



Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura

ISSN: 0123-3432

Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia

Pentón Herrera, Luis Javier  
Spanish Language Education in the United States: Beginning, Present, and Future  
Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura, vol. 23, no. 2, 2018, May-August, pp. 319-329  
Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v23n02a08>

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# SPANISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: BEGINNING, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

ENSEÑANZA DEL ESPAÑOL EN ESTADOS UNIDOS: ORIGEN, PRESENTE Y FUTURO

ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ESPAGNOL AUX ÉTATS-UNIS: ORIGINES, ACTUALITÉ, AVENIR

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## ABSTRACT

Language instruction and learning in United States educational programs date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Rexine, 1977). Among the most common languages taught at schools and universities were Latin, Greek, German, and French, while Spanish was not formally taught at an American institution until 1749. Since then, the works of important scholars such as Mariano Cubí y Soler have provided the foundation for the success of the Spanish language in the United States. Today, the Spanish language is thriving in the U.S. and is considered the foreign language most commonly taught. Furthermore, by the year 2050 the United States is expected to have more Spanish speakers than any other country in the world. This literature review offers a historical analysis of Spanish language instruction in the United States from its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present. In addition, it offers information about the trends, methodologies, and approaches used to teach Spanish throughout the years and offers insight into possibilities for future research.

**Keywords:** Spanish instruction, Spanish language education, Castilian, Spanish language learners

## RESUMEN

La enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en los programas educativos en Estados Unidos data del siglo XVII (Rexine, 1977). Entre los idiomas más comunes enseñados en colegios y universidades estaban el latín, el griego, el alemán y el francés, mientras que no fue sino hasta 1749 que comenzó a enseñarse formalmente el español en una institución estadounidense. Desde entonces, las obras de académicos importantes, como Mariano Cubí y Soler, han sentado las bases para el éxito del idioma español en Estados Unidos. En la actualidad, el idioma español aumenta en Estados Unidos y se lo considera el idioma más enseñado. Más aún, se espera que para el año 2050 Estados Unidos tenga más hablantes de español que ningún otro país del mundo. Esta revisión teórica ofrece un análisis histórico de la enseñanza de la lengua española en Estados Unidos, desde sus comienzos en el siglo XVIII hasta el día de hoy. Además, ofrece información sobre las tendencias, metodologías y estrategias usadas para la enseñanza del español a lo largo de los años y ofrece perspectivas sobre sus posibilidades de investigación futura.

**Palabras claves:** enseñanza del español, educación en idioma español, castellano, aprendices de español

319

Received: 2017-02-16 / Accepted: 2017-10-12  
DOI: 10.17533/udea.ikala.v23n02a8

*Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*

MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA, VOL. 23, ISSUE 2 (MAY-AUGUST, 2018), pp. 319-329, ISSN 0123-3432  
www.udea.edu.co/ikala

## RÉSUMÉ

L'enseignement et l'apprentissage de langues étrangères dans les programmes éducatifs aux États-Unis date du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle (Rexine, 1977). Parmi les langues les plus communes qui étaient apprises dans les écoles et universités, on retrouvait le latin, le grec, l'allemand et le français, mais ce n'est qu'en 1749 que l'espagnol a commencé à être appris dans des institutions aux États-Unis. Dès lors, les ouvrages d'érudits remarquables, comme Mariano Cubí et Soler, ont mis en place les conditions pour le succès de la langue espagnole aux États-Unis. Actuellement, la langue espagnole y est en augmentation et elle est considérée comme la langue la plus enseignée. Plus encore, on espère que, en l'an 2050, les États-Unis compteront plus des locuteurs de l'espagnol qu'aucun autre pays du monde. Cet article offre une analyse théorique de l'enseignement de la langue espagnole aux États-Unis, depuis son commencement au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'aujourd'hui.

En plus, il offre de l'information sur les tendances, les méthodes et les stratégies les plus utilisées pour enseigner l'espagnol au fil des ans et offre des perspectives sur ses axes de recherche future.

**Mots-clés :** enseignement de l'espagnol, instruction en langue espagnole, castillan, apprenants de l'espagnol

## Introduction

Spanish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world (Instituto Cervantes, 2015) and it is presently considered to be the unofficial second language of the United States (Roca & Colombi, 2016; Vilar García, 2008). Reports from the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) ascertain that the Spanish language is the most commonly taught foreign language in the U.S., and its popularity is at an all-time high (ACTFL, 2011; Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015). Spanish is currently the most studied language in the United States with records showing over 6.4 million students enrolled in Spanish courses at different grade levels (ACTFL, 2011). However, Spanish was not always popular in the United States; prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were scant educational resources to teach the language. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a scholarly dialogue about Spanish language instruction in the U.S. from its beginning in 1749 to the present. In addition, this review seeks to analyze common trends in the literature about Spanish language instruction today with the vision of identifying changes to language education practices and possibilities for future research on this topic.

## The Beginnings of Spanish Language Instruction in the United States

The University of Pennsylvania is considered to be the first academic institution to advocate in favor of Spanish language instruction in the United States (Vilar García, 2008). In 1749, Benjamin Franklin published a pamphlet titled *Proposals relating to the education of youth in Pensilvania* (18<sup>th</sup> century spelling), in which he advised the teaching and learning of the Spanish language to merchants or professionals in the trade field (Franklin, 1749). After Franklin's publication, the Spanish language was taught for the first time at an academic institution in the United States in 1766 by Paul Fooks at the University of Pennsylvania.

However, the teaching resources and pedagogical approaches used during that time were rudimentary at best, and the teaching and learning of modern languages were not very popular. After Benjamin Franklin's death in 1790, the University of Pennsylvania became a privatized institution and interest in teaching and learning languages declined significantly (Vilar García, 2008).

Another pioneer university in the teaching of Spanish during the 1700s was The College of William and Mary, located in Virginia (hereinafter William & Mary). William and Mary introduced Spanish into their institution in 1780 under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson (Spell, 1927). Jefferson was particularly interested in the teaching and learning of languages and believed that Spanish was important for Americans (Leavitt, 1961). At the time, Thomas Jefferson was asked by William & Mary's rector to draft reforms of the curriculum and governance of the college. The reorganization made significant changes at William & Mary and added new professorships in modern languages, including Spanish (The College of William and Mary, 2016a). Carlo Bellini, who had been appointed as a professor of modern languages (French and Italian) in 1779, became the first professor at that institution to teach Spanish (American National Biography, 2000; United States Bureau of Education, 1913). However, classes were suspended right after Spanish was introduced due to the Revolutionary War, and Bellini resigned in 1803. These events contributed to the disappearance of Spanish language courses and the teaching of foreign languages at the college. The Modern Language Department became active again in 1858, after its expansion (The College of William and Mary, 2016b) and William & Mary has offered Spanish courses ever since.

The teaching of the Spanish language was once again revitalized in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most prominent scholars and advocates of the Spanish language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Mariano Cubí y Soler, a Spanish linguist

and a phrenology pioneer born on December 13, 1801, in Malgrat de Mar, Spain. On October 20, 1821, Mariano Cubí y Soler, who had recently arrived in Washington D.C. from Spain, was offered the position of Spanish professor by Mr. Eduard Dampoux, president of Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland. At the time of Cubí y Soler's appointment as a Spanish professor, there were little to no academic resources for Americans to learn Castilian (Arañó, 1876), which was the term used at that time to refer to the Spanish language. Professor Cubí y Soler identified that gap of resources and decided to do something about it.

### Mariano Cubí y Soler: Pioneer Spanish Linguist in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the U.S.

In 1822, Professor Cubí y Soler published two books—*Diálogos* (Dialogues) and *Nueva Gramática Española* (New Spanish Grammar)—both of which became well-reviewed manuscripts in the teaching of Spanish at that time. *Diálogos* was a resource that taught Spanish using dialogues and everyday conversations. This book received a general acceptance (Arañó, 1876) among fellow academics and students, but there is currently limited information about it and its academic impact at that time. However, the book *Nueva Gramática Española* was widely accepted in the United States as the best resource for academic Spanish learning during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Arañó, 1876). *Nueva Gramática Española* was considered for many years the only and best Spanish-English dictionary in the United States; it was published many times, had six editions, and was also widely used in South America (García, 2002). In addition to publishing these two books for the teaching and learning of Spanish, professor Cubí y Soler taught a class about Castilian literature—highly innovative at the time—that quickly made him a prestigious professional in his field (García, 2002).

During his lifetime, professor Cubí y Soler published many manuscripts, pamphlets, books and other resources to promote the teaching and learning of Spanish in the United States and around

the world. His teaching methodology focused heavily on the use of grammar and texts, specifically literature and poetry, as an essential resource to learning Spanish. Cubí y Soler explained that literature and poetry are difficult texts in any language and that the purpose of attaining knowledge of a language should be to gain a deeper understanding of literature (Cubí y Soler, 1826). In other words, Cubí y Soler believed that poetry and literature represented the most complex and interesting written work of a culture; thus, mastering a language required the ability to understand and read those types of texts.

In addition to advocating for reading and writing as two important aspects of learning a language, Cubí y Soler believed, as noted in one of his books, that learning languages was an opportunity for mankind to “advance towards refinement and elegance” (Cubí y Soler, 1826, p. v). In his works, the professor instilled moral values and civic education in the curriculum with the purpose of teaching students to be better citizens as they became world citizens. The civic-moral approach used throughout his works (Cubí y Soler, 1822; Cubí y Soler, 1824; Cubí y Soler, 1826; Cubí y Soler, 1831) reflects his commitment to improving the spirit of humankind by instilling civil and social respect through the teaching of languages, cultures, and literature. Professor Cubí y Soler's works in the promotion and refinement of Spanish language instruction should be recognized as the foundation of Spanish language pedagogy in the United States today.

### Spanish Language Instruction from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day

Since Mariano Cubí y Soler's visionary work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the methodologies used for Spanish language instruction in the United States have improved significantly. Some of the reasons associated with the changes in the approaches used for teaching are connected to the demographic change the country has experienced. For example, the works published by professor Cubí y Soler in

the 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on teaching Spanish as a foreign language to the predominantly non-Spanish speaking population at that time. Teaching Spanish to native Spanish speakers was not addressed in the literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and did not become a topic of interest in the educational field until the 1930s (Chomón Zamora, 2013). However, the ever-growing Hispanic population in the United States today (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016) has pushed for an acknowledgment and implementation of effective teaching approaches for Spanish Heritage Speakers (SHS) and Native Spanish Speakers (NSS) at K-12 and higher education American institutions.

### Changes in Spanish Language Instruction

The current literature on Spanish language instruction reflects two major changes that have occurred since Spanish was taught at the University of Pennsylvania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, namely: (1) focus on student population and (2) popular perception of the Spanish language. At first, Spanish language instruction in the United States focused on a homogenous English-speaking population of students. The teaching methodologies used by early Spanish linguists such as Cubí y Soler relied heavily on text translation from English to Spanish (Cubí y Soler, 1826), and the grammatical foundations of the Spanish language (Cubí y Soler, 1824). These early pedagogical approaches to teaching Spanish in the United States were targeted only at individuals who spoke English as a native language and introduced Spanish as a foreign language. However, since the foundation of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) in 1917, the idea of only teaching Spanish as a foreign language evolved in the United States (AATSP, 2016; Chomón Zamora, 2013) to include native and heritage speakers.

A recent article on the topic of SHS and NSS instruction in the United States has addressed relevant subjects that had previously been insufficiently addressed in the literature or completely

ignored, such as regional variations and dialectal features in the Spanish language of native Spanish-speaking students (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016). According to the authors, teaching Spanish to native and heritage speakers is a multifaceted task because Spanish educators must take into consideration the students' language variations in phonology, morphology, and syntax, in addition to interrupted education, and limited Spanish language proficiency (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016). Such considerations need to be addressed more vigorously in today's literature if they are to set a clear standard for the improvement of Spanish language education and instruction in the United States. In addition to addressing these considerations, the authors state that the current Spanish curricula used in schools for native and heritage speakers need to include more opportunities for effective oral communication, in-depth reading comprehension, and writing for academic, literary, and professional purposes, and for expanding vocabulary (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016). The focus of teaching Spanish to native and heritage speakers is a trend that continues to expand but was nonexistent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Spanish was first introduced at academic institutions in the United States.

### Perception of Spanish in the United States

Similarly, the popular perception of the Spanish language has changed over time, and the idea of learning the language for jobs in trade (Franklin, 1749) has evolved. New publications about Spanish language instruction describe the Spanish language as a living entity that reflects the cultural heritage and beliefs of its speakers (Roca & Colombi, 2016; Instituto Cervantes, 2015). The concept of teaching Spanish has transcended the barriers of learning the language solely as a means to communicate—previously used for native English speakers learning Spanish—to learning the language as a means to belong and maintain one's identity as a native or heritage Spanish speaker. Current national standards for Spanish language instruction promote the integration of five guiding

principles: (1) communication, (2) cultures, (3) connections, (4) comparisons, and (5) communities, with the vision of helping students gain cultural understanding, become lifelong learners, and use the language as part of their daily lives (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). These standards serve as reassurance on the importance foreign language instruction has in the United States today (Blaz, 2002) and the vision of integrating world languages—including Spanish—as a regular activity in the lives of students rather than as instructional content only. The perception of Spanish language instruction and learning in the United States continues to advance significantly, and recent literature on the topic (Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015a; Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015b) identifies bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy as the new trends in the country.

### Methodology and Approaches

324

The methodologies and approaches used in the Spanish classroom have changed and improved drastically since 1749. Language teaching in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as seen in Franklin (1749) and Cubí y Soler (1826), was heavily influenced by grammar, translation, and memorization. Presently, the approaches favored as most effective in the teaching of Spanish consider language learning a holistic process in which culture and communication play important roles (Roberts, 2016). Lectures and grammatical drills that were once considered important for language learning are now thought of as obsolete and are therefore not encouraged (Roberts, 2016). The processes of language learning and teaching have become active, where language students take control of their learning process and are active seekers of knowledge (Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015a). As such, Spanish language educators are expected to facilitate explicit types of instruction that engage students (Rondon-Pari, 2011), take their individual diversity into consideration, and promote literacy in the language. In other words, current literature emphasizes that language, vocabulary,

and the process of communication in Spanish should be taught in realistic contexts and settings (Sole, 2003).

Other major methodological changes in Spanish language instruction are related to the inclusion of technology. The use of technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has redefined language education in the classroom (Dema & Moeller, 2012). Language teaching has become a highly flexible process where students can access information anywhere at any time and can listen, watch, or interact with their peers and teachers continuously. There are also many options for Spanish education through online platforms where students take ownership—instructing themselves—and educators become facilitators rather than instructors. This flexible approach to Spanish language instruction is nothing like the old methodologies used by early scholars, but research studies (Dona, Stover, & Broughton, 2014; Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015a) continue to show that they work, and there are many benefits to using technology in the language classroom.

### Trends in Spanish Language Instruction

A plethora of trends surrounds recent decades's most prominent methodologies for foreign language instruction. However, as noted by Cerezal (1995), there are two important trends that continue to be replicated throughout teaching methodologies, textbooks, and curricula: a focus on communication, and the incorporation of content and language objectives. These two methods of teaching foreign languages have served as models for standards implemented in K-12 classrooms (ACTFL, 2011) as well as higher education (Nation & Macalister, 2010; Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015a; Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015b).

The focus on communication, or the communicative approach to language teaching, rose to prominence in the 1970s and early 1980s when the Council of Europe decided to face the new reality

that their students were communicatively incompetent (Cerezal, 1995). The communicative approach holds that meaning and communication are paramount to language learning. As such, the primary focus is on contextualization and realistic dialogues to reach the goal of language fluency, while translation may be used to a more limited extent. This approach is widely featured in recent textbooks used by academic institutions (Blanco & Donley, 2017; Marinelli & Fajardo, 2016), as well as in language learning software such as Rosetta Stone, where communicative competence is the focal point (Lord, 2015). The importance identified in achieving communicative competence has impacted the instructional practices of language teachers. The foreign language teaching practices now considered effective require educators to speak more in the target language, and students are expected to interact in the target language inside and outside of the classroom.

The incorporation of language and content objectives is also a common trend that has been widely accepted in the teaching field. Content objectives state what students will learn during the instructional period or class, whereas language objectives explain how students will demonstrate the mastery of the information presented using the four language domains (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). This method of teaching, primarily introduced by Bloom (1956), seeks to help educators “specify objectives so that it becomes easier to plan learning experiences and prepare evaluation devices” (Bloom, 1956, p. 2). Another resource that has promoted the use of content and language objectives in language classes is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model, created by Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2000). The SIOP model encourages the use of language and content objectives as effective teaching practices to facilitate “student learning strategies, teacher-scaffolded instruction, and higher-order thinking skills” (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013, p. 241). Language and content objectives are at the heart of the assessments, program designs, materials, methodologies and instructional

considerations found in language curriculum development processes (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). As such, the inclusion of content and language objectives in curricula and lesson plans continues to gain strength and validation in second and foreign language teaching where educators are expected to use these objectives in their daily practices (for more information see Echevarria et al., 2000; Kareva & Echevarria, 2013; Marinelli & Fajardo, 2016; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2015c).

### Possibilities for Future Research Directions

The resources and information previously discussed in this paper show that a growing body of research in Spanish language instruction is emerging and building on previous studies (see Blaz, 2002; Echevarria et al., 2000; Nation & Macalister, 2010). However, there is still a need for more research on Spanish language instruction, particularly on the implications of technology in the Spanish language classroom and teaching Spanish to SHS and NSS in the United States. These two topics remain widely under-researched while technology becomes more prevalent in our classrooms and heritage and native Spanish speakers continue to increase in numbers throughout schools in the United States (McFarland et al., 2017). This section of the literature review addresses the most common gaps in literature vis-à-vis Spanish language instruction and presents possibilities for future research directions on the identified gaps.

The use of technology in the Spanish language classroom, or the foreign language and second language classrooms, remains a fertile topic that has not been researched enough. There are still questions about how technology can successfully help us in the classroom, and there is a need for specific technologies designed for language education, assessment, and differentiation. Lessard-Clouston (2016) described it best by stating that future literature on this topic needs to address “helpful ways to incorporate new technologies (e.g., Skype, apps,

and handheld devices) in culture teaching/learning. . . . Ideally, research might not only consider such technologies but also how to incorporate media and perhaps even assessment with available technologies” (p. 66). The current literature and findings on the application of technology in the language classroom remain at the initial stages. Recent studies have focused on the application of technology in the language classroom, and language educators’ perception of the use of technology in their instructional spaces (Castrillo, Martín-Monje, & Bárcena, 2014; Ferreira Cabrera, Vine Jara, & Elejalde, 2015; Swanson, 2013). There is much to be expanded upon regarding technology and Spanish language instruction, but the new trends focusing on perception, validity, and application show that there is both an interest in and acknowledgement of the incorporation of technology that was not previously addressed in the literature.

326

The second gap identified in the literature of Spanish language instruction is the practices, methodologies and processes surrounding the teaching of Spanish to NSS and SHS. Current research articles on this topic (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016; Russell & Kuriscak, 2015) show that there are many issues surrounding the teaching of Spanish to NSS and SHS in American K-12 schools. Pentón Herrera & Duany (2016) state that many K-12 schools throughout the United States do not understand the need of NSS and SHS. Many times, these students are placed in Spanish as an foreign language classes that do not meet their linguistic and idiomatic needs. The authors also explain that binate language learners—NSS who are also English Learners (ELs)—are particularly susceptible to the inadequate support of Spanish in such classes because it “negatively impacts the students’ further development in their native tongue and creates a language literacy gap that can also damage the learning of English as a second language” (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016, p.16). Hence, the lack of understanding about how the instruction, methodologies, and resources needed to teach Spanish to NSS and

SHS could be directly connected to the literacy gap among Hispanic students in American public schools. Furthermore, the importance and academic impact of effective Spanish instruction to NSS and SHS in American K-12 classrooms is a topic that also remains widely unaddressed in current research.

Similarly, Russell & Kuriscak (2015) conducted a research study in which they examined the attitudes and pedagogical practices of high school Spanish educators toward SHS. The article revealed that current high school Spanish teachers struggle with how to best support SHS in practice because they do not know which teaching methodologies to use. Also, the study found that Spanish teachers feel current Spanish programs do not effectively support the idiomatic needs of SHS (Russell & Kuriscak, 2015). These findings are relevant and reflect today’s reality of the inadequate resources American K-12 public schools and teachers have to promote Spanish language literacy to native and heritage speakers. These findings resonate with Outes Jiménez (2017)’s assertions on the inadequacies found in state accreditation tests for Spanish teachers. According to Outes Jiménez (2017)’s analysis, state accreditation tests for Spanish teachers show a pattern of how incorrect linguistic variations of Spanish have extended from informal oral expressions to written expressions in the academic field.

The need for research evaluating the current Spanish language materials and methodologies used to instruct NSS and SHS is, therefore, paramount. To accomplish this, assessing state accreditation tests for Spanish teachers as well as Spanish teacher preparation programs at universities should become an initial point of focus and reference. Furthermore, it is necessary to compare current American teaching resources and methodologies with educational resources and methodologies from Spanish-speaking countries where Spanish language education and Spanish teachers are successful, effective, and focused on

teaching native and heritage Spanish speakers. This type of comparative research is necessary, and the findings have the potential to provide a solid foundation for the improvement of Spanish language instruction for NSS and SHS in American K-12 public classrooms.

## Conclusion

The practices associated with Spanish language instruction in the United States date back to 1749 when Benjamin Franklin published a pamphlet advising educational changes and arguing for the necessity of college education. Since that time, the interest, practices, teaching methodologies, and methods used for the teaching of the Spanish language in K-12 and higher education environments have changed in terms of the theories upon which they are based. A major figure in the early development and promotion of Spanish language education in the United States was professor Mariano Cubí y Soler, a renowned linguist, author, translator, phrenologist, and scholar. While professor Cubí y Soler's works were considered to be the most innovative and of the highest quality, they were also virtually one of the very few resources available for the teaching of Spanish for many years in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Arañó, 1876). Mariano Cubí y Soler's publications and teaching methodologies focused on grammar, translation, and memorization, which were common teaching approaches used in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of the grammar-translation method declined significantly after the 1970s due to the new emphasis on teaching language with the purpose of acquiring communication skills and developing an understanding of culture (Cerezal, 1995).

In recent years, the methodologies of Spanish language instruction continue to place major emphasis on communication and culture, but also on assessments (Shohamy, Inbar-Lourie, & Poehner, 2008). Assessments are widely used in United States public education today and are considered highly important to verify learners'

progression in the learning of new languages. These assessments, and the new practices promoted in American K-12 public schools, encourage the implementation and use of technology in the language classroom, although further research is needed (see Lessard-Clouston, 2016). In addition to technology, two areas of improvement that need to be addressed are the pedagogical implications of teaching NSS and SHS (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016; Russell & Kuriscak, 2015) and Spanish teachers' effective preparation and assessment (Outes Jiménez, 2017).

The primary contributions of this paper extend to the historical overview of Spanish language instruction in the United States since its beginning. Furthermore, this article identifies current challenges faced by Spanish language education programs in the United States, as well as implications for all stakeholders including states, teachers, and students. In addition, the author recognizes the need for further research in the areas of technology inclusion, Spanish teacher training programs, and effective teaching approaches and resources for NSS and SHS students in K-12 classrooms in the U.S.

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**How to reference this article:** Pentón Herrera, L. J. (2018). Spanish language education in the United States: Beginning, present, and future. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 23(2), 319-329. DOI: 10.17533/udea.ikala.v23n02a08