



Challenges and Needs of Community-based Heritage Language Programs and How They Are Addressed

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Heritage language schools were established in the United States by ethnic groups to support the learning of their languages and cultures (Bradunas, 1988; Fishman, 2001), and they continue to be a vibrant force for preserving and developing the linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge of ethnic communities. Establishing and maintaining effective community-based programs involves a great deal of work, support, and dedication on the part of community members, cultural and religious centers, and educational organizations (Compton, 2001). Program staff often face overwhelming challenges to keep their classes going. Maxwell (1996), for example, argues that the challenges to community members and parents seeking to maintain and enhance heritage languages can be insurmountable. According to Compton (2001), challenges include raising public awareness, cultivating broad-based support, improving articulation with other groups and institutions, creating and improving curriculum and materials, recruiting and developing effective teachers, and fostering support among parents and elders. For example, challenges for Chinese community-based programs include maintaining students' interest in learning Chinese and providing them with a valuable learning experience, adopting suitable textbooks, designing curriculum, using current technology, cooperating with state and local school districts, improving teacher training and certification, and promoting articulation among programs (Wang, 2001).

This brief discusses the challenges and needs of community-based heritage language programs based on the heritage language literature and information in the [Heritage Language Programs Database](#) developed by the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages (the Alliance).



The database is a searchable online collection of heritage language programs and a rich resource of information about program types, program contact information, support programs need and receive, challenges they face, and ways they overcome challenges. We encourage you to search the database to learn more about heritage language programs. It includes suggestions and resources on how to address challenges and further develop heritage language programs.

A review of the literature and the community-based programs in the Heritage Language Programs Database points to the following challenges:

- Program funding
- Meeting space
- Diversity of students' language skills and backgrounds
- Student recruitment and retention
- Parental support
- Teacher recruitment and training
- Teaching materials
- Instructional time
- Articulation with public schools and university programs
- Public awareness and support

In the following pages, this brief provides further information about each of these challenges and describes how they might be addressed by heritage language programs.

Program Funding

Challenges

The biggest and most-often mentioned challenge by heritage language teachers and program administrators is the need for funding to enhance and further develop their curriculum and maintain and improve the level of heritage language learning in their programs. Tuition seems to be the main source of funding for many community-based heritage language programs; however, in many cases, tuition does not provide enough support to cover all necessary expenses to sustain a successful program. For example, Anishinaabemdaa, a native American language program, reported needs of funding in a number of areas, including running the Anishinaabe Family Language/Culture Camp, a weekend-long camp established in 1994 in Michigan; and updating and improving the Anishinaabemdaa website, which is visited by more than 2,000 unique visitors per week. Another native American language program, IchChishKiin, reported that there was no financial support for the program, and the instructors had to volunteer their time.

In addition, funding is needed to develop teaching materials, support teachers' professional development, collect reading materials, purchase and update software and educational technology, and acquire permanent space for classes. Over 95% of the programs in the [Heritage Language Programs Database](#) indicate that they would like to have a steady source of income and receive more financial support.

Addressing challenges

In addition to tuition, many programs rely on local and national sponsors and welcome donations through their websites. At the same time, some community-based programs affiliated with cultural centers receive support from those centers, and some get grants from the governments of their home countries (e.g., China, Italy, and Portugal).

Some programs also report conducting regular fundraising events and receiving grants from the U.S. government, foundations, and research associations. Creating partnerships and fundraisers is a strategy. For example, the Contemporary Chinese School of Arizona (CCSA) developed a partnership with the Confucius Institute at Arizona State University, which sponsored a number of activities for CCSA. Another strategy used by CCSA to raise funding was organizing annual fund-raising golf tournaments and inviting people from all professions to participate.

For details on funding for heritage language programs, we recommend reading the brief, "[Where do community-based heritage language programs find funding?](#)" Some programs stress that they are interested in learning how to find grant opportunities and apply for grants. We suggest reviewing the [Heritage Program Funding Guide](#) developed by CAL staff. In addition, we encourage heritage language programs looking for funding to browse through the Heritage Language Program Database to see where other programs receive their funding.

Meeting Space

Challenges

Community-based heritage language programs often do not have enough money to own a facility to house their schools, since much of their funding comes from student tuition and private donations. Thus, these programs have to find meeting space free of charge, pay low rent, or seek funding and support to rent their own space. For example, the Eftekhar Persian School indicated that the school needed room to hold classes; Lesnoe Ozero Russian Language Village expressed that they greatly needed more space to hold classes. Dedicated meeting space can be a critical success factor for heritage language schools, because it can reinforce the identity and importance of the school and its activities and make it an important part of the community.

Addressing challenges

Many programs find meeting space by collaborating with the community. For example, some churches (e.g., the Armenian Orthodox Church) rent or provide space for heritage language classes for their parishioners; some businesses (e.g., the Chinese American Community Center) offer space for community-based heritage language schools. Many programs find meeting space in K-12 public schools and higher education institutions. Escuela Bolivia, a Spanish for Heritage Speakers program in Arlington Bolivia, partners with the Arlington school district, which allows them to use Claremont elementary school every Saturday for free. Community-based heritage programs need to continue reaching out to local communities, and local communities need to do the same so that partnerships can allow space to be used for heritage programs.

Diversity of Students' Language Skills and Backgrounds

Challenges

Heritage language students' linguistic skills in their heritage languages are generally diverse and fall anywhere on the continuum from receptive at one end to fully productive at the other (Wang & Green, 2001). For example, some heritage Spanish-speaking students are completely fluent in oral Spanish (both speaking and comprehension), some speak and understand Spanish fairly well, while others possess only basic oral skills in Spanish (Peyton, Lewelling, & Winke, 2001).

In addition, many immigrant students are often speakers of what are considered by some to be non-prestige varieties of their heritage language, and some may speak a stigmatized variety associated with non-academic uses of the language (Valdés, 2001). For example, heritage Spanish-speaking students come from a number of national backgrounds and speak different varieties of Spanish (Potowski & Carreira, 2010). Although Spanish speakers generally understand each other and only have a different accent and words that differ, there is debate on what variety or varieties of Spanish should be used in instruction of heritage students in the United States (Peyton, Lewelling, & Winke, 2001).

The diversity of students' language skills and backgrounds presents challenges for selection of instructional methodologies and curriculum design. Educators working with heritage programs in the database discuss these challenges in detail and seek information and resources on addressing them. For example, they would like information about placing students when their proficiency levels and backgrounds differ.

Addressing challenges

Students' varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds also present opportunities for teachers to develop practical approaches, curricula, and materials that are relevant to students' needs. An approach recommended by Wang and Green (2001) focuses on the heritage culture as the basis for curriculum. For instance, important figures from the heritage language group—their interests, activities, and importance in society and world, presented through literature, articles, movies, and interviews—serve as the foundation to build an appreciation for the heritage culture. Wang and Green (2001) and Rampton (1995) suggest treating language awareness as a curriculum subject. Students engage in learner-centered, discovery-oriented activities, such as conducting interviews with family, community members, and each other on their language use and interethnic relationships, and discuss and write about what they learn.

Student Recruitment and Retention

Challenges

Recruiting students to attend heritage language schools and retaining them as active participants is a challenge that most heritage language programs face. The Russian School at St. John Russian Orthodox Church and Sanne's German Works indicated that low/decreased student enrollment is a challenge. Students are sometimes not motivated to attend heritage language programs when classes are held on Saturdays or Sundays. One reason for low student enrollment is that students have extremely busy schedules that include extracurricular activities, such as after-school and weekend school sports or clubs. Some students are required to attend after-school remediation programs, which compete with after-school heritage language programs. For example, the need to offer remedial courses connected with low standardized test scores has led to low enrollment and the canceling of Khmer-for-Khmer Speakers courses (Wright, 2007). Another reason is that the population of some heritage speakers is small, such as Czech. Hrouda (in press) points out that one challenge for Czech heritage schools is limited enrollment. Classes cannot be sustained when student enrollment is small.

In addition, an increase in K-12 public school foreign language programs in some languages might account in part for decreased student enrollment in community-based schools. Chinese is an example. According to Dr. J. Liou, the president of the National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools, over 100,000 students of Chinese heritage were enrolled in more than 700 Chinese schools in her association in 2002. In 2009, the number of students dropped to 70,000, and the number of schools, to around 500. Dr. Liou stated that decreased student enrollment was due to the increasing number of public schools that offer Chinese as a foreign language. The percentage of schools offering Chinese, although still low, increased at both the elementary and secondary levels from 1997 to 2008. In 2008, Chinese was taught at 3% of elementary schools and 4% of secondary schools with language programs (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

Student Recruitment and Retention (*continued*)

Addressing challenges

To increase and sustain student enrollment in community-based heritage language programs, teachers and other program personnel should better understand why students and parents stop attending through approaches such as surveys and personal interviews, and then work on identifying solutions. Additionally, it is vital to raise societal, parents', and children's awareness about the benefits of heritage language maintenance. With a strong focus in the United States on learning English, many children do not realize the importance of retaining their heritage languages until they reach college or employment, where language proficiency is suddenly valued. Schools, community centers, and families can communicate to students that the languages they know have great potential to contribute to their personal and professional development. Examples from successful heritage language speakers can be used. For example, Long, a 4th grade teacher in a Chinese heritage language School, related that his daughter works in a large nuclear company and was granted a great job opportunity in China, where two large nuclear companies will be built, because she was proficient in her heritage language, Chinese (Liu, 2010). Research also confirms that heritage language speakers proficient in their heritage languages and in English perform better academically; achieve greater professional opportunities; and view themselves in connection to their heritage culture, community, and ancestry (Baker & Jones, 1998; Crystal, 2003; González, 2005; Krashen, Tse, & McQuillan, 1998; Shin, 2005; Weger-Guntharp, 2006; Wong Fillmore, 2003). The message that "speakers of languages other than English represent an untapped resource for a country that suffers from a critical shortage of citizens able to function in languages other than English" (Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001, p. 5) can be delivered to students as well.

Parental Support

Challenges

Some program administrators mention lack of parental involvement and support as one of their challenges. Parents are an integral part of the success of a heritage language school and of the maintenance of their children's heritage languages. Some parents face various challenges when trying to support their children's language growth. Juggling their busy work schedules while also trying to accommodate one or more children's after-school and weekend schedules may leave very little time to facilitate their children's participation in heritage language classes. In addition to facing scheduling challenges, some parents feel pressured to promote their children's assimilation into U.S. society, which can cause them to encourage abandonment of the heritage language and culture. Parents may also reason that, since their children speak the heritage language at home, there is no need to spend time learning it in school. Some parents do not use the heritage language at home. The Greek School of St. Sophia claimed that the biggest challenge for the students was to get enough exposure to the heritage language at home and elsewhere. The Khayam Persian School Foundation found that the biggest challenge they face is motivating Iranian-American parents to bring their children to language classes.

Addressing challenges

To address this challenge, it is important that parents understand the rich benefits of children maintaining their heritage languages beyond oral communication, including academic language skills. Parents can be informed that when students learn to speak at professional or academic levels in their native and heritage languages, the cultural advantages, and those at the university and in the workforce, are considerable. Heritage language maintenance in immigrant and indigenous communities contributes tremendously to the understanding of cultural heritage and positive self-image development (Val & Vinogradova, 2010), thus positively influencing the mental health of heritage speakers (Baker & Jones, 1998; Crystal, 2003). In addition, parents have various options (e.g., weekend or week-day after-school classes and summer camps) to promote and pass on the heritage language to their children and build their academic language skills.

Parental Support

Addressing Challenges (continued)

In addition to sending their children to heritage language programs, parents can promote their children's language development by ensuring that they speak the heritage language at home and read books in the heritage language. They can help their children with their homework and engage in other language activities at home to make up for time not spent in classes. The participation of parents as volunteers in heritage language schools can be a critical factor in the success of program. For example, in many Chinese schools, parents' service contributes to almost all aspects of the program, including administration, teaching, and community service (Li, 2005). Thoughtful involvement of parents in planning, teaching, and celebration of cultural events can strengthen the heritage language program and its impact in the community (Compton, 2001). As suggested by King and Mackey (2007), another way for parents to help develop and maintain their children's connections with their heritage language and culture is by exposing them to cultural organizations or clubs, which offer activities such as singing, dancing, music, and cooking. "Cultural connections can enhance language learning and can be very motivating for learners" (King & Mackey, 2007, p. 166).

Teacher Recruitment and Training

Challenges

Recruitment and training of teachers is a challenge that most heritage language programs face, which is related to limited funding and to the fact that many of the teachers do not have formal training in education. Since funding for heritage language programs comes primarily from tuition and donations, it is difficult to pay teachers adequate salaries. Consequently, parents often serve as teachers, with minimal pay or on a voluntary basis. While it is crucial for parents to be involved in passing their heritage to their children, few parents have teaching credentials. While they might be proficient in the target language, they do not necessarily have the knowledge of the structure of the language or teaching methodology and assessment. For example, one of the challenges that Czech heritage language programs face is finding qualified Czech instructors with adequate language skills. Many heritage schools hire native Czech speakers who are proficient in the Czech language but have never taught Czech and struggle with teaching diverse student groups (Hrouda, in press). Delaware Tamil School in the [Heritage Language Program Database](#) indicated that volunteer teachers and teacher aids needed more training and development opportunities.

Addressing challenges

A solution that community-based heritage language programs can pursue is to seek low-cost, in-service teacher training opportunities in local organizations and institutions of higher education. For instance, summer workshops are often available through local National Foreign Language Resource Centers or universities. [STARTALK Cross Cultures Teacher Programs](#), offered by the Strategic Languages Institute, provide experienced heritage teachers with an understanding of effective classroom assessment designs and tasks that target students' proficiency levels. State foreign language conferences often offer useful workshops and presentations that can expand heritage language teachers' knowledge (Compton, 2001). In addition, teacher training opportunities are sometimes provided through home government organizations. For example, the [Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission of Taiwan](#) sends language teaching experts to the U.S. every summer to hold teacher training workshops. A large number of Chinese heritage language schools in the U.S. benefit from these workshops. States and school districts can also facilitate the process of fulfilling visa and academic requirements for heritage and native speakers who have been teaching for several years and want to obtain certification to teach.

Teaching Materials

Challenges

Finding appropriate teaching materials for heritage language students is another challenge. Many heritage language programs use materials published in their home countries, and students often do not respond positively and enthusiastically to them, as the content often has little direct relevance to their lives. For example, in some community-based Korean programs, Korean history texts are used to teach grammar. With little or no background knowledge of Korean history, many heritage learners find this sort of language instruction abstract and incomplete. Khmer print material, such as books and magazines that appeal to Cambodian American youth, is also needed (Wright, 2010). Since heritage language classes are often small and include students of different ages and language proficiencies learning together, it is challenging to find materials that are appropriate for all students. In addition, while instructional materials and texts designed for heritage language education are more readily accessible to speakers of more widespread languages in the United States such as Spanish, Chinese, or German, they are less available for less commonly taught languages, like Croatian or Lakota.

Addressing challenges

Learning outcomes might be improved with texts that have direct significance to heritage learners, provide background knowledge about their heritage culture, and directly link assignments with their life experiences and interests (Lee, Barbara, & Shin, 2008). Heritage language programs can benefit from materials that are designed to engage younger students and do not focus solely on grammar.

To meet diverse student needs, many teachers use instructional materials designed for native speakers or foreign language learners in the United States and adapt them for use with heritage students.

For example, Spanish for Spanish/Heritage/Native Speakers programs use a wide array of instructional materials. An [annotated bibliography](#) is available on the Teaching Spanish to Native Spanish Speakers website. Some teachers use music and songs popular in home cultures that students recognize to diversify language instruction and facilitate language learning. Karaoke has created great interest among Khmer heritage speakers in learning to read in Khmer (Wright, 2010).

Instructional Time

Challenges

Many heritage language programs identify limited instructional time as a major challenge. While some community-based schools operate on an after-school schedule during weekdays, most of them are open only on weekends for two to four hours. A recent study conducted by Liu (2010) indicates that 63% of the teachers and 72% of the parents in Chinese heritage language programs regard “not enough class time” as one of the challenges of their schools. In addition, heritage language classes often compete with students’ and parents’ hectic schedules. For instance, the principal of a Greek School in the [Heritage Language Programs Database](#) expressed her wish to add another day of instruction; however, with other activities that students were involved in, that was not possible.

Addressing challenges

To address this challenge, schools are encouraged to operate on a variety of time periods and allow students to consider various scheduling options. If students are unable to attend after-school classes, they can consider heritage language courses on weekends offered by heritage language communities. Another option is to attend a summer language camp, which takes place outside the academic school year. These classes and camps can help children maintain their cultural identity and promote the maintenance of their heritage languages. Technology can also provide a solution when on-site instruction is supported by an online component to increase the amount of time spent learning the language.

Articulation with Public Schools or University Programs

Challenges

Close collaboration between community-based heritage language programs and the formal education system points to a mutually beneficial relationship (Wang, 1999). McGinnis (1999) argues that inter-institutional articulation is needed among the various formal instructional settings where language education is conducted, including K-12 public and private schools, heritage language schools, colleges and universities, and study abroad programs. In California, twenty to thirty school districts grant foreign language credits to students who attend heritage language schools (Liu, 1996). Chen (1996) reports that enrollment in Chinese language schools in southern California increased once students could receive foreign language credit from their local public schools for studying Chinese in community schools.

While some community-based heritage language programs succeeded in granting their students high school credits, most of them are still struggling for articulation with the formal educational system. For instance, the coordinator of a Hindi heritage language program stated that their program had not received recognition from the local community, and students were not granted public school credit for their work in heritage language schools. The principal of a Russian heritage language program expressed a desire to offer language credits and other forms of recognition to their students but had not been able to make it a reality.

Addressing challenges

The heritage language literature contains valuable information on how heritage language programs grant high school credits for high school students. For example, Chen (1996) describes in detail the procedures for granting public school credits to students in community-based heritage language programs. First, school staff must contact local school districts and submit an application package with a detailed proposal that describes the heritage language school and provides other relevant information about the school and staff. School staff might also provide a detailed outline of the courses for which they want students to receive credit. The proposal should include a section devoted to how report cards are handled, which is sent to the local school district or the student's high school. Then, after the school district approves the credit transfer, a follow-up letter to the school district to indicate that the heritage language school will follow the procedures required by the school district is recommended.

Public Awareness and Support

Challenges

Because the majority of heritage language programs were initiated by community-based grassroots efforts, they often have very little public visibility. Many community-based schools work alongside the public and private school system with little or no recognition, support, or articulation. A number of programs in the [Heritage Language Programs Database](#) note that public support and recognition is needed. For example, Escola Portuguesa Novos Horizontes indicates that the program would like to receive more recognition and help from the Canadian or the Portuguese government; Learning Hindi/Hindi USA does not receive recognition from the local community, and school district officials and students cannot receive credit for their study at Hindi USA.

Addressing challenges

Raising public awareness and support is needed. The public needs to understand that through community-based heritage programs, learners “can maintain and develop their proficiency in the language, and, as a result, serve as local, national, and international linguistic resources” (Compton, 2001, p. 149). One way to do this is to develop collaborations with organizations with similar goals and interests. For example, Contemporary Chinese School of Arizona (CCSA) developed a partnership with the Confucius Institute at Arizona State University and co-organized a number of activities, which highly raised CCSA’s visibility. Another strategy used by CCSA to raise the local community’s awareness about its school was organizing a fund-raising golf tournament and inviting people from all professions to participate.

Conclusion

Community-based heritage language programs continue to play significant roles in building a multilingual U.S. society. However, heritage language program staff often face challenges to keep their programs going. In this brief we outline the major challenges described by programs in the Heritage Language Programs Database, along with ways that programs have addressed these challenges. Programs can learn from each other, sharing best practices and successes. Local cultural communities, K-12 public schools, higher education institutions, and organizations from the home country can provide helpful support for heritage language schools. Advanced technology can facilitate teachers' teaching and engage students in learning their heritage languages.

At the same time, policies that support language learning and public awareness of the benefits of language learning can have a positive impact on heritage language schools. "There are important ways in which state and national language education policy, leadership, and financial support could assist heritage school staff in providing effective instruction in the heritage languages of America" (Compton, 2001, p. 162). That is, it is crucial for state and national policies to make language learning a priority so that heritage language schools receive the appropriate support and resources to maintain their programs. With more attention to language learning at the state and federal levels, students and parents will be in a social climate that does not send contradictory messages and that keeps a clear message that heritage language learning is beneficial, and helps to address the challenges that language programs face.

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