

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 2: Developing Heritage Learner Skills for Government Careers

[Intro music]

Mathilda Reckford: 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 welcome [00:30] 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 fulfilling jobs.

I'm your host, Mathilda Reckford. Have you ever wondered if the knowledge, skills, and abilities you have as a heritage language learner [01:00] align with what is needed for a federal government job? In this episode we're going to talk about some specific skills that would be helpful for government careers and ways that you can continue to develop and improve them.

[Guest intro]: Our guests today are Maria Carreira, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and An Chung Cheng.

Dr. Maria Carreira is a professor of Spanish at California State University, Long Beach and was a founder of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA and served as its [01:30] co-director for 16 years. Recently, she created the Heritage Language Exchange, a resource for teachers that focuses on issues of practice.

Dr. Joy Kreeft Peyton is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Applied Linguistics and President of the Coalition for Community-Based Heritage Language Schools. The Coalition seeks to connect, support, and advocate for these schools, which teach hundreds of languages in the U.S.

Dr. An Chung Cheng is a professor of Spanish at the Department of World Languages and [02:00] Cultures at the University of Toledo, where she also serves as the director of Asian Studies Program and Asian Studies Institute. Dr. Cheng has worked with community-based heritage language programs and schools as a parent, teacher, administrator, and researcher.

[Transition music]

Mathilda: Thank you so much for joining us and let's get started! First, can you tell us a little bit about your background and experience [02:30] working with heritage language learners or doing research in the area of heritage language education?

Maria Carreira: Thank you, Mathilda. I'm a professor of Spanish at California State University Long Beach. I was a co-founder of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA. I also retired from the NHLRC to co-found the Heritage Language Exchange, which is an initiative for, and by teachers. And last but not least, I am a heritage language [03:00] speaker of Spanish having arrived in the United States at age 11.

Joy Kreeft Peyton: I started working at the Center for Applied Linguistics—at CAL—on heritage language issues in around 1999, when we collaborated with Maria to hold the first National Heritage Language Conference at CAL State Long Beach. And at some point, a group of us, we founded the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages.

An Chung Chen: [03:30] So, I actually grew up speaking three languages or dialects in Taiwan. After I'd done the research on the heritage language learners or heritage language community, I realized, actually, I'm a Hakka heritage language speaker. I didn't realize that. An interesting situation with Chinese communities is that people can often speak several dialects but there's only one written [04:00] system mainly. So, when we talk about heritage language education, very often we cannot overlook learners' language background.

Mathilda: In your opinion, what are some of the linguistic, cultural, or technical skills that heritage language learners might want to further develop or improve?

An Chung: Linguistically, I think heritage learners have the advantage of early exposure to a home language or languages. Therefore, [04:30] they have good comprehension skills to differentiate the sound system in different languages since birth. Therefore, they usually can speak in the heritage language with little accent. In general, they do have a broader base of vocabulary and a very good sense or intuition of language structure. Culture wise, I think heritage learners are immersed in their cultural heritage [05:00] without realizing it until probably they notice the differences in practice and routines with other communities or other people. Therefore, they have the advantage of experimenting with intercultural communication and developing effective cross-cultural communication skills and strategies.

Maria: Linguistic agency is really important for heritage language learners. In terms of language, specifically, I want to add [05:30] that what you want to learn depends on what you want to do with language. If you want to make professional use of language, you're going to have to develop the academic registers. The academic and the standard language frequently is not learned at home. So you want to develop that. And in addition, you want to develop domain-specific language. So, let's say you want to put your language skills to use as an engineer. Well, then you want to develop [06:00] engineering vocabulary.

A lot of times, heritage speakers feel inferior because they don't sound like native speakers. So heritage language learners—to persist at learning these language, cultural, and technical skills—have to develop resilience. They're going to be criticized because they don't sound like

native speakers. But so what? They're not native speakers. You just want to be the best heritage speaker [06:30] for the purpose that you want to put your language to use, that you can be, right?

Joy: The whole question of what skills to develop and improve is something that really needs to be worked out with students. They need to be encouraged in this regard. They need to meet people who use these skills in their careers, have the opportunity to engage with them.

Mathilda: How could the [07:00] development or improvement of these skills impact students' readiness for careers in the federal government?

An Chung: Yeah. It all depends on heritage learners' language proficiency level and their cultural knowledge but in average, I will say that heritage learners' immersing experience in the language and culture really makes them valuable when they communicate with people of their heritage culture, because they would understand, they would embrace the differences and [07:30] appreciate the difference between cultures. So, they can serve as a bridge or shorten that gap between two cultures and two peoples.

Maria: What I want to add is that it's not just about achieving high levels of proficiency, but it's about what I call, or what has been called, performative competence. And that is a competence for getting things done, not perfectly but achieving communication and for navigating [08:00] diversity and unpredictability. And heritage language speakers are really good about that.

Mathilda: Yeah, for sure. All right. Now let's talk about how we can actually go about developing or improving the skills we discussed. What are some ways that heritage language learners can build their literacy skills?

Joy: It is so valuable in building students' literacy skills to have them mentor younger students. So have them maybe write stories [08:30] for younger students in their language, read those stories with younger students, tutor, and mentor them. I have just seen so much excitement and engagement among both the young students and the teenagers. Mentoring and coaching and leading younger students is really a great way to develop your own literacy skills.

An Chung: So, learning actually can be taking place at home as well because they are a lot of packages and [09:00] food labels and many things. So just reading a few words, right? It could be a starting point. Even texting each other in the heritage language. Now, it's very easy to communicate with family members out of the country, so they could text and join a media group, and communicate with each other instead of using voice. So, learning can take place everywhere.

Maria: I want to say you want to scaffold the exposure that you [09:30] get. So, you know, probably you don't want to start out reading a novel because that's very demanding. Or even

start out reading an academic paper, if you want to build professional proficiency in a language. Maybe start out reading a pamphlet, right? Or start out listening to a talk on YouTube or a conversation on a particular topic, and then build on that to read and listen to successively more [10:00] advanced presentations that use the HL.

Joy: Whatever level they are at, Maria said, you could start with a brochure. You can start with, you know, short stories. You can start with sentences, can start with interviews, whatever level those students are at, start there. And then, focus on texts about that topic. And you can start by looking together at a text that's maybe complicated and look together at the [10:30] photos, the captions, the title, the subtitles, the graphics. Let's start there and let's think, what is this article about?

Mathilda: What recommendations would you have on improving your knowledge and use of vocabulary?

Joy: Yeah, I am really passionate about vocabulary and how important vocabulary is. And again, I just think that texts are the place to build vocabulary knowledge.

An Chung: [11:00] I will say reading, reading, reading [laughs]. I would suggest them to watch TV drama series or media like YouTube or TikTok. This is in the case of Chinese because there are different dialects, so all the programs will have subtitles in written Chinese text. Constantly seeing the subtitles subconsciously builds up their reading speed. Or recognizing the sounds with the texts that they did not know; [11:30] in the case of Chinese, because they're character-based, so learners need to know how to guess the meaning from the appearance, how to analyze the characters in terms of radicals and parts. Although I think repetition is the key, and reading cannot be for the sake of reading. It has to be interesting.

Maria: You want to get a lot of input to learn vocabulary and that input needs to be [12:00] meaningful. In other words, you don't want to just memorize vocabulary words on a list in isolation. It has to be repetitive. You want to hear things and, you know, depending on the context in which you're hearing it between seven and fifteen times, and you want to get a variety of input. Getting different exposures to the word enables learners, not just to remember the word better, but to guess as to how it should be used, with what other words [12:30] they can use these words, with what kinds of expressions.

Mathilda: So, when it comes to different language varieties, how can heritage language learners apply their knowledge of one variety to learning another? What can students do to determine how and when to use the different forms of the language in different contexts?

Maria: I love this question because I think this is one area where heritage language speakers really excel. They tend to be highly multi-dialectal. Now, they may not know the specifics, [13:00] when is it appropriate to use one version versus another, but they're very much aware

of the range of varieties that exist at least here in the United States. It's good to develop the ability to pick up different ways of saying things in different dialects and different registers, because that expands your communicative ability. The idea is that the more dialectal diversity that you know, [13:30] or that you're familiar with, the better a communicator you will be.

Joy: I think it's important that students know, when you're going to this context to talk or write with these people, this is the way you write. Some people have made very interesting videos of use of their language in different contexts. And you can actually say, look, we're in the neighborhood now, [14:00] and we're with these young people, and this is how they're speaking. And now this same young person is doing a job interview. And look how they're speaking here. And you could probably do the same thing with writing. So, notice, appreciate, and know when, where, and with whom, and then how.

Mathilda: Is there anything else you would like to share about the knowledge, skills, and abilities of heritage language learners?

Maria: I just want to add a little anecdote. My sister—she's a lawyer—and she was very [14:30] young when she arrived in the United States. She's a very successful international lawyer. She works a lot in Latin America. And I asked her at some point, how do you deal with native speakers when you are talking Spanish? And she said, well, I know that native speakers will always be better than me at discussing legal issues in Spanish, right. But what I do best, where my place lies, [15:00] is in bridging the two cultures. When the contracts come out, everything gets done in English, but before the contracts come out, there's really important work that is done in this space that I inhabit where we're going back and forth between the two languages, building relationships, trying to understand each other's perspectives. And I think that's the sweet spot for many heritage language speakers.

Joy: [15:30] As has already been mentioned, their cultural knowledge is really, really important. Maria mentioned earlier that in order to even use that cultural knowledge, they need to have a personal sense of agency. I know this culture. I have knowledge of this culture. And so, this sense of agency needs to be, I think, needs to be developed in the individual. Then they can work with another person in a program to develop and improve the skills that [16:00] they started with and now they need to be developed.

An Chung: Yes. Yes. I can agree with that more. Particularly, I think heritage learners need to be proud of their heritage language and culture and use that to their advantage. Regardless, they need to own their language and culture. That's the most precious part, I think.

[Transition music]

Mathilda: [16:30] 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 skills that heritage

learners can further develop or improve to succeed in federal government careers. Let's sum things up...

First, we learned that heritage learners have valuable skills that will transfer well to federal workplace settings, such as their comprehension skills, their knowledge of different varieties, and their ability to serve as a cultural bridge. We also learned that heritage learners [17:00] may benefit from further developing their language skills, their knowledge of vocabulary, and their understanding of when and how to use different varieties or dialects of the heritage language. To develop these skills, heritage learners may find it helpful to focus on learning specific vocabulary related to the career they are interested in pursuing and increasing their exposure to the language by interacting with different types of media and tutoring other language learners. Finally, we learned that heritage learners should recognize the value of their [17:30] unique skills and experience, and it is important to develop a strong sense of linguistic and cultural agency when using the heritage languages in the workplace.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by discussing the benefits of a government career, including ways in which having this type of job could help you make an impact on your heritage language community.

To continue your journey through federal career pathways for heritage [18:00] language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thank you for joining us and see you next time!

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers was created and produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics. This podcast is one component of a project funded by the National Security Agency to develop and share materials [18:30] highlighting federal career opportunities for heritage language learners of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, and Russian.

[Outro music]