

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 1: Skills and Abilities of Heritage Learners

[Intro music]

Francesca Di Silvio: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

Hello, and [00:30] welcome to Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to potential federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Francesca Di Silvio. Have you ever wondered what are your strengths as a heritage language learner seeking a job in the federal government? In [01:00] this episode we're going to talk about the knowledge, skills, and abilities that heritage language learners can bring to a federal government career.

Our guests today are Celia Chomón Zamora, Shahnaz Ahmadeian and Hseuh-Ming Tommy Lu.

Dr. Celia Chomón Zamora currently serves as ACTFL's Director of Professional Learning and Certification. With more than 15 years serving the language education community, Dr. Zamora has been a K-12 language teacher and administrator in public and private school settings, a postsecondary language program instructor [01:30] and assistant director, and researcher.

In her 14 years at the Language Acquisition Resource Center (LARC) at San Diego State University and 20 years at the Iranian School of San Diego (ISSD), Shahnaz Ahmadeian has worked as a professional developer, presenter, language instructor teaching both heritage and non-heritage learners, and, since 2016, as LARC Director of Programs and ISSD Vice-Principal.

Tommy Lu is currently serving on the National Coalition of [02:00] Community-Based Heritage Language Schools and a board member of Chinese School of Delaware where he previously served as a teacher, Curriculum Director, Vice Principal, and Principal since 1994. He has actively participated in community-based heritage language schools at the local, regional, and national levels.

Thanks so much for joining us, and let's get started!

First, can you tell us a little bit about your background and experience working with heritage language learners? Celia, let's start with you.

Celia Chomón Zamora: So, heritage language basically for me [02:30] is my life. I was born in Venezuela and I grew up in Miami, Florida. I got there when I was six. And Miami, Florida is possibly 90% heritage speakers, so my entire life was just surrounded by heritage language friends, family, and honestly, myself.

Then I became a teacher. Before I even knew what a heritage speaker was, I started a heritage speaker program in the high school that I was teaching at.

And then I went to get a Master's in linguistics and I realized that all of these things that I [03:00] knew were just different about me and my Spanish and my culture and my community ended up having a name. So I decided then and there that that was where I was going to dedicate my career to. So I went to my doctorate at Georgetown and my entire dissertation and my research has been on heritage speakers.

And now I work as Director of Professional Learning and Certification at ACTFL where of my main, main missions is to really create as many resources, professional development, and all-around advocacy and support [03:30] for heritage language teachers, as well as heritage language speakers.

Francesca: And how about you, Tommy and Shahnaz?

Tommy Lu: So I started out working in the community-based school, the Chinese School of Delaware, when my first two daughters were enrolled at the Chinese School of Delaware. So that was like in the early nineties. And since then, I've been involved more and more with the community-based schools. At that time primarily, almost, 98, [04:00] 99% of the students were heritage learners because they all come from like a family like mine. I consider myself an immigrant, so my children would be considered the first-generation heritage learners.

So, they asked me to teach, and I said well I'll teach. Then I served as the history teacher, language teacher, and then the vice principal, curriculum director, and the principal. Yeah. So that's something about 28 years so far. [04:30]

Shahnaz Ahmadeian: I work at [the] Language Acquisition Resource Center at San Diego State University. Since 2008 LARC has been offering different STARTALK programs, including a students camp for heritage students. In 2008, I started as instructor for Persian STARTALK and later took the leadership role. And since then, I have been involved with designing and implementing many STARTALK summer programs for high school students, [05:00] mainly for heritage students.

I also work at Iranian School of San Diego since 2002. The school is one of the oldest and largest Persian community schools in the U.S. We have an average of 250 students coming to our schools and taking our classes each academic year. I taught different levels for many years. But now I'm the school vice-principal, and I work with the school [05:30] educational committee. And our role is to really look after the curriculum, enhance and gather any teaching resources and materials that are really relevant and useful for heritage students. And we also do a lot of teacher development. I have coauthored six textbooks that are specifically designed for heritage language learners and the books are based on ACTFL standards and are used in many other heritage language schools [06:00] across the nation.

Francesca: In your opinion, what are the biggest strengths of heritage language learners in terms of their linguistic knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Celia: Something that a heritage language speaker brings to the classroom is just this rich cultural knowledge that would otherwise not be available to anyone taking Spanish even for like 10 or 20 years. It really is those cultural nuances and that idiomatic language that comes with learning— [06:30] really living that language.

Another thing of course, is that L1 or like that first language pronunciation that a lot of second language learners don't necessarily attain and really just that kind of implicit judgment of the grammar, that they know that something sounds right, or something sounds correct or incorrect, but they just can't put their finger on it. Where a second language learner of that language would take years for them to [07:00] develop that skill.

Tommy: Well, most heritage learners, because they practice the language pretty much at home, they get to know those—not so much linguistic but I would say colloquial usage of the language. So they would be able to use that language portion very well, much better than the non-heritage learners.

Shahnaz: So, if you define heritage speakers as those who have some proficiency [07:30] in their heritage language, I believe that their capacity to quickly reach higher proficiency levels and their connection to the language and cultures are their strengths. During the time that we had the STARTALK program for heritage speakers, for example, we had five years of Persian, we were able to help students advance a sub level or a full level in their proficiency in one summer.

Francesca: Great. Thank you. And how could [08:00] their language strengths be used in federal government careers? What makes them valuable for the federal government?

Shahnaz: I think, I strongly believe that heritage speakers are in prime position to fill the urgent needs in the United States for professionals with high levels of proficiency in multiple languages. And more importantly in less commonly taught languages like Persian, Russian, Arabic, and so on. Obviously, there is a demand [08:30] for bilinguals in government jobs,

foreign affairs, business, and almost in any sectors in our society. So, I think for them, really for government jobs it's just their connection to the culture and to the language is really what makes them in a really good position to fill the gap that we have right now.

Tommy: In the past, English was the primary language used for contract negotiation [09:00] or any kinds of law documents. But in recent years, I think more and more countries, you probably want to have the language on both sides. So, for heritage learners, they'll be able to link some of the gaps. So, because certain terms in English are not being interpreted exactly the same in other languages, such as Chinese. So, I think for federal government, when they deal with international relations, international trade, [09:30] or even with law situations, I think that the heritage learner can play a very important role to close the gap of those misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Celia: Absolutely. So again, when I'm dealing with different entities—so if you're doing negotiations with a different country or different ambassadors or so forth, it's really important to have somebody that not just only can speak the language, but that really understands all of [10:00] these small nuances, all of these small pragmatics in the conversation that can possibly derail a conversation if not done correctly.

Francesca: And now let's talk about strengths that go beyond the language. So, what would you say are the biggest strengths of heritage language learners in terms of their cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Tommy: Oh, I think that is the most valuable part heritage learners can bring to the table. Anybody can learn the language, but not everybody can fully understand [10:30] culture. I grew up in Taiwan, so I understand the culture. I've been in the United States more than the time I spent in Taiwan. But in terms of the U.S. culture, I'm trying to get used to it, but I still feel sometimes I don't quite understand.

So, I think the heritage learners in this regard, they probably have, probably the best position. Like my children, they were born and raised here, but we [11:00] taught them about our culture as well. So, they kind of know the culture both ways.

Shahnaz: For this population of students, culture and language go hand in hand, it's almost impossible to kind of separate the two. But what is important to mention is that heritage language learners experience culture in the most authentic way, which is through their daily interaction with their parents or interaction with their family and friends within the community. [11:30] So they really are aware of gestures, understand some nuance. And they're very much aware of the differences between their heritage culture and then the dominant culture, which is in this case American culture.

So, for them to be able to navigate and act appropriately between the two cultures, it's really their strength.

Francesca: Okay. Thank you. And how can these language learners' cultural strengths be used in the federal government [12:00] context?

Shahnaz: So, in multicultural societies like the U.S., cultural competence is generally very important to help our society grow and evolve. The U.S. population is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, cultures, and countries of origin and languages, and we should think of these and value this diversity as assets. So it is important that people who are in government represent the diverse population and are responsive to their [12:30] needs.

This is even more vital in positions that involve interaction with other countries. I really believe understanding and valuing someone's culture is a sign of respect and strength. By having individuals who understand culture, not just on the surface, but really understanding cultural perspectives and norms, someone who can read between the lines, understand the reasons and intentions, I think it allows us to not only work respectfully with [13:00] others, but also solve problems and avoid any misunderstanding.

Celia: I always think back of the movie *Inglourious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino. And there was a spy who was trying to infiltrate, you know, during World War II and he was very highly proficient in German. But then they were at a bar with other German colleagues or German soldiers and at one point he asked for three more beers. And the way that he held up [13:30] the fingers to symbolize the number three was so different than how an actual German soldier would have put up the number three that that gave him away.

So his language didn't give him away, his accent, his colloquialisms, his idioms, his vocabulary, his grammatical conjugations didn't give him away. It was holding up the number three with his fingers the wrong way. That's what gave him away.

So imagine again, those nuances that you can [14:00] bring to a government setting. I'm not saying that everyone's going to be a spy, of course, but again, these are the small things that the heritage speakers have that already ingrained in there. And they don't have to think about it. It's second nature to them.

Francesca: What advice would you give to heritage language learners who are interested in how they can prepare to use that language to work in the federal government?

Celia: The first thing I would say is to embrace who you are. Embrace your identity. There's nothing wrong with how you speak your heritage language, because I [14:30] know that one thing that happens that really deters heritage speakers from pursuing a career using their

heritage language is that they've been constantly put down by friends, by family, by even society because you don't speak it well enough.

That's not true. So first of all, empower yourself and realize that what you bring to the table is something completely unique. Then I would—if you feel that you're not currently at the proficiency level, I would definitely maybe take some courses geared towards heritage speakers that would help you just [15:00] really kind of get you to that next step in so far as like your written skills or your grammar skills.

And then after that just really embrace your culture and who you are. And that's how you have to sell yourself, that you are both your heritage and where you live right now. And really just show what things you can do with your language. So focus on what you can do and not what your friends or relatives have told you you can't do for all these years.

Tommy: Well just, [15:30] not every heritage learner, but there are very good percentage of heritage learners that they probably kind of lost their identity. They are in a mix of like, who do I belong to? Do I belong to my parents' group? Or I really should belong to my peers' group. But I think for heritage learners, first they have to accept and acknowledge this is really who you are. [16:00]

And, after I accept it, now I have to come up with a healthier way. Like, how do I find my position or how do I find my identity that I belong to? Actually, instead of saying, I feel excluded by both worlds, but partly embrace both worlds and then maybe serve as a bridge position to connect both worlds so we can all have a better [16:30] life, better understanding and then mutual benefits of each other.

Shahnaz: They should think about their language as a strength, something that they can build on and to not only—you know, something that they can connect them to their family and their heritage background and whatnot, but also something that can help them with their career in the future, for sure.

[Transition music]

Francesca: [17:00] Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways Podcast! Thanks for joining us, and a big thank you to our guests for sharing their thoughts on what makes heritage language learners strong candidates for federal government jobs. Let's sum things up...

All three of our guests agree that one of the key strengths of heritage language learners is that they have a connection to and deep knowledge of the heritage culture. They're able to serve as cultural ambassadors, whether that be in their personal lives or in government careers. Heritage learners are also able to master nuanced levels of language quickly, [17:30] thanks to

their background knowledge in the language. Finally, our speakers remind heritage learners to embrace who you are and what you can already do.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by discussing ways to develop and improve different skills to help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government.

[Transition music]

To continue on your journey through Federal Career Pathways for Heritage Language Learners, check out the other episodes in this series. [18:00] You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thanks for joining us and see you next time!

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[Outro music]