S., since students are forced to achieve high academic and linguistic competence in English at the cost of losing their Spanish. This scenario poses tremendous challenges at higher levels of education when those students arrive at the university with both limited HL linguistic competence and literacy, but seek to recuperate their linguistic abilities and gain Spanish academic knowledge. The purpose of my paper is to present the current challenges that both professors and university students of Spanish as a HL are facing, and to discuss how the university plays a role in helping these students maintain and develop their bilingualism and become biliterate.