



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
ABOUT
HERITAGE LANGUAGES
IN THE
UNITED STATES

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1. What is a heritage language?

The term “heritage language” is used to identify languages other than the dominant language (or languages) in a given social context. In the United States English is the *de facto* dominant language (not an “official” language, but the primary language used in government, education, and public communication); thus, any language other than English can be considered a “heritage language” for speakers of that language. (See articles by Joshua Fishman, Guadalupe Valdés, and Terrence Wiley in Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001, for discussion of definitions.)

In the United States, languages other than English are often thought of and referred to as “foreign” languages. However, many people who live in the United States have cultural connections to and know languages other than English. These languages are not “foreign” to particular individuals or communities; instead, they are *familiar* in a variety of ways. Some people may be able to speak, read, and write the language; others may only speak or understand when spoken to. Some may not understand the language but are part of a family or community where the language is spoken. **The term “heritage” language can be used to describe any of these connections between a non-dominant language and a person, a family, or a community.**

The term “minority language” has also been used for the purpose of identifying languages other than English in the United States. However, there are at least two concerns with the term “minority” language. First, while “minority” in a demographic sense tends to mean “smaller in number” or less than 50% of a group (as opposed to a numerical majority), many negative social connotations accompany the term. Second, in a particular community or social setting in the United States, a language other than English may in fact be spoken by a numerical majority. (See the Introduction to Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001, for discussion.)

Alternative terms to “heritage language” have been and are being used in the United States and in other countries. These terms include “community language” (Baker and Jones, 1998; Corson, 1999; Wiley, 2001, 2005) and “home language” (e.g., Yeung, Marsh, & Suliman, 2000).

The linguist Joshua Fishman identifies three types of heritage languages in the United States (Fishman, 2001). These categories emphasize the historical and social conditions of other languages relative to English.

1. **Immigrant heritage languages** are any of the languages spoken by immigrants arriving in the United States after it became an independent country. Immigrant heritage languages may overlap with colonial heritage languages; for instance, Spanish was a colonial heritage language, and it is now an immigrant heritage language of great importance in the United States.
2. **Indigenous heritage languages** are the languages of the peoples native to the Americas. Many of these languages are now extinct, some are spoken by a very few elders and are at risk of being lost, and a very few are being maintained within communities of speakers through strong

educational efforts. For a book-length account of the educational efforts to maintain Navajo within a community on the Navajo Reservation, see McCarty (2002).

3. **Colonial heritage languages** are the languages of the various European groups that first colonized what is now the United States and are still spoken here. These include such languages as Dutch, German, Finnish, French, Spanish, and Swedish.

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2. Who is a heritage language learner?

In general, the term “heritage language learner” is used to describe a person studying a language who has proficiency in or a cultural connection to that language. However, just as there are different kinds of heritage languages (see *What is a heritage language?*), there are different types of heritage language learners.

For members of indigenous communities (e.g., Navajo, Hawaiian, Arapaho), any member of the community studying the language might be considered a *heritage language learner*. In such cases (e.g., Navajo children learning the Navajo language in school), all learners are members of the community and are heritage language learners regardless of their levels of Navajo proficiency. Children who come from homes where no Navajo is spoken would be considered heritage language learners, as would children who have had some home exposure to the language. In such settings, the focus of instruction might be community-oriented and focused on language preservation and maintenance, or it might be on heritage language development. Language instruction is part of a larger effort to pass on cultural connections to younger generations (Fishman, 2001; McCarty, 2002).

In K-12 public and private and college education in the United States, where English is the predominant language of schooling, languages other than English are typically considered *foreign languages*, and students of these languages are considered *foreign language learners*. However, in many classrooms, some students will have a connection to the language of study through their family and some proficiency in it. These students are also *heritage language learners*. In some educational settings where there are a large number of students with home background and some proficiency in the language, separate classes are offered for heritage language learners (e.g., see program profiles on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Raleigh, NC, Spanish heritage language program; the Flushing High School, Flushing, NY Chinese program; and the New York City public schools French heritage language program).

Coming from the Spanish language development context, Guadalupe Valdés, a professor in the department of Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University, has formulated a basic definition that resonates with language educators and researchers. Her definition has been reprinted a number of times, including as the central definition of “heritage language learner” in *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource* (Peyton et al, 2001). It is also commonly cited in articles published in the online, peer-reviewed journal, *Heritage Language Journal*, published annually since 2003 by the UCLA Center for World Languages.

Foreign language educators use the term to refer to a language 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 (Valdés, 2000a, 2000b). For these educators, the heritage language student is also different in important ways from the traditional foreign language student. This difference, however, has to do with developed functional proficiencies in the heritage languages (Valdés, 2001, p. 38).

This definition is especially helpful to language educators, because proficiency in the language studied is the focus of instruction. At the same time, it raises a number of issues that are of concern to language educators and will be addressed in other FAQs.

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3. What is a heritage language program?

In its broadest sense, a heritage language program is any language development program that is designed or tailored to address the needs of heritage language learners (see related FAQ, *Who is a heritage language learner?*). The Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Language (the Alliance) is building a collection of program profiles—descriptions of heritage language programs throughout the United States. Click [here](#) for more information about this project, including how to add a program to the collection

Heritage language programs may be at any level or setting, including community-based, K-12, or higher education, and vary in terms of their approaches to teaching, populations they serve, and other factors. The following overview provides a basic outline of heritage language programs in these three major educational contexts.

Community-based programs: Historically in the United States, the strongest efforts for the teaching of heritage languages have occurred outside of mainstream schooling where, until recently, education in languages other than English was characterized almost exclusively as foreign language teaching (Fishman, 2001; Valdés, 2001). Heritage language schools are often created out of a community's desire to pass on their language and culture from one generation to the next in order to maintain connections within families and communities.

Community-based schools or programs are organized privately rather than within the public education system (Fishman, 2001). Because of this, no centralized government records have been maintained, but the linguist Joshua Fishman undertook two separate projects (1960-1963 and 1980-1983) to identify and document such schools. His more recent study identified over 6,000 heritage language schools, teaching 145 different languages. Of these languages, 91 were indigenous American languages. The majority of the schools taught the following languages: Chinese, French, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. (See Compton, 2001, for discussion of heritage language communities and schools.)

Community heritage language programs vary a great deal with regard to populations served, program structure and organization, focus of instruction, instructional methods, materials used, staff qualifications, articulation with school-based programs, and funding sources. What they do have in common is that they are organized by community members—families, community leaders, churches, or civic organizations. Culture, traditions, and other content are often taught through the language, rather than focusing strictly on language as the object of instruction. Many schools incorporate community events and holiday celebrations into the curriculum and rely on the involvement of community members as staff volunteers, teachers, and school leaders. At the same time, schools strive to meet high educational standards, and some are organized into networks at the regional or national level. Examples include a national organization for private German language schools, the German Language School Conference, and the two national associations of Chinese schools, the National Council of Associations of Chinese Schools and the Chinese School Association in the U.S. These associations, and some individual schools, are

creating linkages to the formal education system by offering AP credit-bearing courses at the community schools.

The community-based programs in the Alliance Program Profiles collection can be found [here](#).

K-12 education: The situation at the K-12 level is complicated because schools do not always identify or support specific “heritage” language programs. Rather, they may have immersion or two-way (dual language) programs that include heritage language speakers, or they may have classes within the foreign language education program for heritage or native language speakers. (See, e.g., Christian, Howard, & Loeb, 2000; Genesee, 1999; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Montone & Loeb, 2000, and Webb & Miller, 2000 for overviews of such programs for overviews of such programs.) This situation is different for Spanish, with many Spanish for Spanish Speakers (or Spanish for Native Speakers or Spanish for Fluent Speakers) programs in school districts across the country. (See Wang & Green, 2001, for discussion of heritage language programs in K-12 education; Peyton, Lewelling, & Winke, 2001, for discussion of Spanish for Spanish Speakers programs.) K-12 heritage language programs included in the collection of program profiles developed by the Alliance include those that enroll heritage language students and work to develop their unique heritage language abilities.

Higher education: In general, heritage language programs in higher education are those that have separate classes for students with home background in the language of study. University heritage language programs can also provide courses for students who identify with a language and culture even if their home background is not in the language of study. (See Gambhir, 2001; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003; Kono & McGinnis, 2001, for discussion of heritage language programs in higher education.)

Information about university-level heritage language programs is being collected by the National Heritage Language Resource Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. Visit their Web site to learn more about these programs.

Conclusion

Despite the personal, community, and societal benefits of bi- and multilingualism, educational conditions in the United States still make it likely that languages other than English are lost across generations (Fishman, 1991), although there is variation within families and communities that shows this tendency is not inevitable (Schechter & Bayley, 2002; Zentella, 1997). Language education that values, builds on, and promotes the development of heritage languages, as a complement to the development of English, has an important role to play in reversing this trend. A great deal of work needs to be done to strengthen the programs described here in community-based, K-12, and higher education settings.

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4. What languages are taught as heritage languages in the United States?

Heritage language teaching takes place in many different instructional settings -- in community-based programs, public and private K-12 education, and higher education. In part, because different program types and organizations are involved, there are no current, comprehensive studies that list all of the languages taught as heritage languages in the United States. Further, factors such as immigration and education policies have an impact on which languages are taught in addition to where and how they are taught. This FAQ gives information about languages taught as heritage languages, gathered through the program profiles collection of the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, and offers a brief discussion of some of the social and political factors that affect the availability of heritage language instructional opportunities.

Languages represented in the Alliance's Online Collection of National Heritage Language Program Profiles include:

Languages indigenous to the U.S.: Chinuk Wawa, IchCinshKiin, Denaakk'e Athabascan, and Navajo;

Latin American and European Languages: Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian;

East Asian, South Asian and Pacific Island Languages: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tibetan, Persian, Hindi, Ilokano, Samoan, Tongan.

This list represents only a small number of the languages currently taught as heritage languages. The Alliance is working to expand the program profiles collection, concentrating on community-based and K-12 programs. You can help the Alliance with this effort.

To complete a program profile, [click here](#).

To let us know about programs we might contact and profile, please contact Joy Peyton at the Alliance.

The National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC), housed at UCLA, is conducting a survey of heritage language teaching in higher education. Data are not yet available, but for more information or to participate in the NHLRC survey, visit the NHLRC Web site.

What does it mean that a language is "taught as a heritage language"? The term "heritage language" signals a particular relationship between a learner and the language of study, which is taken into consideration in program design and implementation. (See FAQ, "What is a heritage language?") There is no single model of heritage language teaching, but heritage language programs build on the experiences that students have with the language and culture of study outside the classroom, in their families and communities.

Not all programs that fit this description are called “heritage language” programs. *Heritage language programs in community settings*, often administered through civic or religious organizations, rarely carry this title but are important heritage language programs that promote language maintenance across generations. Often heritage language literacy is taught as a way to educate children about traditional cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Languages as diverse as Yiddish, German, Chinese and Japanese have strong traditions of having been taught through community schools in the United States. Many other immigrant languages are now taught through community programs, and as new groups of immigrants and refugees from around the world come to the U.S., they have established their own community schools. As an example, after the political upheaval in Iran in the late 1970’s, many Iranians came to the United States. In the early 1980’s, recent immigrants established Persian (also called Farsi or Iranian) language schools principally in areas with large Iranian communities. Over a similar period of time, due to political turmoil in Southeast Asia, many Hmong immigrated to the U.S. Now Hmong communities in the U.S., including those in areas of Wisconsin and California, have established community-based organizations that support the teaching of the Hmong language. (For more information, visit the Hmong Cultural Center Web site.)

According to research done by the linguist Joshua Fishman in the 1980’s (Fishman, 2001), at least 145 different languages were being taught in heritage language schools (community-based schools) that at that time were operating outside the public education sector in the United States. Of these languages, 91 were Indigenous languages. Since then, the focus on teaching heritage languages has made its way into higher education and the public K-12 system (primarily through programs like dual-language immersion that educate speakers of two different languages, English and another languages, in both languages). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) officially recognized the unique needs of heritage learners and began establishing standards for these students as part of their national standards in the late 1990’s (ACTFL, 2006).

Heritage language programs in public schools include Spanish, Chinese, Denaakk’e Athabaskan, Navajo, French, German, and Korean. For more information about K-12 heritage language programs, see the preK-12 and adult section of the program profiles. [LINK](#)

Heritage language classes at the university level are often taught through “dual-track” programs, where there are separate classes for foreign language and heritage language learners in the lower levels of the curriculum (Kondo-Brown, 2003). Spanish and Chinese have both been taught through this type of program structure, and Russian is emerging as another case (Kagan & Dillon, 2003). Dual-track systems seem most likely to emerge in contexts where a foreign language program exists and heritage language learner enrollments are increasing. At the higher education level, Japanese is another case that fits this profile. Classes focused on the less commonly taught languages (e.g., Arabic, Hindi, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese) are usually only available as a single track (foreign language and heritage language speakers are in the same class).

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5. How do community-based heritage language programs and two-way immersion programs compare?

This FAQ describes the similarities and differences between community-based heritage language programs and two-way immersion programs, which take place in PreK-12 public and private schools.

Community-based heritage language and K-12 two-way immersion programs are similar in that both seek to develop proficiency of students in languages other than English, which are often the languages of the local community (Christian, 1994). In doing so, they develop bilingual individuals and enrich the multilingual resources of the United States by providing opportunities for children to develop proficiency in their native or heritage language. Despite these and other similarities, there are differences between these two types of programs. Community-based heritage language programs are designed to address the needs of speakers of a non-English language and to develop cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities associated with the language. (See FAQ #3, *What is a heritage language program?*) Addressing heritage language learners' needs includes developing a curriculum that links students to their heritage language and their cultural identity.

Two way-immersion programs serve both an English-language home background student population and a population of students who speak the partner language with their families and in their communities (Christian, 1994, 2007; Howard & Sugarman, 2007). These programs focus on developing proficiency in two languages -- English and the partner language -- while also developing the academic skills of the students in the program.

These programs differ from community-based heritage language programs in terms of the student population served, the program's location, and the program's design and focus.

Student population

The student population in community heritage language programs is typically connected to the program through a specific non-English language and a shared culture or country of origin. (See FAQ #2, *Who is a heritage language learner?*) Involvement in the program is a voluntary decision, usually made by parents. An important goal is for students to learn about the language and culture that connects them to the local community, relatives in the United States and overseas, and their ancestors.

Students in two-way immersion programs are enrolled as a part of their K-12 education. They consist of both those with a cultural connection through family to the non-English language and those without that connection. While there are many positive educational benefits for both sets of students, some challenges have also been noted. Two way-immersion programs may serve a middle-class English speaking population and a working-class heritage language population (Christian, 2007). This cultural and socioeconomic difference in student population can contribute to a situation where the needs and perspectives of the heritage language students are overlooked in favor of the English dominant group (Valdés, González, García, & Máquez, 2007). At the same time, both types of programs strive to provide an effective education in the language other than English.

Location

Two-way immersion programs are usually located in public schools, charters, magnets, or private schools, largely at the elementary school level. If a coalition of parents decides that they want to establish a two-way immersion school or program, they may request that the school or district establish it (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). Students in these programs at the elementary school level follow the normal district academic curriculum and progress through the grade levels. At the secondary school level, they usually receive credit for language study or for study of the content in which the language is taught.

In contrast, study in community-based heritage language programs is often not recognized by the K-12 system, and this may result in isolation of the programs from school-based study and credit systems. Wang and Green (2001) argue that community-based heritage language programs should be connected with school-based systems in specific ways. In school districts and states there is some movement toward granting credit for language study in heritage schools that meet district and state curriculum standards (Compton, 2001). However, there is more coordination to be done on this issue.

Program design and focus

Community-based heritage language programs are designed to help students gain fluency and proficiency in their heritage language, and a primary focus is often on building cultural connections. These programs are often established out of a community's desire to pass on their language and culture from one generation to the next in order to maintain communication within families and communities (Webb & Miller, 2000). The goal is to teach language and culture and to honor the language varieties that students speak (Draper & Hicks, 2000).

Two-way immersion programs focus on developing proficiency in English and another language (e.g., Chinese, Navajo, Spanish) and may aim for students to learn academic subjects in both English and the partner language, eventually using English for one-half of instruction and the partner language for the other half. Because two-way immersion instruction is usually offered in a school-based setting, language instruction tends to be integrated with other instructional programs, and the program strives for academic achievement in both English and the non-English language.

Both heritage and two-way immersion programs may build cultural appreciation for students in the heritage or partner language as an important part of their design.

Conclusion

While the goals and design of community-based heritage language and two-way immersion programs differ in some ways, both types of programs are attempting to advance language maintenance and learning and to benefit heritage language communities and the nation as a whole (Peyton, Carreira, Wang, & Wiley, 2008; Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001). In order for both types of programs to flourish, strategic planning, networking, and action are needed to create a social, political, and economic climate in which bilingualism and biculturalism are truly embraced.

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6. What is the difference between indigenous and immigrant heritage languages in the United States?

Indigenous heritage languages are spoken by people whose ancestors originally inhabited the area that is now the United States (herein after referred to as Native Americans). Immigrant heritage languages are spoken by people who immigrated to the United States after European colonization. While indigenous and immigrant heritage languages have many things in common, there are two important reasons for drawing a distinction between them: indigenous languages (herein after referred to as Native American languages) receive special protection by the United States legal system, and they are in danger of dying out with little hope of revitalization if children do not learn them.

Linguists have affirmed that all of the world's languages are complex and rule-governed forms of communication, and that no language is inherently better than any other at expressing human thought. However, Native American languages receive special legal status in the United States. Such legal status is remarkable because the United States doesn't have a national language policy, and it exists because the ancestors of the speakers of these languages lived on this continent long before other peoples arrived. The special legal status is also meant to help protect Native American languages. Because these languages originated on this continent, if people stop speaking them here, they may never be spoken anywhere again. While there are many noteworthy efforts to bring back severely endangered or sleeping languages, it is a tremendously difficult task, and much work remains.

In fact, the large majority of the remaining 175 Native American languages are in danger of losing all of their speakers; only around 10% are still commonly learned by children. Many languages have only a few elderly speakers left (Krauss 1996). The reasons for this loss are complex, but it is due in large part to the colonial practices of the past three centuries. Speakers of many Native American languages died of new diseases like smallpox, brought by the Europeans. Many other speakers were killed for their land. Still others were forcefully moved to reservations, where they might be separated from other members of their family and tribe, and no longer had anyone to speak with. In the mid-19th century, the United States government began a policy of assimilation, under which Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools, where they would be harshly punished for speaking any language but English. Under these conditions, it is a wonder that so many languages survived this long, and it is a testament to the strength of the people who continued to speak them. (See Reyhner & Eder, 1992, for more information about the history of Native American education.) Today, much like other heritage languages in the United States, Native American languages face stiff competition from English, the de facto language of government, media, and most educational and business institutions (Crawford 1996). Unlike speakers of most immigrant heritage languages, however, people who speak Native American languages cannot go to another country to relearn what has been lost. (Note that a similar situation arises for some immigrant groups who have fled their country due to extreme turmoil.)

In 1990, the United States Congress passed the Native American Languages Act (NALA), which gives special status to Native American languages and aims to protect them from loss. This special status was

granted in recognition of the sovereign position that Native American tribes have in the United States. Native American languages cannot be restricted in public places, including in public school classrooms. The law permits states to make exceptions to teacher certification requirements if someone who speaks a Native American language would like to teach it in a school. Finally, the law encourages schools serving Native American students to use their heritage languages as the medium of instruction. A later revision of the law appointed a \$2 million annual fund to be allocated to Native American tribes for learning and teaching their heritage languages. (For more information about the enactment of the NALA, see Arnold, 2001.) More recently, in 2006, Congress passed the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act, which recognizes the value of Native American language instruction and provides funds for language immersion programs, language and culture camps, and teacher training. The act was named after a Tewa storyteller who died in an automobile accident. (For an overview of laws that affect Native American languages and language revitalization, see Haynes, in press, and Hinton, 2001; for a detailed collection of U.S. documents pertaining to Native Americans, see Prucha, 2000.)

Legal status and immanent possibility of loss are the two major differences between Native American languages and immigrant heritage languages. However, Native American languages and immigrant heritage languages also share a number of important features. The languages are markers of their speakers' identities and vessels of their speakers' traditional cultures. They are important for maintaining the world's linguistic diversity. A large body of research shows that students who have an opportunity to learn their heritage language in school outperform their peers who do not have this opportunity. (See Cummins, 1992; Cummins, 2000; Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003 for overviews of the research on the use of heritage languages in school.) While there are important reasons for distinguishing the two types of heritage languages, both types deserve recognition of their indispensable role in U.S. society.

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