From Policy to Practice: University Instructors’ Implementation of Spanish Language Reforms

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Abstract

This article presents a micro-level analysis of language policy and planning implementation by exploring university foreign language instructors’ interpretation and appropriation of a specific set of language reforms proposed by the Real Academia Española (RAE). Through in-depth qualitative interviews of 15 instructors in a foreign language department in a U.S. university, we analyzed their acceptance and resistance to the language reforms. Acceptance of the reforms was based on issues related to the simplification of the language and the role of the RAE as a language authority; resistance was based on a lack of rationale behind the changes and matters connected to language ownership and identity. The findings indicate that instructors hold agency in policy implementation by negotiating the reforms to the Spanish language to specific contextual demands and classroom practices and taking into account the particular needs of students in said contexts.

1. Introduction

Recent research on language policy and planning (LPP) has increasingly reflected a shift in focus from macro-level to micro-level analyses of LPP enactment and implementation (Chua & Baldauf, 2011; Davis, 2014; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007). Micro-level language planning concerns the examination of contextualized local responses that are undertaken by a wide range of policy actors (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Macro-level policy implementation is frequently a result of multiple actors’ negotiation and interpretation of policy mandates at the micro-level (Ball, 1999; Shohamy, 2006, 2009). Among the range of policy actors, teachers occupy an important and powerful role in implementing policy. Menken and García (2010) contend that teachers are “the final arbiters of language policy implementation” (p. 1). The central role that teachers play as primary language policy makers has prompted calls for an examination of how teachers exert agency in interpreting and implementing language policies to specific contextual demands and classroom practices (Baldauf, 2006; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007).

The concept of agency proffers a lens to better understand the complexities and interplay between macro-level and micro-level LPP in educational settings. This form of analysis allows for a critical examination of teachers’ experiences with language policies and the decisions and actions teachers adopt in response to them. Drawing on the concept of agency, the present study examines how Spanish instructors at a four-year public U.S. university interpreted and
appropriated the language reforms to Spanish orthography made by the Real Academia Española (RAE) Royal Spanish Academy in 2010. Specifically, it centers on how instructors negotiated the Spanish language reforms and how this negotiation informed the implementation of the language reforms in university classroom practices and curricula. The present examination can offer a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the way foreign language instructors in U.S. higher education respond to and appropriate language policy in ways that align or conflict with their everyday contextual realities and instructional needs and experiences. This study adds to the body of work on micro-level LPP analyses by investigating how instructors exert agency in engaging, interpreting, and implementing language policy, thereby becoming de facto language policy makers, and how instructor agency can impact classroom practices.

2. Language in Education Policy: Teachers as Policy Makers

An important concern of LPP research is how overt and covert decisions, actions, and practices surrounding language policies are formed and taken up (Ramanathan, 2005; Ricento, 2000, 2006; Schiffman, 1996; Wiley, 2000). Research in language in education policy in particular is widely understood and analyzed from a multilayered lens (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Micro-level analyses aim to capture the multilayered dimensions of policy processes—stakeholders, policy, and context—that interact to shape implementation (Honig, 2006). The decisions local actors make at the micro-level may constrain the implementation of macro-level language policies, revealing the many complexities, pressures, and constraints individuals’ experience with language policy.

Numerous studies have focused on the role educators play in language policy processes (Menken & García, 2010; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2012). Rather than conduits of policy, teachers are engaged policy actors that play an important part in policy enactment at the micro-level. They can negotiate “ideological and implementational spaces” (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007, p. 510), thereby reshaping policies to meet the needs of their contexts (Baldauf, 2006). In other words, teachers have the potential to change the trajectory of language policies (Tollefson, 2013). Johnson and Johnson (2015) highlighted how educators, identified as language arbiters, at two different U.S. school district-level programs, appropriated the same state-level language policy resulting in different practices. Their analysis revealed how these language policy arbiters’ beliefs about language, language education, and educational research impacted the policy’s implementation. In a similar line, Cincotta-Segi (2011) demonstrated how a teacher incorporated multilingualism in Lao classrooms despite Lao being the official language of education. This study revealed that within a restrictive language policy context that only allowed the use of Lao, teachers exerted agency through various language choices and classroom practices that contradicted official language policy texts and discourses. Stritikus and Wiese (2006) analyzed the role teachers played in the implementation of bilingual education policies in the U.S. state of California. They illustrated that teacher beliefs and policy mandates interacted to shape policy implementation. Similarly, Paciotto and Delany-Barmann (2011) reported how teachers in a rural school district in Illinois reinterpreted and “corrected” a macro-level language policy through the development of two-way immersion program that better met students’ social needs and realities. Nguyen and Bui’s (2016) study on English language teachers in a remote area in Vietnam showed how they interpreted, interrogated and appropriated national English language education policy reforms, ultimately resisting the reforms and taking on a transformative role in LPP enactment. These studies demonstrate that teachers are not simply “cogs in the language policy
wheel” (Johnson, 2013, p. 99), acting in accordance with language policies but rather try to understand those policies and more importantly exert agency by taking action in response to them.

Research on LPP regarding orthographic choices and practices frequently focuses on the debates of standardization (Georgiou, 2011; Sebba, 2007), the reform of official standardized languages and practices (Bermel, 2007; Ní Ghearáin, 2011), or the use of orthography in the construction of cultural identities (Bird, 2001; Sebba, 1998). The acceptability and implementation of orthographic language reforms can become a contentious ground where various stakeholders resist and challenge them. In Germany, a reform of the spelling system provoked a constitutional crisis delaying its introduction into school curricula (Johnson, 2005). In France, language reforms made the by the Académie Française (French Academy) in 1990 were not adopted due to fierce opposition from language users (Ball, 1999). These same language reforms have recently garnered renewed opposition as publishers have decided to incorporate the reforms into school textbooks (Zdanowicz, 2016). In Spain, online readers posted comments in favor of and against the RAE’s language reforms that appeared in an article in a Spanish newspaper, revealing language users’ beliefs and attitudes about language (Reyes, 2013). These debates illustrate the attention and degree of contestation that language reforms receive and the difficulties they encounter in their implementation.

The aforementioned studies proffer in-depth and valuable contextual insights into language policy and orthography and teacher agency in K-12 settings, expanding our understanding of the interplay between macro-level language policy and micro-level practice. At the tertiary level, LPP research frequently examines and is specific to how students and higher education institutions experience and reinterpret language policies (Fuentes, 2012; Hult & Källkvist, 2016; Nkosi, 2014). A number of studies address the critical role of teachers in LPP processes and several scholars affirm that teacher agency requires further investigation (Menken & García, 2010; Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012). In addition, university settings have been singled out as a context where LPP is underexamined (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). This study fills the gap by examining how Spanish instructors negotiate and implement the RAE’s language reforms in a foreign language university classroom setting in the U.S. In situating instructors as “central agents in language policy development” (Baldauf, 2006, p. 154), this paper also considers how instructors’ own understanding and views about language and their situated experiences inform policy implementation and classroom practices.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on a sociocultural approach to policy which Levinson, Sutton, and Winside (2009) define as “an ongoing social practice of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts” (p. 770). They conceive policy as an ongoing sociocultural “practice of power” (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 767). Through appropriation, policy actors can selectively adapt and incorporate elements of policy “into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action” (Levinson et al., 2009, p.770). Resistance to a policy is also “a kind of appropriation insofar as it incorporates a negative image of policy into schemes of action” (Levinson & Sutton, 2001, p.3). This conceptualization of policy counters top-down analyses of policy formulation and implementation in education. It moves the focus from a macro-level analysis to a micro-level analysis of policy texts, underscoring the agency of policy actors in the formation and negotiation of policy. The concept of appropriation highlights how power, context, and agency are intertwined with local actors’ interpretation and negotiation of policy, situating the
relationship between the individual and policy as contentious and dynamic.

Understanding appropriation “as a form of creative interpretive practice necessarily engaged in by different people involved in the policy process” (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 768) accentuates the role of agency in LPP processes. We conceptualize agency as individuals’ contextually mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001) and something negotiated between individuals and their social environments (Jones & Norris, 2005). Adopting this socioculturally mediated lens of agency allows for the analysis of how Spanish instructors in a foreign language department in a U.S. university, negotiate their subject positions and strategically employ agency in response to policy that may or may not align with the aims of the RAE’s language reforms. In analyzing instructors’ appropriation of policy, this study emphasizes the ways instructors selectively adopt, negotiate, and appropriate cultural instructions and rules (Koyama & Varenne, 2012). In doing so, we seek to examine how a language policy “is only adopted by those who consider that it is compatible with their own prime goal of education” (Choi, 2014, p. 216) by focusing on how micro-level policy actors, Spanish instructors, exercise agency in the appropriation of policy and its implementation in the classroom.

3.1. Spanish Language Reforms

Our study focuses on a specific set of changes proposed by the RAE in 2010. The reform included the elimination of two separate letters (ch and ll) from the alphabet, reducing it to 27 letters. Additionally, it changed the nomenclature of some letters of the alphabet: y changed from i griega to ye (a common nomenclature in some Spanish-speaking countries (e.g., Colombia) but not in others (e.g., Spain)). The reform also included the elimination of orthographic accents from some words such as the adverb sólo ‘only’, which previously was distinguished from the adjective solo ‘alone’ by means of the accent. Monosyllabic words like guión (script), demonstrative pronouns such as éste ‘this one’ or ésa ‘that one’, and the conjunction ó (or) when used between numbers also ceased to have an accent. Finally, the letter q is substituted with c when it is used to represent the phoneme /k/. For example, quórum and Qatar become cuórum and Catar respectively.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

At the beginning of the academic year in autumn 2013, a recruitment email was sent to 25 participants, asking for their participation. Ultimately, 15 participants (12 females and 3 males) volunteered for the study. Our sample included a wide variation in terms of nationality (6); native Spanish speakers (NSSs) (8) and nonnative Spanish speakers (NNSSs) (7); and years of teaching experience (1-16) (see Table 1 for summary of participant profiles). At the time of the study, all participants were working in the Department of Foreign Languages at a major urban U.S. public research university, South City University (SCU). Their positions within the Department ranged from teaching assistants (TAs), and full-time instructors to tenured and tenure-track professors. For clarity’s sake, we will refer to all of our participants as “instructors”. The Department of Foreign Languages at SCU offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Spanish.

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1 Pseudonyms are used for the institution and participants.
The undergraduate Spanish program of SCU has between 1,700 and 2,000 students per semester. Approximately 87% of those students are enrolled in the Basic Program\(^2\) which consists of several beginner and intermediate level classes. The Basic Program is standardized, therefore all students have to adhere to the same syllabi and complete the same assessments in each level respectively. The remaining 13% of students enrolled in Spanish courses take advanced level skills-based language classes or linguistics, culture, and literature-based content classes that are taught in the target language.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>National Origin</th>
<th>Native Spanish speaker (NSS)/Nonnative Spanish speaker (NNSS)</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cristina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picasso</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesar</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orwell</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>NNSS</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofía</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Materials

Before starting the interview, participants completed a background information form, which collected demographic information relevant for the study as well as contact information. This form included a summary of the RAE orthographic changes for participants to review (see Appendix A). After completing this form, participants were interviewed for about 60-90 minutes using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). The interview started with some background questions about the participant’s teaching experience (e.g., courses taught et cetera). The next section of the interview protocol consisted of 22 questions about instructors’ views of the RAE’s language reforms and implementation of the reforms in the classroom. The first set of questions revolved around participants’ familiarity with the RAE and its most recent set of Spanish language changes: “Are you familiar with the RAE?”, “What do you know about it?”, and “Did you know about the recent changes to Spanish orthography?”. Following these, participants were asked questions regarding their views of these changes and whether they had

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\(^2\) Data extracted from 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years.
implemented these changes in their own teaching: “What is your opinion about the changes?”, “Do you agree or disagree with them?”, and “Have you incorporated the Spanish orthography changes into your pedagogy?”. Some more general questions about participants’ views of language or the regulatory role of the RAE were also included in the interview protocol: “What are your views about language?”, “Do you think the RAE should regulate or monitor the Spanish language?”, and “Should an institution that regulates the Spanish language exist?”

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis

During the fall semester of 2013, we collected data through 60- to 90-minute audio-recorded in-depth qualitative interviews with each instructor. To make comparisons across instructors, we employed an interview protocol and modified the questions in each interview to examine further the individual views and experiences of each instructor. Data-clarification interview sessions transpired during and beyond the data collection period. We compiled field notes during each interview as well as reflective researcher memos.

Qualitative interviews can provide a deeper understanding of “the world from the subjects' point” (Kvale, 1996, p.1). They situate policy changes within the context of people’s lived experiences (Holland, Thomson, & Henderson, 2006), thereby providing a window into individuals’ understandings and experiences (Mason, 2002). The adoption of this research method was aimed at gathering insights into instructors’ views and experiences of the RAE’s language reforms. We conceptualize interviews as a socially constructed event by the interviewer and the interviewee (Briggs, 1986; Mishler, 1986) and as specific types of interaction (Cicourel, 1964). From this view, an interview is not only a methodological approach (Briggs, 1986) but also an object of analysis (Rapley, 2001; Talmy & Richards, 2011). In an interview, the audience or the listener can impact the content and the form of the narration (Erickson, 1985; Goffman, 1976). In this type of interaction, interviewer and respondents construct themselves as types-of-people in relation to the interview and its topic, creating concomitant identities (Rapley, 2001). In these terms, our status as native Spanish speakers and teachers and researchers may have influenced what and how the participants talked about the RAE’s language reforms and their implementation in the classroom. However, this dual status allowed us to adopt insider and outsider researcher positions. Being Spanish speakers and teachers was a commonality that we shared with participants, which allowed us to claim insider researcher status. As university professors, we occupied outsider researcher status. Our positionality allowed us to create rapport and distance with the participants and access their views and experiences regarding the RAE’s language reforms.

All interview recordings and researcher field notes were transcribed. Adopting the view that analysis is an ongoing, cyclical, and reflexive activity (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), we composed reflective memos throughout the collection, transcription, and analysis of the data. This process allowed us to identify and reflect on emerging themes and patterns in the data related to instructors’ views and experiences of the RAE’s language reforms. Interview transcripts and researcher field notes were coded and grouped around salient patterns. We adopted grounded theory to analyze the data (Straus & Corbin, 1994) taking the view that theory develops from the ongoing process of collecting, transcribing, coding, comparing and contrasting of data. The emergence and production of theory was rooted in situated and intricate descriptions, perceptions, and experiences. This method facilitated the examination of instructors’ reception of the RAE’s language reforms and its ultimate implementation in the classroom. We employed the grounded theory approaches of open, axial, and selective coding of data using qualitative com-
puter software, Atlas.ti, into salient themes. Next, we clustered these themes into three primary categories: (1) instructors’ acceptance of RAE’s language reforms, (2) instructors’ resistance to RAE’s language reforms, and (3) instructor’s implementation of RAE’s language reforms. In the following section, we report on these themes.

5. Instructors’ Acceptance of RAE’s Language Reforms

Instructors who positioned themselves in favor of the language reforms identified two main arguments to support their position: (i) language simplification and standardization and (ii) the position of the RAE as an authority on the Spanish language.

5.1. Language Simplification and Standardization

A recurrent argument for instructors who supported the reforms was that they simplified their tasks as teachers and the learning process for students. Joy stated, “You know those extra rules and stuff, it was one less thing students had to learn. Makes their lives a little easier.” In line with this view, Charlie commented, “If what I am teaching is easier for them to grasp, and has fewer things like accents, which for the people I’m teaching are confusing, that would be helpful.” When asked whether Charlie liked the language reforms, he added: “I like them because they’re making things more standard, which is helpful for students coming into the language.” Focusing particularly on heritage speakers’ difficulties with accents, Maria argued, “They learn English first, and there’s no need for writing accents on the words. And, when they come to Spanish, they don’t really know how to do it. So, I like that there is less accents to put on words.” In sum, those in favor of the reforms commended the simplification of the Spanish language as proposed by the RAE, especially, in connection to the impact it would have on the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. Rather than viewing these reforms as a sign of the deterioration of language and the “dumbing-down” of Spanish for an ever-increasing uneducated society (Reyes, 2013), some instructors principally viewed them as a positive simplification of the Spanish language, relating them to practical applications in more global settings (in this specific case, teaching Spanish as a foreign language in the United States).

5.2. RAE as an Authority on the Spanish Language

An additional argument for those in favor of the reforms was the positioning of the RAE as a language authority whose language reforms must be accepted and implemented. Lisa, a highly experienced nonnative Spanish instructor, reflected this view: “As an instructor, it [RAE] gives us a foundation when we explain things to students... It gives us support. This isn’t just us dreaming this up... This is the Royal Academy that decided this.” Then, she went on to explain why the changes needed to be followed: “This is our ultimate authority on the language that I teach and it’s important. If the changes are made and this is worldwide, then I need to follow suit. I can’t go against what the authority has changed.” Another nonnative Spanish instructor, Claire, highlighted the power and authority of the RAE over the Spanish language: “They’re [RAE] the decision makers; they decide what’s right.” What it is important to highlight is that for nonnative Spanish instructors, the RAE helped them legitimize their knowledge of the Spanish language; that is, it empowered them in their position as expert language users and Spanish language teachers. The RAE became an important part of the authority nonnative Spanish instructors
maintained as instructors in front of their students. It follows logically then that, for those who view the RAE as an important part in their role as instructors, the changes will be accepted without question.

The positions described above are closely related to the “native speaker myth”; that is, the belief that native speaker language instructors have more credibility than nonnative ones (Thomas, 1999). This myth is deeply rooted in the concept of the idealized native speaker (Chomsky, 1965, 1986) who is considered to have native intuitions and, because of that, represents the sole reliable source of linguistic data. In these terms nonnative Spanish instructors are perceived as having less legitimacy over a language, and as a result, they are frequently rejected from jobs and even prevented from applying to them (Braine, 1999; Clark & Paran, 2007).

Because of this generalized situation, nonnative Spanish instructors may struggle to maintain authority in front of their students. Authority in language classes hinges on two essential factors: authenticity and legitimacy (Creesse, Blackledge, & Takhi, 2014). Since nonnative instructors have been denied authenticity through the mentioned native speaker myth, they need to focus on maintaining their role as legitimate instructors who are both qualified and confident in their knowledge of the language. Although different strategies are implemented to maintain legitimacy and present themselves to students as expert speakers of the language (e.g., amount of time living abroad, advanced degrees in the target language), the RAE as a regulatory authority on the Spanish language seems to be an important means from which nonnative Spanish participants in our study could claim legitimacy and validation as instructors.

6. Instructors’ Resistance to RAE’s Language Reforms

Instructors who resisted the policy identified two arguments: (i) a lack of rationale behind the reforms and (ii) language ownership and identity.

6.1 Lack of Rationale Behind the Reforms

Several instructors expressed their concerns regarding the lack of rationale behind the RAE’s reforms. This was particularly evident regarding the changes to accent marks. For instance, Jenna declared, “I don't like them changing the accent marks. I think that they were there for a purpose.” A similar comment about the functionality of accents and the concern for their disappearance in certain contexts came from Ana:

I don't like it because I feel the accents, a lot of times I tell my students, are really important. They always want to eliminate accents, but... if I say 'hablo', it's 'I speak', 'habló', 'he spoke'. So, if you don't have the accent, I'm going to mark it wrong because you're saying something different. Same with these meaning changes because when you have the accent it makes it like you're giving emphasis. And so I think it's important to keep that because if not, the meaning is different.

Instructors repeatedly questioned the rationale behind the RAE’s language reforms. They argued that prior to these reforms, accentuation helped differentiate two identically spelled words, and that the recent reforms would lead to ambiguity and confusion instead of simplification.

Another concern raised by instructors who resisted the RAE’s reforms was related to the
plausibility of these changes being incorporated into the different varieties of Spanish. Cristina, a native speaker from Spain stated:

    I think we shouldn't teach things that are artificial or artificially imposed on speakers—on native speakers—because if these changes do start happening in native Spanish, then I guess I would consider really giving it a thought and maybe planning a lesson around it or incorporating it. But there are things that I just don't see happening. Like, I can't imagine people in Spain suddenly calling “i griega”, “ye”. I don't think that's going to happen now or in decades.

Cristina’s comments reflect a common attitude in debates regarding language reforms. That is, when language users feel that language reforms do not reflect their practices and these are imposed on the speech community by an outside institution, they tend to reject the reform. For example, language users in Cyprus were resistant to orthography changes in Cypriot Greek (Georgiou, 2011), and in Ireland, the Gaeltacht speech community rejected the imposition of official Irish terminology (Ní Ghearáin, 2011). Language users in both these contexts viewed the language reforms as artificial and forced upon the community with complete disregard for both their opinions and patterns of use.

6.2. Language Ownership and Identity

Together with a lack of rationale, issues of language ownership and identity were linked to instructors’ resistance to the RAE’s language reforms. In particular, for some instructors, these changes were viewed as an imposition by the RAE. Compared to nonnative Spanish speaking instructors, native Spanish speaking instructors expressed much stronger reactions against the reforms based on language ownership and identity. Picasso, a Castilian Spanish speaker, stated, “There are guidelines and there are rules that are so embedded in my mind when I was a child that it is difficult for me to change.” Asunción, a Cuban Spanish speaker, raised a similar point when asked whether these changes represented an infringement on identity: “Yes, because growing up you were taught in school a way. . . . my whole life I was taught this and then randomly the RAE decides to change it and I have to accept it.” These statements echo how some NSSs linked changes in language to changes in identity, reflecting that language is part of an individual's emotional and private domain (Ball, 1999). As previously mentioned, they also evidence some instructors’ uneasiness or lack of understanding regarding the rationale behind the reforms as highlighted by Asunción’s statement regarding the RAE's decision to “randomly” reform the Spanish language. NNSSs also held the view that the changes to Spanish represented an infringement on identity; however, they limited this infringement on identity solely to Spanish native speakers and not on themselves. For instance, Claire declared, “If I had grown up as a monolingual Spanish speaker, I think I would probably have some problems because if I had grown up being taught this is right, I would feel it’s part of [how] I grew up.” Similarly, Ana, referring to native speakers of Spanish, affirmed, “I think if you tell them, ‘Oh that’s wrong, you can’t say that.’ Of course they’re going to be kind of offended.” The native or nonnative status of Spanish instructors impacted their overall views regarding RAE's language changes. Jones, a nonnative Spanish instructor from the U.S. stated, “It’s hard to have a really strong opinion since it’s not my first language. I don’t think I have as much ownership as someone who grew up speaking it. Another nonnative Spanish instructor from the U.S., Orwell, shared a similar view about the RAE’s reforms:
I think, as a native speaker, my opinions would be 110% different. So, I’m not super passionate about this. I know language needs to change. Orthography doesn’t change easily but it does need to reflect the spoken word. But, as a nonnative speaker, it doesn’t matter to me if “solo” has an accent or not. I don’t care.

The aforementioned instructors’ views pivot around the issue of language ownership, “a metaphor that reflects the legitimate control that speakers claim to have over the development of a language” (Wee, 2002, p. 83). The notion of ownership includes labels such as native speaker, which are used to delineate the status and linguistic competence of various speakers. Claiming ownership over a language means asserting an individual’s competence and legitimacy as a speaker of a language (Blommaert, 1999; Bourdieu, 1991). Certain instructors perceived themselves as having more or less ownership over the Spanish language because of their speaker status; this affected their position towards the reforms. NSSs exhibited stronger reactions to the reforms and tended to gravitate towards positions of resistance towards the changes. On the contrary, NNSSs, not having invested as much in the language (e.g., the repeatedly mentioned childhood drills), exhibited more flexible positions towards the reforms based mainly on practical issues (e.g., language simplification and standardization). While NSSs openly claimed language ownership, NNSSs felt that because of their lack of language ownership they could legitimately react neither strongly against nor in favor of the RAE’s reforms. The native Spanish instructors in this study corroborated some of the views regarding language ownership that language users expressed in Reyes (2013) study, specifically language users’ “life-long commitment” to a specific use of language (p. 348). In this regard, the RAE’s language reforms posed a threat to NSSs perceived commitment which had developed over time. Additionally, for many native Spanish instructors, language was closely associated with not only individual identity but also national identity, a concern that was of little importance for nonnative Spanish instructors.

Language ownership extended beyond the native and nonnative dichotomy. María referenced linguists as having purview over the ownership of language in university foreign languages departments: “There is the linguists. . . . we don’t think that these kind of things apply to a person who is not a linguist, right? It’s just a linguist discussion.” Her comment echoes the institutional tensions between the “language” and “literature” disciplines in several U.S. foreign language departments (Belz, 2005; Scott & Tucker, 2001). As Bernhardt (1997) states, there are “two distinct curricula in language departments, a language curriculum and a literature curriculum” (p. 13), each one with its own objectives and faculty. The language-literature dichotomy reflects a demarcation of knowledge and language (Byrnes, 2001) where “language teachers and literature scholars are careful not to tread on each other's territories” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 7). In this respect, language ownership formed part of the language-literature dichotomy, reflecting the institutional bifurcation of many U.S. language departments.

The claim of ownership over the Spanish language also pivoted around the RAE’s authority within and beyond the confines of Spain’s national territory. Some instructors limited the impact of the language reforms to speakers from Spain, evincing a divide between Spanish speakers from Spain and other countries. For instance, Picasso stated, “Those changes that are coming from the RAE or the academic institutions in Spain, they do not necessarily have to be incorporated within the context of the Latin American literature. . . . there’s a perception of the Spanish imposing those changes to Latin America.” Her comments reflected that the RAE’s language reforms might not be welcomed by Spanish speakers outside of Spain because of the perception of the RAE as a Eurocentric institution (Del Valle, 2007; Paffey, 2012) that represents mainly
Peninsular Spanish. In fact, instructors’ views regarding the RAE’s language reforms revealed that there were some important pre-conceived notions about who owns the language (i.e., the RAE, Spanish speakers from Spain, Latin America, NSSs, or linguists) that shaped instructors’ positioning in favor of or against the changes to the Spanish language.

In general, all of the instructors agreed that language was a dynamic entity in constant evolution—even those who showed opposition to the reforms—and therefore agreed that the changes should be implemented at some point in the future. For instance, Sofia, when asked about whether the RAE should make these changes, replied: “I think it should because, you know, language keeps evolving and getting influences from different things and people change the way they speak.” In regards to the same question, Picasso responded, “Language evolves naturally. . . . some foreign words come into other languages, and they are completely incorporated. . . . I think it’s important to notice all those changes and to actually incorporate [them].” Charlie shared a similar view: “I have no personal interest in preserving the language as it was at any given point.” Therefore, it is possible that after a stage of initial resistance, instructors will incorporate the changes once they feel the changes have been incorporated into the various varieties of Spanish.

7. From Policy to Practice: Instructors’ Implementation of Policy

The RAE’s language reforms had little or no impact on instructor’s pedagogical practices. Instructors agreed that the changes to Spanish orthography could be incorporated into more advanced upper-division courses such as Composition or Grammar but that they should not be incorporated into lower-division courses because they might be confusing for students. When asked about implementing the reforms, Picasso replied: “I don’t really incorporate them. I think incorporating those changes would be more confusing for the students.” Along the same lines, Pedro was skeptical about the usefulness and practicality of the reforms and their implementation: “You spend so much effort and at the end of the day, it turns out that many of our students. . . . don’t pay any attention whatsoever to accents. . . . You have to choose your fights.” On the other hand, Claire declared “I would adopt [them], especially changes that require fewer accent marks. Students are very confused with those. . . . So that’s something that I would be very happy to not have to stress my students out about.” The comments made by these instructors reflect instructors’ appropriation of policy. They interpreted the policy according to their students’ needs, background, and competence. These student characteristics and instructors’ specific teaching context and curricular goals guided instructors’ implementation of the language reforms.

While contextual factors such as student’s needs and competence played an important role in instructors’ decisions to implement the language reforms, instructors frequently mentioned that the most important factor in the reforms’ implementation in the classroom was the textbook. Because the textbooks used at SCU at the time of the study did not reflect the RAE changes, instructors did not incorporate them into their teaching and curriculum. Orwell asserted, “If the textbook doesn’t reflect it, then there’s not really much we can do. And the reason why I say that is ’cause the textbook serves as our standardizer.”

The role of the textbook for language programs is a highly debated issue in foreign language pedagogy (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). Textbooks often function as “the bedrock of syllabus design and lesson planning” (Kramsch, 1988, p. 63), meaning that content in foreign language courses, especially introductory ones, is predetermined and generally adhered to by instructors. At SCU, the textbook served as the standardizer for all instructors who taught introductory courses and was of particular importance for TAs and novice instructors. The textbook is considered an
“agent of change” (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Leung & Andrews, 2012) because in times of language reforms, where ambiguity regarding certain areas of the reforms might exist, the textbook can be a reference and provide guidance for instructors. In our study, in the midst of ambiguity, instructors preferred to adhere to pedagogical content that was strictly in the textbook rather than incorporate new content proposed by the RAE’s language reforms. Despite some of them being receptive to introducing the language reforms in their classes, they were hesitant to do so because course textbooks did not include them. Additionally, the lack of discussion within the Department impacted the reforms’ implementation, rendering the language reforms as something not needed to be incorporated in classroom curricula in the eyes of many instructors. In sum, instructors exercised agency by deciding whether or not to implement the changes based on a combination of external (e.g., the textbook) and internal factors (e.g., language ownership, identity) that they deemed relevant for the implementation of the policy.

8. Discussion

Our study explored Spanish university instructors’ views of a set of language reforms put forward by the RAE. Our findings revealed two main patterns: one of acceptance and one of resistance of the reforms. Positions of acceptance were mainly associated with matters of standardization and simplification of the language and with the role of the RAE as the principal authority and the overseer of the Spanish language. On the other hand, positions of resistance to the RAE’s reforms were based on issues connected to a lack of rationale behind the reforms and on issues related to identity and language ownership. More interestingly, instructors’ implementation of the language changes, regardless of their views, was basically inexistent. Instructors decided not to integrate these changes into their teaching based on two main factors: (i) the textbook did not reflect these changes and (ii) they felt students’ proficiency level was insufficient to understand or benefit from these changes and the language reforms did not contribute to the overarching goal of the program (which was attaining communicative competence in the target language).

The findings presented in this study provide evidence of the central role that teachers play in LPP, particularly in language policy implementation (Baldauf, 2006; Cincotta-Segi, 2009). They support previous studies (English & Varghese, 2010; Marlsbary & Appelgate, 2016; Menken & García, 2010; Oliveira Coelho, & Henze, 2014) which demonstrate the importance of teacher agency in the interpretation and appropriation of policy. For the group of instructors interviewed in this study, agency was exerted by resisting the implementation of the policy in the context of their classrooms. In this particular case, the policy was not implemented because instructors felt that the policy did not serve a purpose in their particular teaching context. In fact, they believed that, instead of contributing to the main goal of the program, attaining communicative competence, it could impede students’ progress in the language. Instructors argued that the changes were beyond the understanding of their students’ proficiency level, and that by incorporating them into the class, students would be hindered in attaining classroom goals. This elaborates on previous literature that argues that policies can only be implemented successfully when they are compatible with teachers’ educational goals (Choi, 2014).

In our analysis of instructors’ views, a clear divide emerged between native and non-native instructors with the former group expressing stronger and more negative reactions to the language reforms than the latter. As we argued in the previous section, the attitudes of the native Spanish speaking participants were clearly related to a sense of language ownership. In fact,
NSSs considered these changes an “infringement” on their identity. This corroborates similar arguments in studies about individuals’ attitudes toward language reforms and standardization in which the community opposed changes that were not representative of their speech practices or did not take them into account (Ball, 1999; Georgiou, 2011; Reyes, 2013; Sebba, 2007). For the nonnative instructors, this notion of ownership was rendered irrelevant since they did not claim ownership of the language and certainty did not take the orthographic changes as an infringement on their identity. However, our study highlights the concept of legitimacy (Llurda, 2005) as a crucial one for this group. Nonnative Spanish instructors viewed the RAE as a language authority that offered them support to present themselves as expert speakers of the language. For that reason, their attitudes towards the language changes were more favorable, and as opposed to the native Spanish instructors, they did not question them. On the contrary, they praised the simplification of the reforms and viewed them as something that would streamline the teaching of the Spanish language to their students.

Despite the diverse reasons for accepting or rejecting the policy, all instructors tacitly agreed on the non-implementation of the language reforms in their classes. Course textbooks and students’ needs principally drove this decision. The course textbook used by instructors greatly influenced what instructors taught, corroborating previous studies’ findings about instructors’ professional development and the influence of textbooks on instructors’ teaching practices, especially TAs and inexperienced instructors (Allen, 2008; Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010). It clearly overshadowed the RAE’s authority since instructors’ decisions regarding the implementation of the Spanish language reforms were directly related to whether or not textbooks had integrated the reforms. That is, although the RAE’s language reforms represented a standardization of the Spanish language for some instructors, course textbooks became instrumental and the ultimate authority, not the RAE, in implementing the language reforms. In this sense, we could argue that textbooks can influence and contribute to de facto language policies. This highlights the influence that textbooks and publishing companies can have on foreign language instructors’ implementation of language policies in U.S. higher educational settings, particularly in programs with a large number of students and a teaching body with varying levels of teaching experience (e.g., inexperienced and novice vs. experienced instructors) such as the one at SCU. Hence, the textbooks a foreign language program decides to adopt is one of critical importance since it can drive issues ranging from curriculum design and policy implementation to assessment and evaluation.

This study provides insights into how language policy reforms are received and appropriated by individuals in a context where the societal language differs from that of the language reform. The findings make a contribution to understanding the rationale behind U.S. foreign language instructors’ attitudes and responses to a language authority, like the RAE, and its language reforms. They reveal that instructors made policy enactment decisions grounded in the language and communication needs of their students, which may be different from those that drive policy implementation in Spanish-speaking countries. Moreover, the present study contributes to the role of language academies in language standardization (Estival & Pennycook, 2011; Paffey, 2007; Tosi, 2011). While language academies can play a role in influencing, controlling, and dictating matters of language policy at the macro-level, policy actors, like those instructors in this study, remain powerful agents in the final implementation of those policies. The present study highlights the success and limitations of language academies as they attempt to influence language practices. It demonstrates the necessity for further examination and attention to how language academies and their policies impact the teaching of foreign languages in global contexts and,
more importantly, what role instructors play within this process. Foreign language departments in U.S. higher education institutions need to address language reforms, like the one undertaken by the RAE, and provide instructors with curricular guidance, content-specific support, and dialogue opportunities on how to proceed with such language reforms in terms of curriculum and assessment. Teacher education programs need to examine the role that language academies or language-regulating authorities such as the RAE play in LPP and their impact on language pedagogy.

9. Conclusion

In this study, we have examined Spanish instructors’ interpretation and appropriation of the RAE’s language reforms in a U.S. university. It responds to calls for further research of teacher agency and language policy, particularly at the tertiary level, by contributing to the growing body of research that emphasizes the critical role of language teachers in implementing language policies (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005; Li, 2010; Menken & García, 2010). While it is important to understand how language policy goals intersect with education, it is equally important to examine how language policies are taken up and implemented by instructors in higher education. In the context of foreign language education, the need to explore teacher agency in response to language reforms and their implementation in university classroom settings is critical. Foreign language instructors make classroom decisions based on the language and communication needs of their students. We need to understand the extent to which instructors, as powerful actors in LPP decision-making, become policy implementers in the context of language in education reforms. Doing so allows us to gain insights into instructors’ possible pedagogical obstacles and limitations as well as ways to enhance and cultivate instructors’ multiple strengths and teaching practices. It also opens up opportunities for transformation through the interrogation of instructors’ roles and classroom practices in regards to language policies. This study reveals the critical role of teachers in shaping curriculum through the implementation of language policy.
Works Cited
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Appendix A: Participant Information

Section A: Personal Information

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age: 
3. Place of birth:
4. Nationality:
5. What is your first language?
6. What additional languages do you speak?
7. What is your job/position at the SCU?

Section B: Contact Information

If you would like to participate in the study, please provide your name and contact information below (PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY):

Last Name: ____________________ First: ____________________ Middle: ____________________

Telephone Number (Home): ____________________ (Cell): ____________________

Good time to reach you by phone: ____________________

Email: ____________________

(Please note that I cannot guarantee the confidentiality of any information sent over the internet.)

Real Academia Española (RAE), the organization that defines Spanish language standards, made several changes regarding Spanish orthographic conventions. The following is a summary the principal changes implemented by the RAE:

**ALPHABET**

1. The letters “ch” and “ll” are no longer considered separate letters of the alphabet reducing the total number of letters from 29 to 27.

2. The names of the letters “b,” “v,” “w,” and “y,” which vary among different Spanish-speaking countries, have been assigned one name. The new names of the letters are listed below:

   - b, B  
   - v, V  
   - w, W  
   - y, Y

   - be  
   - uve  
   - uve doble  
   - ye

3. The letter “q” is eliminated when it is used to represent the phoneme “k”. For example, *Iraq* is now written as “*Irak*” and *quórum* becomes “*cuórum*.”
ACCENT
4. Words such as guión, fié, riáis, Sión o truhán are now considered monosyllabic. They are no longer accented.

5. The accent is eliminated from the word “sólo” except in cases where its omission may lead to ambiguity. Previously, “sólo” was used to distinguish between the adverbial form of the word meaning “only” and the adjectival form “solo” meaning “alone.” Demonstrative pronouns such as “éste” or “ésa” also cease to have an accent.

6. The conjunction “o” is no longer accented when appearing between two numbers (e.g. 3 ó 4).

PREFIX
7. Prefixes are joined to the word they precede. For example, “exmarido” instead of “ex marido”. Prefixes are written with a space when they precede two words, as in the case of “pro derechos humanos”.

FOREIGN WORDS
8. Foreign words, if not modified to the appropriate Spanish spelling, must be written in italics. For example:

Me encanta el ballet clásico / Me encanta el balé clásico.
Juego al paddle todos los domingos / Juego al pádel todos los domingos
La reunión se suspendió por falta de quorum / La reunión se suspendió por falta de cuórum.
Appendix B: Spanish Instructor Interview Protocol

**A. PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND**

1. How long have you been at the SCU?
2. What institutions were you at prior to coming to SCU? What position did you hold there?
3. What Spanish classes have you taught? Beginner, intermediate, etc.
4. How long have you taught Spanish? Where have you taught it?

**B. RAE & Spanish orthographic changes**

*In this part of the interview I would like to ask you some questions about the recent orthographic changes made by the RAE (Spanish Royal Academy)*

I. Views of RAE’s language reforms

1. Are you familiar with the RAE?
2. What do you know about it?
3. Did you know about the recent changes to Spanish orthography?
4. What is your opinion about the changes?
5. Do you agree/disagree with them?
6. What do you like/dislike about them?
7. Which changes are the most/least significant?
8. What do you know about the RAE?
9. Do you think the RAE should regulate or monitor the Spanish language?
10. Should an institution that regulates the Spanish language exist?

II. Implementation of RAE’s language reforms

11. Have the changes to Spanish orthography impacted your teaching?
12. Have you incorporated the Spanish orthography changes into your pedagogy? If not, why?
13. Have these changes appeared in textbooks?
14. Do you feel the need to incorporate those changes into your teaching?

15. Have you mentioned the changes to students?

16. If so, what were their reactions?

17. As a department have they been discussed? Should they be discussed?

18. Have your colleagues’ reacted in any way to the changes in Spanish orthography? If so, how?

19. From a teacher’s perspective, what are your views about language?

20. Do you feel the need to implement reforms to the Spanish language in your teaching?

21. Do you keep up to date with the RAE’s Spanish language reforms?

22. This is a study about Spanish instructor’s views of the changes to Spanish orthography made by the RAE. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not discussed?