INTRODUCTION

First language speakers regularly make mistakes that typically cause little to no problem for comprehension. However, for second language (L2) and heritage language learners (HLL), mistakes and errors can range from making them “right” (Valdés, 1998, p. 3), but in the hope of developing a nuanced and deeper understanding about issues related to the Vietnamese heritage language learners studying at university level.

METHODOLOGY

This research is one section of a qualitative research project that used traditional ethnographic tools: surveys, interviews, and observations. I used these tools because at the start of this project I cast my “research net” as wide as possible in the hopes of finding something interesting in the Vietnamese classes. I constructed the resulting questions, issues, and ideas inductively from the data I gathered. This research began without the research questions “in mind” (Lam, 2006, p. 48), but in the hope of developing a nuanced and deeper understanding about issues related to the Vietnamese heritage language learners studying at university level.

SURVEYS

Student perspectives were gathered through the survey tool, which was administered in the second semester of the second year class (April/May of the 202L class-level). Students typically took between 10 and 20 minutes to fill out the survey depending on the amount of detail they chose to write in the open-ended questions. I created and piloted the survey for 2 years and made adjustments as needed.

INTERVIEWS

Students volunteered to participate in the interview through the survey tool (it was the last question). I contacted the students through the information they provided and conducted the interviews while recording them, and digital transcribed the interviews. The interviews are then actively discovered recurring ideas and themes, which were then used in later interviews. As a result, interview questions throughout this research evolved.

Observations

Through an academic school year, I sat in on the Vietnamese 201 and 202 classes taking notes about the class on topics that include: different teaching activities used in class and how students reacted to them; overall engagement of students with lessons; language used in class, as well as, students’ preparation prior to lessons. These observations were used to triangulate responses to the survey and interviews.

DATA

The data below is a partial selection of data drawn from one-on-one interviews with the VHLLs and their language teacher, Cô Trần. Cô Trần

“I think always, then and now, is difficult to teach, so the student to have good pronunciation. So that’s a focus of the Vietnamese language you have to pronounce it correctly.” – pronunciation mistakes and errors

“[Yes, we focus] more on writing and, and reading. I think that’s what they desire, reading and writing. And, you know, as I told you, now they’re speaking skill is less and less and it’s not as much as before.” – diminished speaking skill and pronunciation accuracy or mistakes

“Well I expect the heritage students to, you know, understand first, and to read better. But, what I found is that, non-heritage students read better than heritage student. They read better, maybe they don’t write, I mean, orthographically, the spelling, they’re better.” – pronunciation mistakes and errors

“Teacher (then) can see what they have” – teacher awareness about language change and language structure.

Mistakes and Errors

Gass & Selinker (2001) – explaining the work of Corder (1967) – wrote that mistakes are correctible by the learner since they are essentially “slips of the tongue” (p. 78). Whereas errors represent a systematic or methodical incorporation of an “erroneous form into his/her system” (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 78). Errors are characterized by “changes in their producing language with the target language (p. 78). Vietnamese focused research

In this (2000) study, I concentrated my reading through linguistic terminology the differences between the northern and southern dialects of Vietnamese showing that both dialects are “structurally equal and socioculturally adequate” (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 78). The reason there is no reason that the same southern dialect could not be used for language instruction (p. 22). “When every student feels secure about her/n his native dialect, she/he would be more confident and more accurate in using it in her/his daily life.” (Selinker, 1972, p. 78).

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