WPHL – Who Are Heritage Language Learners?

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https://www.cilc.gc.cuny.edu/wphl-who-are-heritage-writers

General definition

The most widely used definition of heritage language learners (HLLs) among educators in the US, taken from Valdés (2000), identifies an HLL as a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English.

The heritage language is a complex phenomenon in itself, existing as a heterogeneous set of linguistic features and cultural practices in its US context, rather than as an extension of the language and culture of a community outside the US. An HLL participates in a complex multilingual and multicultural environment.

HLLs are not a monolithic group—there is robust variation among HLLs with respect to whether and how they embody each of the elements presented here. For example, some HLLs will have high levels of proficiency in the language, others low. Some HLLs will have strong connections to the heritage culture, others minimal. In this site, we focus on HLLs who have at least an Intermediate level of proficiency in the heritage language.

We consider here some of the key elements that shape the language of heritage learners, and consider which of these elements predict proficiency in writing, to leverage this information in placement and pedagogical decisions.

Unpacking the definition: Heritage language learners

Age and context of acquisition	When and how a language is acquired shapes all aspects of the language and has an impact on language proficiency. **A typical heritage language learner…** Acquires the heritage language from birth in a naturalistic setting (from family members, caregivers, etc.).
Quantity and type of input	Input: the language a person is exposed to in a communicative context. Input is a main component of acquisition, and the one without which acquisition does not take place. **A typical heritage language learner…** Is exposed to a large quantity of input from a variety of sources, mostly in familiar contexts; thus, familiar contexts are the ones most commonly used when interacting in the heritage language.
Educational experiences	**A typical heritage language learner…** Has limited literacy experiences with the heritage language. They might have attended a few years of grade school in a country were the heritage language is the majority language. As a result, they might have no or limited explicit/metalinguistic knowledge.
Language dominance	Most bilinguals are dominant in one of the languages they speak. **A typical heritage language learner…** Experiences a shift in language dominance at some point in childhood or adolescence, from the heritage language to English.
Intercultural competence and cultural connections	Intercultural competence "is the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions" (Deardorff, 2006). **A typical heritage language learner…** Participates in complex multilingual and multicultural practices that may include: the majority language/culture (English/USA), the HL language and culture, a minority language as realized in a particular US community: i.e., L.A. Spanish, Miami Haitian Creole, New York Chinese, etc., a language and culture as spoken and practiced outside the US, usually mediated by parents, grandparents, or other family members, e.g., Spanish spoken in Nicaragua, Hatian spoken in Haiti, Chinese spoken in Taiwan. The extent of this participation varies.

Unpacking the definition: The heritage language

Minority Language and Language Varieties	The heritage language is spoken by communities who are linguistic minorities: in our case, linguistic minorities in the US. The heritage language overlaps substantially with, but also diverges from the language in its majority context. For instance, Russian spoken in Queens shares many characteristics with Russian spoken in Moscow, but Russian spoken in Queens also shows characteristics of languages in contact. The power imbalances between majority and minority groups are typically reproduced in the prestige assigned to their languages and their speakers. The social capital associated with national languages versus minority languages (including heritage languages) tends to be an extension of the power and prestige associated with their speakers. As such, speakers of heritage languages often experience linguistic prejudice. Nevertheless, high levels of functional proficiency can be achieved in any language or language variety, as every language furnishes its speaker with tools for a full range of linguistic expression.
Language in Contact	Languages are constantly changing. This change occurs in monolingual contexts, as well as in multilingual ones. In multilingual contexts, like communities in the US where English and one or more heritage languages are spoken, it is common to have languages "borrowing" from each other. Borrowing has endowed English with the majority of its vocabulary over the centuries. More recently, contact between English and Spanish in the U.S. context has yielded words like "bodega", used by English speakers to refer to convenience stores, and "troca", used by heritage Spanish speakers to refer to trucks. Borrowing is the most pervasive contact phenomenon, with prolific results in many heritage languages, e.g., heritage Russian "бенефиты" for "benefits", as well as in monolingual contexts, e.g., Japanese コンピューター /konpyuta/ for "computer".

Implications for instruction

Our overarching recommendation is for instructors to leverage HLLs' particular strengths, and implement instructional practices that build from their learners' actual proficiency levels. HLLs bring highly developed oral language skills, which often place them at an advantage over their L2 peers with respect to their readiness to process complex input. Since input is the cornerstone of acquisition, instructors can exploit these receptive skills, accelerating the development of their students' proficiency by exposing them to a variety of rich input.

HLLs typically have a vast vocabulary that pertains to informal context/content, vocabulary that is difficult to come about in academic textbooks. On the other hand, HLLs are typically less familiar with formal, academic, and professional context/content. One type of knowledge can be used to scaffold the development of the other by working with input that integrates both (some works of fiction do this really well), and gradually moving from there to formal contexts (for example, practice writing one letter to a family member and then one to a professor). We caution instructors against presenting these kinds of contexts without transition, which might exacerbate feelings of linguistic insecurity, which HLLs are already vulnerable to.

HLLs tend to have very limited literacy experiences in the heritage language. Access to reading and writing in the heritage language might be impeded by a lack of knowledge of the writing system (if the heritage language employs a non-Roman alphabet or a logographic system). With this in mind, instructors should assess learners' abilities and work from their actual proficiency levels in reading and writing.

HLLs might be unable to explicitly explain what they know implicitly. Lack of metalinguistic awareness and associated vocabulary is not an impediment to proficiency development and literacy development. HLLs at Intermediate and Advanced level of proficiency have a robust implicit linguistic system in place that can be further developed by exposing them to input and output practices at the appropriate level.

Finally, we recommend that instructors keep the affective dimension in mind as well. HLLs might come to class with very low "linguistic self-esteem", usually the result of the status of minority languages and the varieties they speak. Incorporating sociolinguistic awareness through critical discussion of issues of power and identity as they relate to language, and taking the explicit stance that no language (variety) is "better" (linguistically speaking) than another, promotes linguistic confidence and motivation, which in turn might have a positive effect on proficiency development. For models on how to work within critical pedagogy see Leeman (2005).