



**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF STATE  
SUPERVISORS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

**Position Paper**

# **HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

**PREPARED BY**

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# Heritage Language Learners

## Introduction

In 1977, the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages (NCSSFL), in a position paper issued on Bilingual Education, stated that:

if the United States is to remain a world leader, it must develop for its citizens the opportunities to learn to communicate adequately in many tongues and in the context of many cultures. It must provide for orderly development of native or ancestral languages as well as a choice of other languages for all its people. It is understood, however, that development of the official language of the nation English is important to all citizens (NCSSFL, 1977).

Three decades later, at the beginning of a new millennium, the NCSSFL maintains its position toward the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity among the population of the United States. Furthermore, it endorses an expanded and more inclusive view on heritage language students, including, but not limited to, children with limited English proficiency in our educational system.

## Linguistic and Cultural Resources: For the Nation and For Individuals

The NCSSFL believes that, on the micro level, being bilingual/multilingual and bicultural/multicultural is a personal asset, which will greatly enrich an individual's educational, economic, and political life. Not only will such individuals enjoy access to and interaction with people of different languages and cultures, but they will also enhance their own marketability, social mobility, and political empowerment.

On the macro level, such individuals are indeed human resources on which the society may draw upon in various ways. While the world is rapidly shrinking due to globalization and through the Internet, and while English has become a lingua franca, the opposite is also true. Maintaining one's individual identity and ideology through language and culture broadens one's perspective and outlook. Such respect for linguistic human rights (Phillipson, Ranut, & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995) and the development of necessary linguistic skills and pragmatics will enable American citizens to communicate effectively and achieve cross-cultural understanding. Should heritage language speakers be able to build on the linguistic and cultural inheritance that their families pass on, they will be able to achieve a high level of language proficiency that will benefit both the individual and the society. Taking the perspective of building the foreign language capacity of this nation, it is important to recognize that all heritage and indigenous

languages and cultures within its borders are indeed resources that the United States possesses and must strive to preserve and develop (Brecht & Ingold, 1998).

### **Definition of Heritage Language Learners**

There is no one profile of heritage language students, as they cover a heterogeneous population. Furthermore, a narrow definition of the term would do more harm than benefit if any language group/individual is excluded rather than being included. It is thus important to recognize that heritage language students are not a monolithic group who comes from any specific linguistic or racial background. According to the definitions offered by Guadalupe Vald s, heritage language students are individuals who:

- Are raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken;
- Speak or merely understand the heritage language;
- Are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language (Vald s, 1999, also see 2001).

These definitions show that there is a wide range of language proficiency among heritage language students. They may be monolingual English speakers with rudimentary knowledge and ability in the home/heritage language and culture; they may also be monolingual heritage language speakers with little or no skills in English; most of them within our school systems probably fall somewhere along the continuum of language abilities.

The enormous difference in linguistic abilities indicates the heterogeneity of the heritage language student population in the United States, which is categorized into three major groups by Fishman (1991; 2001). The first group of heritage languages is the indigenous languages spoken by Ameri-Indians. The second group is what Fishman called colonial languages, such as Spanish, French, and German, which were brought along with earlier settlers in North America. The third group is immigrant languages spoken by immigrant groups that came later, such as Japanese, Chinese, Hebrew, and Russian, to name just a few examples. The mere fact that a heritage language student may come from any of the three groups portrays the complexity of heritage language issues. It is important to note that, although Native American languages are not considered foreign languages, they are languages other than English and the study of these languages may allow students to earn foreign language credits (such as the case in Oregon, Nariyo Kono, personal communication, May 17, 2002). Therefore, much of the discussion of this NCSSFL position paper will also apply to American indigenous heritage language students.

Because language, culture, identity, and power among various groups in social situations shape and are being shaped by human interactions (Erickson, 1996; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz & Hymes, 1964, 1972; Hymes, 1974; Zentella, 1997), many socio-historical-cultural factors increase complexity of heritage language

issues. For example, place of origin, the condition of entry or the history of annexation, place of settlement, length and generational residence in the United States, native born or foreign born, age of arrival if foreign born, family educational attainment and socio-economic background all play important roles in the language development and identity formation of heritage language students. Their needs in education hence vary tremendously from individual to individual.

### **Needs of Heritage Language Learners**

Applying Vald s definitions of heritage language students to traditional terms of classifying students in the K-12 school system, heritage language students may be divided into four major groups: (1) new arrivals/migrant students; (2) foreign-born students who arrived at a young age but have been in American schools for a number of years; (3) ethnic-American students who were born here to immigrant parents or ancestors; and (4) indigenous American students who would like to strengthen or re-establish their ties to their heritage language and culture.

The immediate linguistic and educational needs of these students may vary from group to group. While the following discussion intends to be generic, it is important to bear in mind local conditions and the socio-cultural factors mentioned above when real students are considered. Generally speaking, new arrivals and migrant students may need instruction in the English language and content areas. Depending on whether they have received any formal schooling in the home country, there may be a need to teach English through the native language. Ideally, from the foreign language perspective, it is important to continue the students development in the native language and literacy in order to ensure true bilingualism and biliteracy in that individual.

For those students who were foreign-born but have been in the United States for a certain period of time, it is important to assess if their English language ability has been developed to the extent that they are able to function fully in American schools. Furthermore, they need to be proficient and literate in their native language in order to be truly bilingual and biliterate.

On the other hand, there should be a mechanism to ensure that those students in groups 3 or 4 mentioned above have developed their English language ability in an age-appropriate manner. As far as their HL ability is concerned, they may or may not have developed any oral proficiency in the heritage language; their reading and writing literacy is often limited due to lack of exposure and only those who have had the opportunity to receive formal instruction in their ancestral language may have developed a certain degree of literacy. The linguistic skills, therefore, may be unevenly developed, and any of these skills may fall anywhere on the continuum from receptive/passive at one point to productive/active at the other point.

Other issues such as cultural understanding and representation, and forming and performing social and linguistic identities (Erickson, 1996; Erickson & Shultz, 1982;

Freeman, 1998) are equally influential in the maintenance and development of the heritage language. That is, contextual factors surrounding heritage students, their ethnic group, and the wider community will improve or impede their development in the heritage language. When heritage language students feel that others in schools and the society value their languages and cultures, they will be more likely to claim themselves speakers of the language and members of the cultural group. On the contrary, when the heritage language is stigmatized and the cultural inheritance is ridiculed, heritage language students will be less willing to be identified as such. The educational system needs to provide them with enabling tools in order for them to build a healthy identity with which to negotiate group membership with their own heritage group and other groups in the society (Bucholtz, 1995; Erickson, 1996; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Gumperz & Hymes, 1964; Ogbu, 1996; Rampton, 1995). In other words, schools need to assist heritage language students to successfully assimilate to the mainstream society while maintaining their affinity to their own cultural roots.

One way to achieve this goal is to ensure that students acquire the dominant language, Standard English, while encouraging and helping them maintain the heritage language that is their special badge of identity (Bucholtz, 1995, pp. 355-357). On the other hand, schools and educators need to broaden their views on literacy and acknowledge the community funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992, p.20) that exists in heritage language students homes and communities. Just as there are multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983; 1999), there are multiple dimensions and layers in literacy, identity, knowledge, and discourse in both the dominant and heritage languages and cultures (McKay, 1993; McKay & Wong, 1996; The New London Group, 1996). While students need to acquire the literacies of the dominant society, educators need to value the literacies that students possess.

This view is in concert with the goals proposed by Cazden et al. of the New London Group (1996) at their meeting in New London, New Hampshire. The group argues that the goals for literacy learning should be creating access to the evolving language of work, power, and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment (p. 60). They define the traditional literacy pedagogy as that of teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language (pp. 60-61). As such, literacy pedagogy has been restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language (p. 61). Therefore, they advocate the broadening of literacy teaching and learning to include negotiation of multiple discourses:

We seek to highlight two principal aspects of this multiplicity. First, we want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate. Second, we argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning

variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies (p. 61).

Furthermore, educators must attend to sociolinguistic issues faced by heritage language learners. For example, some students may speak a dialect that happens to be a stigmatized variety with regard to the standard variety. They may need to expand the domains of their language use from those of the family, playground and street to those of the school and later to work and so on (Fishman, 1972); and increase their verbal repertoires (Sridhar, 1996), i.e. the total range of linguistic resources available to them. They need to know what and how to speak to whom in what situations (Hymes, 1974), and need to upgrade their language proficiency from that of a child in a social situation to an age-appropriate academic level (see Cummins, 1981; Vald s & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998). It is also quite possible that some of them experience fossilization and attrition (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 462; Ellis, 1994, pp. 353-355; Hyltenstam, 1988, p. 68; Selinker, 1972, p. 215) in the heritage language. That is, not only is their heritage language not fully developed, but it also stays at a stage where many linguistic mixings or errors occur, or even loses what has been acquired as a result of the exclusive use of English.

On the other hand, because of home language and cultural exposure, heritage language learners will most likely be able to learn the heritage language at an accelerated pace. Regular foreign language pedagogy and materials often do not suit their needs. Teachers also need to engage in culturally responsive teaching (Heath, 1983; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Philips, 1983; Tharp & Gallimore, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) so that every student who comes from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may participate in meaningful schooling experiences. In short, it may be necessary to take innovative programming approaches to serve the needs of heritage language students.

## **Taking Innovative Programmatic Approaches**

**Program Models:** Several program models may be explored in terms of serving the needs of heritage language students. For example, if local conditions and student demographics allow it, a two-way dual-language program is ideal in helping students of the dominant group learn a second language and students of a specific minority group learn their heritage language. Immersion foreign language programs are also helpful in developing language proficiency and literacy for all students (See Genesee, 1999, for details on program types).

Heritage language students can benefit from foreign language course offerings as well. They need to be encouraged to enroll in foreign language classes in which their heritage language is taught when certain accommodations are provided. In Texas, for example, students who are native speakers of Spanish are placed at appropriate instructional levels after assessing the linguistic skills that students already master. Students are awarded graduation credit based on demonstrated mastery of those skills and continue further study of Spanish within the foreign language curriculum. Schools

should establish course sequences designed to build on the skills that students bring, develop additional skills, use their language in new contexts/domains, and increase their pride in their heritage. These course offerings may represent a separate strand comprised of homogeneous groups of students with similar linguistic backgrounds and needs.

In addition, schools or districts may collaborate with an ethnic community, by co-establishing or helping the community set up heritage language schools that can offer language instruction or accrediting the language classes that community schools have already offered (For examples, see X. Wang, 1996; also see S. C. Wang, 1999). Such community schools provide opportunities and incentives (Cooper, 1989, pp. 159-160) for heritage language students to engage in meaningful communication in the target language, enhance their ethnic pride, and improve their cultural preservation (Hornberger, 1997; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1990; and Wong, 1988). As in two way immersion programs, if non-heritage language students attend such schools, the presence of both heritage language and regular students will in turn heighten the sense of ethnic pride for community members to value their own heritage.

**Community Collaboration:** In designing curriculum or a language program for heritage language speakers, the following areas must be addressed: community collaboration; teacher availability and training; content of instruction; materials development; as well as student and program evaluation and assessment. For example, in community collaboration, it is important to find out what heritage languages exist and if an avenue in the educational system can be established that would connect the community to the schools. If so, what kind of collaboration is feasible so that both sides benefit?

**Teacher Recruitment and Training:** Teacher availability and training can refer both to the use of native speakers in our school system, as well as the training of mainstream teachers to teach heritage language students. Native speaker teachers can serve as role models for heritage language students, while providing excellent language input to all students. If there are native speakers interested in becoming teachers, adequate training and support should be made available in order for them to be part of the teaching force. Depending on an individual's educational background and career goals, native speakers can serve either as heritage language and cultural informants, paraprofessionals, or teachers. In addition to pedagogical, linguistic, and educational training, native speaker professionals need to understand American culture and how the American educational system works in its socio-cultural contexts. Likewise, mainstream teachers need to receive training in examining their beliefs and orientations toward heritage language speakers and their language varieties. They need to know the needs and socio-psychological orientations of heritage language students in order to maximize their instruction.

**Curriculum Design and Material Development:** In curriculum design, questions such as standards alignment with students' proficiency levels and needs; valuing all students' heritage, background, learning styles and abilities; and promoting a balanced world view and intergroup relationship must be addressed. In materials

development, issues related to the language system itself, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax, must be incorporated in an age-appropriate and contextualized manner. They need to aim at fostering bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy.

**Program Evaluation and Student Assessment:** Finally, in evaluation and assessment, the monitoring and measurement of students and programs must be addressed. What are evaluation and assessment criteria? What are instructional and program objectives? What are expected outcomes? What qualitative and quantitative measurement can be conducted and demonstrated? What are criteria for student placement, exit, and promotion? What proficiency level is expected of students? Are there other social and psychological gains to be expected and obtained? For heritage language speakers who are limited English proficient, assessment in their subject matter achievements must be included as well.

**Summary:** The NCSFL recognizes that education is a people business which must adapt to local groups and socio-cultural conditions. The suggestions above represent points for consideration, but in no way are they meant to be comprehensive and exhaustive (for more discussions about heritage language students in the K-12 education system, see Wang & Green, 2001). Moreover, the NCSFL recognizes that heritage language students represent a wealth of research potential in terms of general education, first language acquisition, second language learning and teaching, sociolinguistics, and the interrelationship of language, culture, and identity. The fruit of this body of research will in turn inform the educational system to better cultivate the resource stored in these students and communities.

## **Conclusion: Promising Practices in the Nation**

At the present time, various initiatives are underway that involve heritage language learners in the United States. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has designated a special interest group (SIG) in the area of Spanish for Native Speakers that solicits conference presentations for the annual conference. In 1999, the National Foreign Language Center and Center for Applied Linguistics sponsored the first National Heritage Language Conference and Initiatives to address the issues of the diverse linguistic student groups and to share information regarding the various responses to these issues. The second national conference will take place in the greater Washington DC area in the fall of 2002 (for details, see the NFLC or CAL websites). The Center for Applied Linguistics also established the ERIC/CLL Resource Guides Online, providing lists of resources, such as ERIC Digests, ERIC Annotated Bibliographies, articles, books and reports, curricula and teaching materials, listserves, and web sites related to the instruction of Spanish for native speakers. The National Endowment for the Humanities has funded professional development opportunities at a variety of institutions of higher education across the country. The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese has recently published *Handbook for Teachers K-16, Volume I*, as part of its Professional Development Series in the area of Spanish for native speakers (Anderson 2000).

These are examples of how professional organizations, government agencies, and researchers are contributing to the knowledge base regarding this student population. Together, with commitment to meeting the needs of these students at the campus level, many benefits can be realized for individuals as well as the society. The United States can indeed become a truly pluralistic nation when all its members heritage languages and cultures are valued and capitalized.

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### **Useful Resources**

- American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese: [www.aatsp.org](http://www.aatsp.org)
- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages: [www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org)
- Center for Applied Linguistics: [www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)
- ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics (ERIC/CLL): [www.cal.org/ericell](http://www.cal.org/ericell)
- National Foreign Language Center: [www.nflc.org](http://www.nflc.org)

Heritage learners of minority languages can play a lynchpin role in reversing language shift (RLS) in their families; however, in order to enact this role, they must first overcome certain barriers to re-integrating the minority language more. Heritage learners of minority languages can play a lynchpin role in reversing language shift (RLS) in their families; however, in order to enact this role, they must first overcome certain barriers to re-integrating the minority language into the home domain. A typical heritage language learner has learned their heritage language to some extent in childhood from parents and relatives, but theyâ€™ve become more proficient in the language that dominates where theyâ€™ve grown up and been formally educated. The question they face is how they can develop their heritage language from their current level to higher levels of proficiency.Â Continue reading â€œAdvice to heritage language learners: Donâ€™t focus so much on the language!â€ 1. Definition of Heritage Language Learners 2. The Importance of Heritage Language Learners 3. Creating the Optimum Learning Environment for Heritage LanguageÂ Additional Resources 13. Survey. Heritage Learners â€œ Ohio Department of Education â€œ June 2017. 1. (Valdes, 2000) (Fishman, 2001: Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003) (Kagan,2003). Heritage Language Learners (HLL) generally fall into four major categories: 1. New arrivals/migrant students.