

## Article

# Current Approaches to Heritage Spanish and the Identity Construction of Spanish Heritage Speakers: Lessons Learnt from Five European Countries

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**Abstract:** An individual's social identity, often overlooked in Europe in the field of Spanish as a second or foreign language (S2L/SFL), has always been the focus of attention in the teaching of heritage Spanish in the USA, especially in programmes designed from critical pedagogy and based on a reconstructive narrative of Latino immigration. There, heritage speakers (HS) strengthen their identity as linguistic experts and contribute to positive social change that counteracts the scholastic subordination of Spanish to English in primary schools. In this research based on verified questionnaires, we investigate in the European context (Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium) how primary–middle school HSs attending extracurricular S2L/SFL classes self-perceive their identity in comparison to S2L/SFL students. The results show that the incidence of the factor “country of origin” is central to identity recognition and highlight the feelings linked to different classroom conditions and dynamics for heritage and S2L/SFL students. To conclude, these results are contrasted with those obtained in the United States.

**Keywords:** heritage language; heritage speakers; identity construction; Spanish; Europe; mixed classes



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## 1. Introduction

Identity is “sameness” according to the Greek philosophical school, which is the opposite of contradiction (Campos-Winter 2018) and leads us to consider the importance of the label of “heritage” carried by these speakers, as it is a distinguishing feature of their identity. In turn, cultural–social identity is presented as a discourse and as “a set of subject positions (Foucault) between which we continually move, challenging the rigid categories with which we try to account for cultural boundaries that are continually breached” (Vergara et al. 2010, p. 9). This means that the social construction of an HS's identity needs to be conceived within the society in which they live and defines them as such, since it is within relationships in society that those identities are built. In our case, this is primarily in the classroom, which is the most common educational microcosm in the life of an adolescent.

The construction of identity is linked to an emotional dimension, and there is no linguistic meaning that is not “sifted” by it (Gironzetti et al. 2020, p. 66). For this reason, in the classroom context, the situation of the learner of Spanish as a heritage language speaker (hereafter, HLS) is different from that of the learner of Spanish as a second or foreign language (S2L/SFL, hereafter SFL as a common container). We understand HLSs as “bilingual individuals who grow up in an asymmetrical bilingual environment where the language spoken in their home or heritage language (HL) is not the dominant language of the society” (Bayram et al. 2016, p. 2).

The aim of this research is to obtain empirical data on how middle school students feel in hybrid language classes, i.e., without ad hoc didactics and in interaction with SF learners.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose is to investigate how elementary and middle school students, who attend Spanish elective classes in the European context, perceive their self-identity. The control group consists of SFL students who attend these classes together with HSs. The areas of interest of the study are twofold and linked to emotional dimensions: (1) the individual identity as a Spanish speaker and (2) the identity of the HS in their scholastic group (teachers and peers).

We interviewed students in Europe (Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium), where hybrid classes are the norm and, as far as we are aware of, there are no formal educational institutions with specific HLS programmes—that is, exclusive for HLSs—besides the after-school language programmes for language preservation such as those run by the *Agrupaciones de Lengua y Cultura Españolas* (ALCE).<sup>2</sup> This situation is to be expected, since in Europe the immigration of Spanish-speaking people does not present similar demographic density features to those of the United States, a country that is at the forefront of studies on the HLS population.

## 2. Institutional HS Management: Exclusive and Mixed Classes

Leeman and Martínez (2007, p. 35) situate the phenomenon of the establishment of specialised courses in HLS in US universities in the 1970s. They analysed the materials published in the last 30 years of the late twentieth century and noted that, from the point of view of the identity of HSs, there was a shift from a discourse that emphasises inclusion to the idea of diversity vindication, which entails in a twofold social justice and marketing resource in the management of university Spanish departments. In the latter sense, there was a “greater acceptance and generalisation” of such courses, “accompanied by a depoliticization and a disassociation of Spanish from the Latin identity” (p. 60). The materials, from that perspective, partially abandon the historical, cultural, and literary aspects and attempt to emphasise the communicative effectiveness offered by the knowledge of standardised Spanish.

Reading this research, like studies that describe the birth of a critical pedagogy—in which the ideologies implicit in textbooks, teaching practices, educational administration, and government policy are taken into account—leaves the European researcher completely disoriented. Apart from the aforementioned ALCE experience and that of generally self-managed centres for immigrants, European schools and universities do not offer specific HLS courses. The published SFL materials for immigrants are scarce and those for HS are practically non-existent. There are didactic units in online repositories and some material verified in ALCE classes and from smaller experiences—such as Spanish-speaking immigrant associations—but no manuals. SFL teachers are, therefore, left with the alternative of adapting materials from textbooks used for native speakers or SFL methods.

Ferre-Pérez et al. (2022) recently conducted a review of the American literature, which led them to characterise HS groups as “heterogeneous,” either in their demographic characterisation (second or third generation, parents with the same geographical origin or mixed marriages that are not always fully native Spanish-speaking) or from a linguistic perspective (with or without a familiar use of Spanish, with greater or lesser ability to manage formal registers, with greater or lesser dialectal variation with respect to the type of Spanish spoken in a community). In fact, there is also the often forgotten “caregiver effect,” since many children in the US have non-English-speaking Latina *tatas* (babysitters) who teach them Spanish from early childhood and are occasionally hired to “transmit” Spanish in the family context. In this hybrid scenario, it would be preferable to have a group of HLS students separate from SFL students, since it is common to find HSs in SFL courses (Ferre-Pérez et al. 2022, p. 184). Given that this is the most usual situation in European courses, they point to the possibility of setting up a mutually beneficial process that involves mediation tasks as a way of bringing into focus “issues of social identity and cultural value [which] are (...) essential for the success of HLS learners and can be very

enriching for the SFL learner. Cultural mediation tasks provide a very interesting meeting point between the two types of learners" (Ferre-Pérez et al. 2022, p. 185).

Research with HS informants in mixed classes has demonstrated that SFL learners positively value the impact of fluent native speakers as examples of diverse dialects and cultures. Edstrom (2007), for advanced courses, talks about a true immersion experience in which there is an opportunity to interact with collaborative native speakers in a relaxed conversational register that contrasts with the standard formal classroom setting. Nevertheless, a small group felt a little intimidated by the language competence of the HSs, to the extent that it decreased their desire to participate in the classroom, and they stated that the teachers' expectations were modified and increased when HSs were present in the classroom. Lacorte and Canabal (2005), however, found in their research that L2 learners were not intimidated by the presence of HS learners in the classroom.

As for HSs, Edstrom (2007) claims that they also spoke of a positive experience with their counterparts, mainly because they felt respected, appreciated, and happy to help them. In addition, they learned more about the L2 learners' ideas and were able to build a pleasant atmosphere. Nevertheless, they believe that this was only possible for higher levels of Spanish, whereas at beginners' levels mixed classes were not recommended. On the other hand, Bowles and Montrul (2014) state that 75% of HS students prefer to take language courses with L2 students at all levels. Sánchez Abchi and Menti (2023) state that, in their study of HSs in Switzerland, the HSs mentioned having greater advantages in speaking and listening activities and difficulties with writing proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge, and specifically valued supplemental readings and participation in oral interaction tasks as being more productive.

Campanaro (2013) compared the opinions of students in mixed Spanish courses in Canada, where HSs find a more inclusive school context, because they are protected by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1985, which defends the policy of the Government of Canada to ensure that every Canadian receives equal treatment by the government by respecting and celebrating diversity. Moreover, the act recognises Canada's multicultural heritage and the protection of it. Her results were positive and in line with those of Edstrom (2007), as HSs and SFL learners reported learning from each other, especially when given the opportunity to work in groups. Although in terms of learning gains there were more benefits for L2 learners than for HS learners, the latter maintained a positive attitude towards the study of their language and culture. In many cases, HSs stated that they lacked confidence due to the low prestige of their Spanish dialect, so they hoped that the course would not only enable them to improve their language skills but also to acquire a standard dialect.

Consideration must also be given to the obstacles encountered by teachers who oversee these mixed courses. Burgo argues that these classes represent "a challenge for many instructors who lack the necessary training to negotiate intercultural and linguistic issues in the classroom" (Burgo 2018, p. 50). In our opinion, given that the demographics of HLLs in Europe are different than those in North America, cohabitation in mixed classes is at the moment the only possible solution in European schools. This leads us to think that, although it is fair to analyse materials according to the criteria used by Leeman and Martínez (2007), it is unlikely that a teacher will be prepared to apply them when choosing a textbook for a class whose students are mainly SFL speakers (see also Buyse et al. 2022). Sánchez Abchi and Menti (2023) conclude that addressing the diversity of these courses and the importance of including differentiated activities could have important benefits for students, teachers, and the dynamics of these heterogeneous classes. For the above reasons, in addition to linguistic training, educators would also benefit from training in critical language awareness.

It has been argued that teachers could reduce feelings of intimidation among SFL learners by encouraging them to establish meaningful relationships with HSs as a mean to maximise the positive impact of this unique situation (Henshaw 2022). Edstrom (2007) has talked about shortening the gap between L2 and HS learners' conversational performance

levels by having them work in small groups, so that the L2 learners' anxiety diminishes and their opportunities to learn directly from HS learners increase. In recent years, this common construction of the learning process has favoured the approach to language mediation<sup>3</sup> and translanguaging activities,<sup>4</sup> a tool promoted as "potentially transformative in the teaching of Spanish as a mother tongue" of HSs (Prada 2019, p. 320).

We understand that since Edstrom (2007), and even before, the mixed classroom has been presented as a context of immersion. However, it is necessary to point out that there is a considerable distance between the classroom context and what is generally considered to be an immersion context, i.e., a natural (geographical) context in which speakers communicate spontaneously in a language with specific varietal characteristics. In the classroom, not only is there no spontaneity—as we usually understand it—but there is usually also no need to communicate in the HL, other than the one that is pedagogically induced. This implies that we should consider a different pragmatic impact. The classroom is a context that allows teachers to switch from the target language to the vehicular language used in society. At some levels and in some educational contexts, the use of the mother tongue may be even greater than that of the foreign language. We agree, therefore, that it does not present the same challenges of an immersion context or, at least, that it is another kind of immersion.

The research approach to HSs has also considered immersion situations. This is due to the fact that educational plans often foresee an exchange or practical experience in a country other than the country of residence (Burgo 2020). In this sense, a very encouraging thematic line is that which promotes "service-learning," i.e., where the student is inserted into a community to work in a communitarian way, prevalently in NGOs (for a complete bibliographic review, see Barbosa 2022). The results show that the HSs affirmed that this was a positive experience, where they learned more, felt comforted by an experience of solidarity, and found greater opportunities for negotiation based on language use (Barbosa 2022, p. 1127).

In these two research lines for HSs, namely, their inclusion in mixed classes and service-learning, the degree of satisfaction with the programmes is usually investigated and features of the emotional dimension may appear, but there is no specific mention of "emotion." In the case of our study, we aimed to link classroom experience to emotions, as we are convinced of the direct influence of affectivity on the learning process, which is effectively consolidated knowledge in the world of education in general and applied linguistics in particular. Regarding the complex process of language maintenance of HSs (Schalley and Eisenchlas 2020), we have not found a consistent amount of empirical data in Europe, nor for the comparison of their situation in different European countries.

Ainciburu and Buttazzi (2020) conducted research to study the influence of affective and identity factors of European HLS students on university performance. The informants were enrolled in humanities courses, especially in philology, in Germany and Italy. The results of questionnaires and grades (exams passed) were triangulated and showed that Italian students suffered forms of discrimination from peers and teachers. This situation had a significant impact on their final grades and on their willingness to continue studying. As a result, we believe that a more extensive study, carried out in secondary education contexts and in a larger number of countries, would help us to better understand the institutional situation of HLSs in Europe. In that sense, research on non-university students—namely, primary and, certainly, secondary education—at an age when socialisation is more important plays a greater role in their development.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

In light of the panorama presented in the previous section, we formulated the following research questions:

- Q1. Are the emotions experienced by HSs when speaking Spanish in class different from those experienced by SFL learners?

- Q2. Which emotions do HSs perceive in their peers and teacher(s) while performing their own tasks in Spanish?
- Q3. Finally, and considering the country in which the classes take place, did the HSs like or dislike taking Spanish at school in mixed courses?

According to the results obtained by other researchers, the working hypotheses were the following:

**H1.** *The experience of mixed courses is positive for all students, independently of their identity group and the European country in which they reside.*

**H2.** *HS students feel well valued by the scholastic group (peers and teachers).*

**H3.** *If the two previous hypotheses are positive, this one by derivation should also be positive. As an attribute variable, being a member of the European countries of Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, or Belgium will be considered.*

### 3.2. Data Collection Tool

The choice of these five countries to carry out this study was based on the accessibility to data collection by the researchers. In the case of emotions and preferences, we considered that the most appropriate initial instrument for the research was a questionnaire, followed by a focused interview in case the students' answers were not exhaustive. In the focused interview, also known as the "critical incident interview," the interviewer sought to find out what the candidate did, thought, and felt in a given situation. For that reason, when an answer was unclear, justifications and narratives were requested. For example, "You said you felt bad in class, can you tell me about a particular episode?" The premise of this type of interview is that the thoughts, feelings, and actions that the candidate had at a particular time in his or her biography would be replayed in the event that such environmental conditions were to reoccur. Some authors consider it one of the methods with the highest predictive value in the field of studying emotions (Lean et al. 2014).

A mixed questionnaire of three questions with closed answers was designed, and we added the possibility of open answers, which was optional in the third case (Appendix C). It was distributed using the JobForm platform and was verified (Taherdoost 2016) by a group of 5 experts (2 native Spanish speakers and 3 non-native speakers). Only question formulations that the experts declared to be clearly formulated for the A2 level were accepted. The teachers entered this questionnaire at the end of a class in the second semester of the 2021–2022 school year and extracted the response data in an Excel file. They indicated which questionnaires were from SFL and HS students but anonymised the participants; therefore, the researchers did not have access to any sensitive data of the informants.

Students received a simplified and translated version of the adjectives of Robert Plutchik's ([1980] 2012) Feeling Wheel. This support (see Appendix A) was modified not only because a translated version was used but also because the central categories containing 6 nouns—*anger, disgust, sadness, happiness, surprise, fear*—and the external 72 adjectives were eliminated. The main argument for this decision is that they could have diverted the student's attention, for which a theoretical model would have had to be presented unnecessarily. A student may associate "anger" with feeling "aggressive," but if they decide to obey the teacher, keep quiet, and be "submissive," they will probably not want to admit that it is because of fear of the teacher. The external wheel "tuned" to 72 emotions implies, from an FL point of view, a level of lexical knowledge that students do not have. It is true that in many cases they are cognates, but the likelihood of choosing these and not those describing the emotion was too high (Ainciburu and Rodríguez 2014). For the same reason, in order not to present preconceived associations, the figure was presented in black and white (see Appendix B).



### 3.3. Participants

Thirty-nine mixed classes from curricular courses at public secondary schools in Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium participated in our research, and we received a total of 844 responses (see Table 1 for the breakdown). The classes were not chosen based on demographic sampling but by deliberate, critical, or judgemental sampling, as the informants were selected based on the purpose of the study. Teachers in different grades who reported being in charge of SFL classes in which HSs were present were contacted (the educational systems do not correspond), but all had adolescents between 12 and 15 years old.

**Table 1.** Entire classes responding to the questionnaires and raw number of informants.

Countries (Cities)	Whole Classes	Questionnaires Returned
Poland (Warsaw /Krakow)	9	167
Germany (Manheim)	8	178
Belgium (Antwerp)	9	181
Italy (Rome/Sienna)	7	160
Portugal (Oporto/Aveiro)	6	158
Total	39	844

In each of the mixed classes there were only one or two HSs. This in itself is a revelation that describes the situation of the European groups. For this reason, since the HSs were in the minority compared to the whole groups surveyed, the post-processing did not include all of them but rather 50 SFL learners—per nationality and randomly selected—and 10 HSs, for a total of 250 SFL informants and 50 HSs. Since the selection was made by the teachers, it was only indicated that it was optimal to have 25 boys and 25 girls. In fact, our aim was to obtain data from 10 HS learners per country, even though we were aware that a further selection had to be made.

All students had at least one year of previous experience attending these types of courses: B1.1 to B2.1 curricular courses—according to the teachers—that use different textbooks and have a weekly schedule of three to four hours. We considered a minimum level of A2 as a precaution with regard to the questions asked. The textbooks used were different but published in the last 5 years in Spain. The teachers claimed to use a communicative approach, but this definition is very vague and could not be verified by classroom observations.

The teachers could present *ad laterem* the emotion wheel in the mother tongue of the students, but the few questionnaires answered in the mother tongue were eliminated *a priori* in the selection of informants and thus answered in Spanish.

The HSs constituting the focus group were chosen according to the following stricter criteria:

- Both parents come from a country where Spanish is the official language.
- HSs have been schooled in the language of the country of residence.

Other criteria, such as the homogeneity of the parents' country of origin, were not considered. Of the 50 informants that were HLSs, 10 were Mexican, 6 Cuban, 2 Nicaraguan, 2 Colombian, 4 Peruvian, 3 Ecuadorian, 3 Argentinian, and 10 from Spain. This might not have been a methodological vulnerability but rather an ecological value of this study. Factors such as the socio-economic or educational level of the parents were also not taken into account. Finally, the HSs had already studied at least one year of Spanish in a mixed class, as had the SFL students.

The 8 teachers who were invited to fill in the questionnaire addressed it as an informative instrument about their previous experience, and its results were used to improve the current 2022–2023 school year. They also received the results of this research at the end of the course, as the time taken to administer the questionnaires did not allow them to intervene in time in the dynamics of the classes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Self-Perceived Emotional Patterns in the HLS and the SFL Groups

The first question of the questionnaire attempts to identify the emotions that the learners experience when speaking Spanish in class. The students were given 36 adjectives to describe how they felt on that occasion. Although using the wheel was not compulsory, none of the students used adjectives other than those 36. The frequency of the chosen adjectives, linked to the two groups studied, is shown in Table 2 (first column shows the units and the second column shows the frequency data in percentages, since the number of each group differed):

**Table 2.** Five most frequent adjectives used to describe the relationship with one's own language competence speaking Spanish in class.

SFL Group (n = 250)		HLS Group (n = 50)	
85	Insecure (34%)	16	Proud (32%)
65	Anxious (26%)	10	Powerful (20%)
48	Accepted (19.3%)	9	Optimist (18%)
25	Amazed (10%)	6	Lonely (12%)
20	Disappointed (8%)	4	Distant (9%)

As the results in the table show, the adjectives chosen seemed to conform to a stable group in all cases. The five most frequent ones were used by 97.3% of the SFL learners and by 91% of the HLS ones. The results show clear differences between the two groups: it is striking that the top five emotions were not shared by both groups. Moreover, in the SFL group, there was only one rather positive emotion selected and ranked in third place (*accepted*), in contrast to the three chosen by the HLS group and positioned in the first three places (*proud*, *powerful*, *optimist*).

For the sake of completeness, we compared the emotional responses (nominal data) with the language level declared by the teachers of each grade (A2 and B1) using a Spearman test, which allowed us to consider the level as an ordinal quantitative variable. The results show that there were no significant differences in emotions associated with language level.

### 4.2. How Students Judge Their Own Language Proficiency as Perceived by Students of the Other Group

Following the list of adjectives used in the previous section, we proceeded to answer the second question, i.e., which emotion do HSs perceive in their peers and teacher(s) when they perform tasks in Spanish?

As shown in Table 3, the five most frequent adjectives covered 94% of the choices of the SFL group and 98% of those of the HSs. In the distribution, the consistency of students' responses was striking with respect to the emotion *accepted*, constituting 46% of the SFL students and 54% of the HSs.

**Table 3.** Five most frequent adjectives to describe the perception of class judgement.

SFL Group (n = 250)		HLS Group (n = 50)	
115	Accepted (46%)	27	Accepted (54%)
55	Proud (22%)	7	Proud (13%)
40	Interested (16%)	6	Disappointed (12%)
15	Optimist (6%)	5	Joyful (10%)
10	Joyful (4%)	4	Disapproved (9%)

The question addressed both the teacher's and the classmates' emotions, as it seemed appropriate in the context of the classroom dynamics. In future research, it might be interesting to separate them, for example, to see whether the feeling of *disapproval* comes more from the teacher than from the peer group. Given that the eight teachers selected

included six native Spanish speakers (three Spaniards, one Chilean, one Argentinean, and one Mexican) and two had nationality of the country of residence (Italy and Germany), the heterogeneity of the sample discourages a correlation study that considers the variable “perceived feeling in relation to the consideration of the teacher.”

#### 4.3. The Mixed-Class Experience

The dichotomous responses to the third question, i.e., whether they like studying Spanish at school in mixed classes, showed a very high positive value of preference in the SFL group (91%) and in the HS group (83%).

In order to provide a more adequate comparative overview by country, the adjectives outlined in the previous two subsections were associated with the country of residence and the corresponding category of emotion (Table 4). In the attribution to the six major categories, the above adjectives were classified and assigned as follows: *accepted*, *optimistic*, *proud*, and *powerful* were labelled as “happiness”; *anxious* and *lonely* as “sadness”; *amazed* and *joyful* as “surprise”; *disappointed* and *disapproved* as “dissatisfaction”; *distant* as “anger”; and *insecure* as “fear.” All six categories were represented in the selection.

**Table 4.** Average value of adjectives by emotion and country in the SFL and HLS groups.

		Anger	Dissatisfaction	Sadness	Happiness	Surprise	Fear
Germany	SFL	0	4	13	49	14	20
	HLS	0	1 (5%)	0	18 (90%)	1 (5%)	0
Belgium	SFL	0	3	14	50	15	18
	HLS	0	0	0	16 (80%)	3 (15%)	1 (5%)
Italy	SFL	0	6	18	51	17	14
	HLS	3 (15%)	4 (20%)	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	3 (15%)	0
Poland	SFL	0	2	12	48	14	22
	HLS	0	0	2 (10%)	15 (75%)	3 (15%)	0
Portugal	SFL	0	6	19	44	18	13
	HLS	1 (5%)	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	10 (50%)	2 (10%)	0

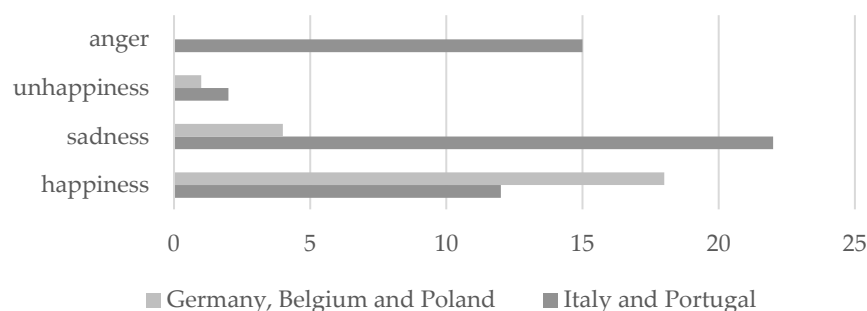
Since the group numbers were different, the results are provided as units and percentages.

The coincidence of the cases by category was not absolute with respect to the previous tables due to the fact that the five most used adjectives did not describe the totality of the chosen ones but only the five most frequent. The table allows us to observe that there were two emotions with values close to zero in at least one of the groups:

- “Anger” (adjectives: *threatened*, *hateful*, *unhinged*, *aggressive*, *frustrated*, *distant*), non-existent in the SFL group.
- “Fear” (*scared*, *insecure*, *submissive*, *rejected*, *humiliated*, *hurt*), with only one case of “insecure” in the Belgian HLS group.

When we compared the five groups of HSs (see Figure 1), the distribution showed values that suggest differential features for the Portuguese and Italian groups, with clearly negative emotions (*sadness* and *anger*) showing high values. The HS groups of the other countries seemed to be closer to the choices of the SFL learners. If we make a comparison by adding up the results of the two groups shown in Table 4, the results are even clearer.





**Figure 1.** Comparison of emotions of the HSs by country.

The data obtained from the open-ended responses sustains the idea of differentiated behaviour in Germany, Belgium, and Poland (examples 1 and 2) compared to Italy and Portugal (examples 3 to 5):

- (1) *Me encanta ir a clases de español porque todos me quieren en el grupo para trabajar menos. Yo aprendo muchas cosas porque hablar y leer se me da bien, pero escribir, no. Tengo muchas faltas de ortografía y mis compañeros me las corrigen.*
- (2) *La profesora del año pasado me puso en el grupo de los compañeros que iban a desaprobado y me dio trabajo. A final del año me dijo que lo había hecho muy bien porque de 7, uno solo desaprobó. El tipo no estudiaba nada.*
- (3) *A mí la prof me dijo directamente que yo quería hacerme la sabionda, aunque no abría la boca en clases. Le soplabo a mis compañeros, pero eso es normal y lo hacen todos en matemáticas o geografía. En el horario de atención a mi padre le dijo que era “una chinche” y hablándole todo el tiempo en portugués. Mi padre no había escuchado nunca lo de la chinche, pero supuso que no me quería en clases. Estuve muda el resto del año y no quería seguir, pero este año tengo otra prof*
- (4) *El profesor del año pasado era italiano y ¡hasta decía “resolvido”! A mí me tenía entre ceja y ceja. El primer día me dijo que él era el “experto” pero que yo también, pero a la segunda clase ya me dijo que lo que yo hablaba no era español y que podía hacer francés.*
- (5) *El tipo se creía muy pijo y se hacía el amigo, pero después se daba garra con que yo no sabía el “sabéis”, “queréis” y así. Tenía huevo el trompa.*

A curious fact in the case of the open-ended responses of these 50 HS students is that they adopted a very colloquial tone and exhibited strong dialectical marks. The above quoted fragments were seen as prototypical, for reasons of conciseness, but there were students who went on for more than a page, reporting very severe instances of discrimination, which had already been confirmed in past research ([Ainciburu and Buttazzi 2020](#)). Therefore, it is possible that listening and supportive opportunities should be provided more frequently in institutional settings.

## 5. Discussion

Despite the heterogeneity of the data with respect to certain parameters (level of Spanish: B1 or higher; previous experience in mixed classes: 1 year or more; parents' country of origin), the groups presented significant differences. In the following, we discuss the results in more detail, starting from the three research questions and their respective hypotheses and in light of previous research.

**Q1.** *Are the emotions experienced by HSs when speaking Spanish in class different from those experienced by SFL learners?*

**H1.** *The experience of mixed courses is positive for all students, independently of their identity group and the European country in which they reside.*

Contrary to the hypothesis we formulated, the mixed-course experience was not positive for all students, regardless of their identity group and the European country in

which they resided. If we compare the SFL and HLS groups in terms of the lists with the five most frequent adjectives—in both cases used by more than 90% of the students—there was a clear tendency towards adjectives at the negative pole in the SFL group, whereas the ones used by the HLS learners shifted towards the positive pole. These tendencies only partially confirm the results obtained by Edstrom (2007), who generally referred to positive emotional tendencies for both groups (as did Campanaro (2013), later). He also observed that a small group of SFL students felt somewhat intimidated—a less positive tendency at beginner levels—and therefore suggested that mixed classes are not recommended at these levels. The difference between previous research and our study may be due to the broader spectrum of levels, countries, and nationalities we included, as well as the neighbourhoods among the levels considered. Statistical comparison between emotions and language course levels, judged by teachers as A2 and B1 (specific to SFL and non-HLS learners), shows that there were no significant differences.

The case of feeling *amazed* was more difficult to understand. The teachers who distributed the questionnaires believe that the responses given have to do with the method used in class. Furthermore, the emotion *accepted* for self-assessment felt strange for a native or heritage speaker: It seemed to be a reflex emotion, but the fact is that students chose it. To a certain extent, it could be an emotion closer to what we usually call “conformity.”

This result could be the consequence of probing from a standard set of emotions, which was not chosen as a specific description spectrum for educational experiences. The analysed results reveal that students should focus on a small number of emotions. For example: *intimate* or *effusive* did not seem particularly suitable to portray how a learner feels when participating in a Spanish class, whereas *insecure* and *anxious* were described as frequent emotions in the classroom. Given that a specific gradation of emotions has not been applied in any research before but rather in terms of positive or negative poles, we believe that, in light of the results, including both relevant and non-relevant adjectives could be considered a study limitation but also an added value in this research regarding future studies in the field.

**Q2.** Which emotions do HSs perceive in their peers and teacher(s) while performing their own tasks in Spanish?

**H2.** HS students feel well valued by the scholastic group (peers and teachers).

In line with the formulated hypothesis, the overall experience of mixed courses was significantly positive, regardless of the students’ identity group and the European country in which they resided: Here again, the lists of the five most frequent adjectives were used in both cases by more than 90% of the students. Nonetheless, there was a clear tendency towards adjectives at the positive pole in both groups, who considered themselves to be *accepted* (most frequent adjective in both cases) and *proud* (second most frequent adjective in both cases). A third positive adjective was also among the five most frequent in both cases, namely, *joyful* (5th in SFL, with 4%; 4th in HLS, with 10%). These results confirm the general trends described in previous research by Lacorte and Canabal (2005), Edstrom (2007), and Campanaro (2013).

However, it is also important to mention that the five most frequent adjectives were all positive in the SFL case, whereas the HLS group also considered itself *disappointed* (12%) and *disapproved* (9%), which applied to all members of the HS groups from Italy and Portugal and to one case from Germany. The latter result disagrees with most of the data obtained by other authors, although we must recall Campanaro’s (2013) findings. In her study, she stated that in many cases, HSs lacked confidence due to the low prestige of their Spanish dialect, and they hoped that the course would not only enable them to improve their language skills but also to acquire a standard dialect. A more explanatory hypothesis could be inferred from the open-ended answers to the third question, discussed below.

**Q3.** Finally, and considering the country in which the classes take place, did the HSs like or dislike taking Spanish at school in mixed courses?

**H3.** If the two previous hypotheses are positive, this one by derivation should also be positive. As an attribute variable, being a member of the European countries of Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, or Belgium will be considered.

As in Q2, the hypothesis with respect to Q3 was confirmed in general terms, although with overall lower values in the case of the HLS group (more than 80%, in contrast to more than 90% in the SFL learners): Both groups seem to have liked the mixed classes, even though there were differences by country, which are detailed as follows.

If we compare the five SFL groups, the values were homogeneous and there were no differences in behaviour by nationality that would lead us to appeal to statistical tests; probably only the emotion *dissatisfaction* (with a minimum frequency of 2 and a maximum of 6) could have shown some kind of significant distance. We believe that, in the context of 100 responses per group, the effect was minimal and could be explained by the nature of the adjectives (*guilty, avoidant, terrible, disappointed, disapproved, critical*).

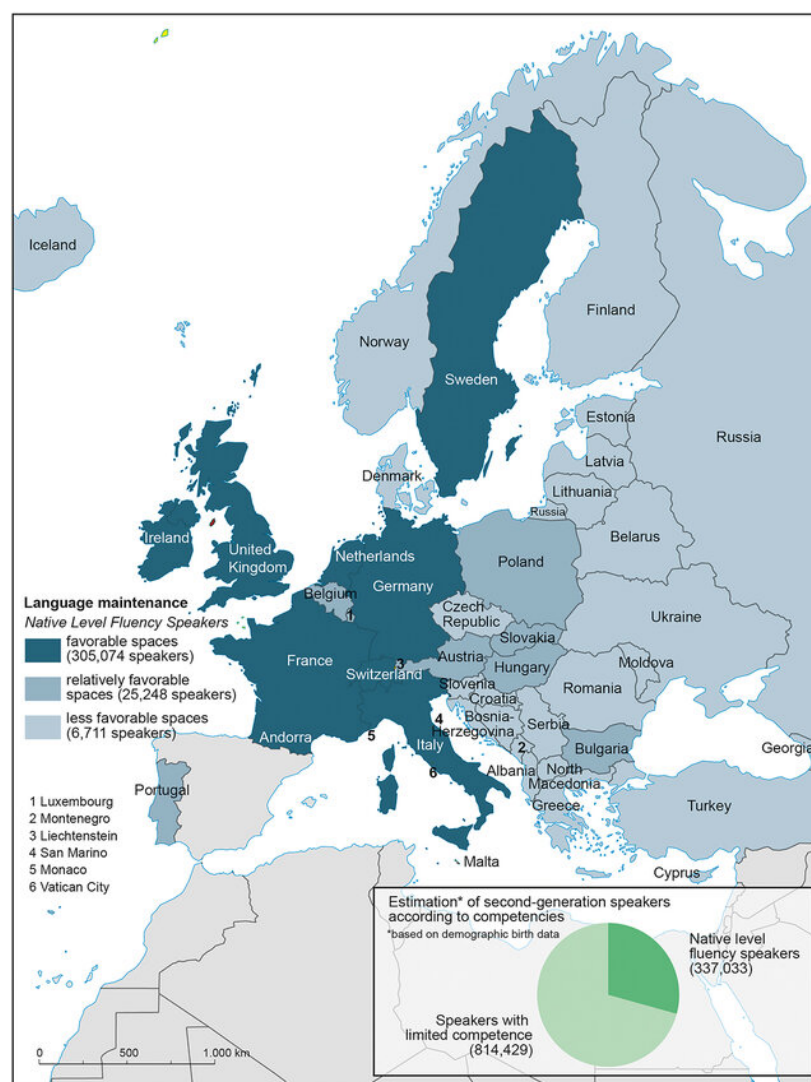
Ideally, we would take into account demographic and immigration information to better contextualise the HS communities in each country. As stated by Ainciburu and Buyse (2023), recent studies such as that by Loureda Lamas et al. (2021) and Loureda Lamas et al. (2023), as part of the excellent work of the group “Spanish in Europe,” directed by Francisco Moreno at the Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies (Heidelberg University) and the University of Zurich, with whom we have worked on other research, resulted in two demolinguistic studies, in Germany and Switzerland. In the German papers, the authors speculate on the mixed marriages of about 60% of Spanish-speaking immigrant marriages. They do not venture to say in how many there is transmission of the language to the second generation.

It is possible that comparing figures from countries with different legislation may not be accurate. For example, Italy grants dual citizenship to many Spanish-speaking American countries. When their citizens emigrate, they do not do so with the passport of the country of origin but with a European passport. When they marry, they also become Europeans. The number of mixed marriages is only speculative in these cases. We believe that extending this type of data to Italy, a country where Spanish-speaking emigration is hidden under the dual passport, is risky. We understand that this is a limitation, but we would rather opt for an ecological approach.

The comparison between the five HS groups indicates that the distribution presented values that suggest differential features for the Portuguese and Italian groups, where negative emotions (such as *disgust* and *anger*) clearly showed high frequencies and positive emotions such as *happiness* showed lower ones. The HS groups of the other countries seemed to be closer to the choices of SFL learners. On the one hand, it is striking that these are two of Spain’s neighbouring countries, with a majority language in the social and educational context of the same (Romance) language group: this smaller geographical and linguistic “distance” might also reduce the degree of pride in speaking another language. On the other hand, the hypothesis about the constitution of two geographical groups with different integrations of HSs in mixed classes is reinforced by their answers to the only open question in the questionnaire—“Give us an example,” in question 3. The students in the group that perceived that they generated positive emotions (examples 1 and 2) emphasised that everyone wants to work with them or that they have mentored their classmates and achieved good results, whereas those in the “negative” group suggested situations of strong discrimination, such as those highlighted by Ainciburu and Buttazzi (2020).

From a sociolinguistic point of view, some authors argue that the degree of preservation of Spanish by direct descendants of immigrants can be indirectly deduced by observing the geographical and social spaces where they live and socialise (Loureda Lamas et al. 2023). Using this criterion, and on the basis of a common origin of immigrant populations, added

to the size and density of the Spanish-speaking population, the existence of linguistic and social environments more or less favourable to the preservation of the language can be revealed. In the absence of other sociolinguistic data (as pointed out by [Extra \(2017\)](#) and [Adler \(2020\)](#)), one way to approach a classification of these speakers is to determine favourable and unfavourable environments based on the combination of two criteria: (1) the use of Spanish as a language of communication in the family and its environment, and (2) the existence of educational support systems (above all, the provision of language courses in secondary school). The final picture is as follows (Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** Second-generation Spanish-speakers in Europe (excluding Spain) ([Loureda Lamas et al. 2023](#), p. 16).

The results of our research do not seem to correlate with these data. There were signs of discrimination in countries included in a “favourable” area such as Italy and none in “less favourable” countries such as Greece.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to obtain empirical data about how HLS learners feel in hybrid language classes, i.e., without ad hoc didactics and in interaction with SFL learners. The question arose as to whether there are differences between the two types of learners, since it is assumed that the social construction of identity—which by default is built within

the society in which they live—is different in the case of an HS, whose label of “heritage speaker” implies that language is already a distinguishing characteristic of their identity.

As identity construction is linked to the emotional dimension, we investigated by means of verified questionnaires how primary–middle school HS students in extracurricular Spanish classes in the European context (Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium) self-perceive their identity as speakers compared to a control group of SFL learners who attend these classes with them. From 39 whole mixed classes in public institutions in the five countries mentioned above—chosen by purposive, critical, or judgmental sampling, and from different grades—we received 844 responses from students aged 12–15. Of these informants, we randomly selected (a) 50 SFL learners per nationality involved and (b) 10 HSs (additional criteria were that both parents came from a country where Spanish is an official language and that the HSs themselves had been schooled in the language of the country of residence) for a total of 250 SFL informants and 50 HS pupils. At the same time, we contacted the teachers responsible for the SFL classes in which there were HSs: eight in total.

The mixed questionnaire was composed of three questions with closed answers in addition to the possibility of more open answers, to which the participants answered based on a simplified version of the adjectives that translate Robert Plutchik’s ([1980] 2012) wheel of emotions. The three areas of interest (individual identity, identity of the group of origin in the country where they live, and the educational institutional) were linked to emotional dimensions.

The results show that the incidence of the factor “country of origin” was central in the awareness of the phenomenon of identity recognition. In some institutions, the lack of existence of the “expert student” figure reinforced feelings linked to linguistic marginalisation. As a result, the student felt like they were of lesser value or was even told more directly that he/she was disruptive in class, which confirms the existence of a negative emotional facet linked to their social and institutional integration. These results contrast with those obtained in the United States (Brugger 2021; Serafini 2021).

Although it was not included in the research questions, the characterisation of the HLS institutional learning landscape in European countries in mixed classes with a very low presence of HSs compared to SFLs (no more than two per class) is a demolinguistic finding. We are fully aware that we are talking about a limited number of courses in public schools, but we consider that this is a situation that requires didactic attention beyond the borders of any particular country (Buyse et al. 2023). On one hand, this observation implies, in terms of identity, that we cannot directly associate ourselves with the innovations of American didactics (Leeman et al. 2011). In this type of pedagogy, the reconstruction of immigrant history or the awareness of a hierarchical system of linguistic prestige challenges the reasons for marginalisation and ethnic discrimination in that society. The aim of such actions is to awaken patronymic pride and to boost motivation to learn more of the language and better. On the other, a conversion of the subject matter triggers a different condition of small groups and those without a majority background, and secondly, an adaptation of the discourse of minority languages to a discourse of multilingualism that the European Community seems to have decisively adopted at the institutional level.

The results of the questionnaires revealed, at the European level, two different emotional patterns for the visualisation of one’s own language competence in the scholastic context: For SFL learners, the predominant emotions in class were insecurity and anxiety, whereas HLS learners were proud and felt powerful with their identity and language competence. The latter was very clear in the examples of open-ended responses: Students often pointed out their teachers’ grammatical mistakes, and there were not-so-subtle testimonies of a feeling of superiority: *Last year’s teacher was Italian and even said “resolvido”!* (4). This question requires further research. It would be necessary to obtain empirical data on which position, either “expert” or “tutor,” is more comfortable for HSs: Is it better to point out and leverage their diversity, or does this put them in a critical position in the group?



At the same time, the existence of two possible dynamics has been revealed: one related to the integration and work of the HSs as linguistic “experts” and informal guides in the working groups, and another that concerns the student being isolated by the others (according to the open answers by the teachers). The fact that students blamed the teacher for unproductive dynamics needs further study. There are cases—not evidenced in our study but that tend to be a common practice in institutions—where HSs are not included in SFL classes: Is this disciplinary correctness or does it imply a priori discrimination? We understand that having to assess them within a system designed for SFL students is not ideal/suitable, but it falls into the paradox of excluding the person—and their identity nature—from the only institutional possibility of linguistic improvement.

The impact of forms of linguistic discrimination and its incidence on emotions increases in some countries—coincidentally, those with close language and cultural proximity. The exact nature of this problem, which affects the dynamics of the classroom, needs to be studied and addressed. For the time being, it seems vital to implement so-called “inclusive” teaching materials and classroom dynamics that allow these students to be integrated as experts in class while preserving the emotional dimension and their identity, both key aspects in their educational development.

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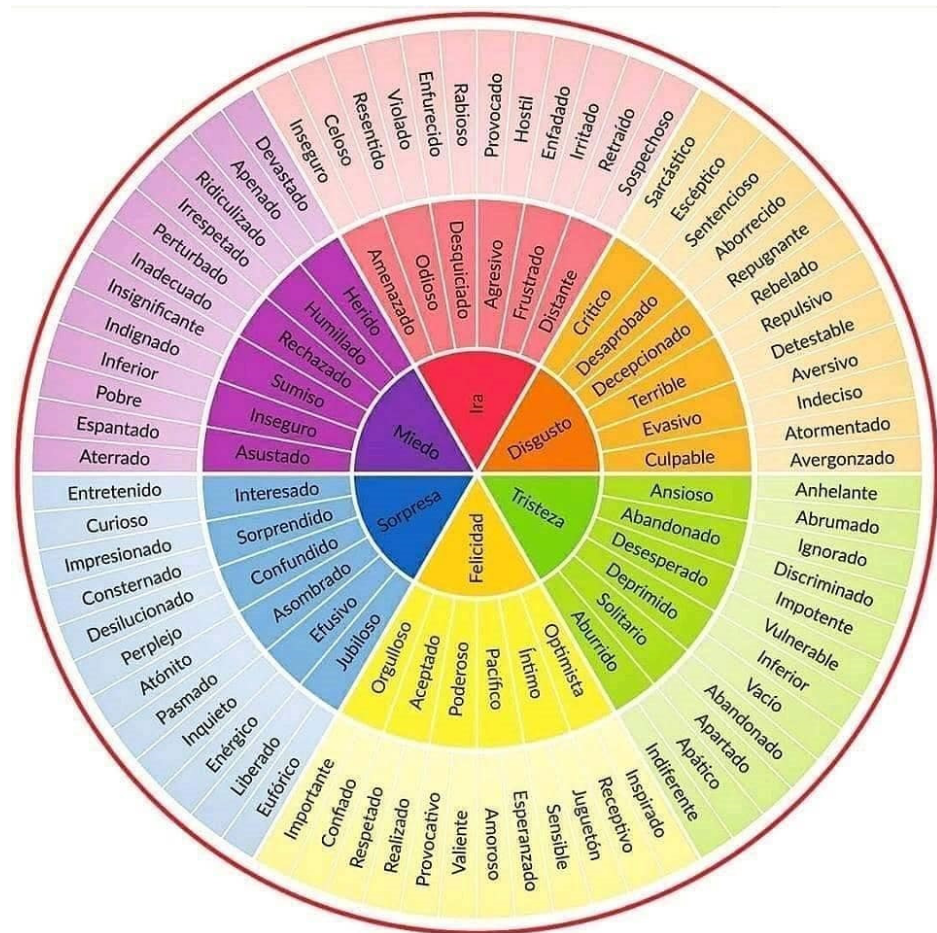
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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions. Depending on the nature of the requested data, some of them are available on request from the corresponding author.

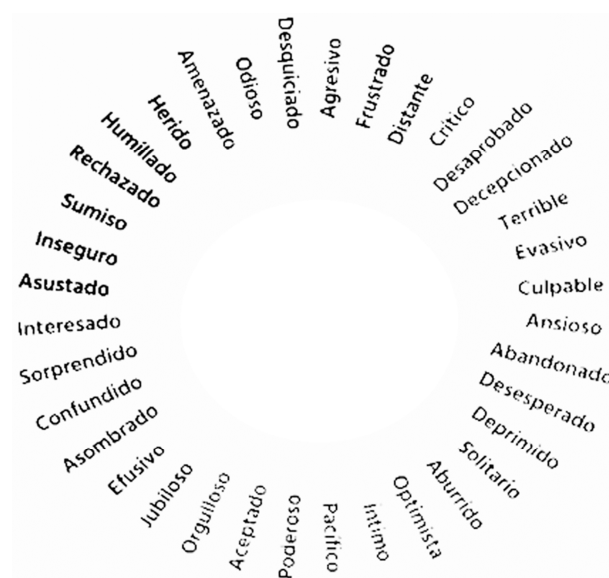
**Conflicts of Interest:** This article, included in the activities of the National Research Project EMILIA2 (PID2022-138973OB-C22 La emoción en el aprendizaje del español como lengua adicional y en la comunicación bilingüe en contextos de migración, granted by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain), respects the criteria of honesty, responsibility, rigour and avoidance of conflicts of interest characteristic of the CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE IN RESEARCH of the Nebrija University, holder of this project. The research is conducted in the classroom and therefore does not include experimentation or the use of any type of technology that could harm the student. The participants are volunteers, the processing of their personal data is aggregated and anonymous, which avoids breaching current regulations (see <https://www.nebrija.com/investigacion-universidad/pdf/codigo-buenas-practicas-CEI.pdf>, accessed on 1 June 2023). Only the first author collected the data while working for the University of Siena (Italy), so the permission has been processed in her name under the internal title “Speakers of Spanish Heritage in Europe”.

## Appendix A. Original Version of the Wheel of Emotions



**Figure A1.** Wheel of emotions (Spanish version, [Jaramillo 2021](#), p. 42).

## Appendix B. Adjectives the Students Can Consult When Answering Questions 1 and 2



**Figure A2.** Modified version of the wheel of emotions as lexical support.

### Appendix C. Questionnaire

1. How did you feel in past courses when you spoke Spanish in the classroom?
2. How did you feel thinking about your classmates' and teacher's opinions when they were listening to you speaking in Spanish last year?
3. Did you or did you not enjoy attending a Spanish mixed course together with other students that speak Spanish on a daily basis? Can you provide an example?

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This research is a collaboration of researchers from Nebrija University and KU Leuven (Belgium, Flanders) within the framework of two R&D research projects (see "Funding").
- <sup>2</sup> Known as ALCE schools, they are part of a program of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training of Spain with complementary classes of Spanish language and culture for descendants of Spaniards residing abroad.
- <sup>3</sup> Language mediation in class means that "the teacher will play not only the role of an educator but also a linguistic mediator among L1 and L2/L3 cultures (...). The idea would be to work on highlighting the similarities, to ensure that the learner feels closer to this new culture and is more aware of their own one" (Santos-Sopena and Antolín Pichel 2022, p. 101).
- <sup>4</sup> Translanguaging education is understood as "intentional instructional strategies that integrate two or more languages and aim at the development of the multilingual repertoire as well as metalinguistic and language awareness" (Cenoz and Gorter 2015, p. 300).

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