Heritage Briefs

Hindi-Urdu Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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Nearly 500 million people claim Hindi or Urdu as their first or second language, making this the fourth largest language population in the world (Lewis, 2009). Nearly one million of these speakers live in the United States (Shin & Kominski, 2010). While educational opportunities in these two languages have traditionally been designed for non-heritage graduate students with professional academic interests, there is a growing demand for and availability of courses for heritage language learners (Gambhir, 2008). Hindi and Urdu are now taught not only in colleges and universities, but also in a small number of high schools across the country. In addition, community-based organizations offer classes for Hindi and Urdu heritage language speakers. Following a brief historical overview and discussion of background issues, this brief describes these educational programs and their future prospects.

Historical Overview and Background

Hindi and Urdu are closely related languages, sharing the same grammar and much of the same vocabulary. However, the languages use different scripts, borrow literary and formal vocabulary from different sources, and have very different socio-religious identities. As Hindi adopted the Devanagari script (which is also the modern-day script for Sanskrit), Urdu adopted the Shahmukhi script (which is a Punjabi script derived from the Nasta'liq font of modified Arabic). Urdu is also heavily influenced by Persian. Thus, today Hindi has a growing Sanskrit lexicon and Urdu, a more Persian-oriented one. As a result, language has become a strong signifier of identity, with Hindi being associated with Hindus and Urdu with Muslims. While the two languages can sound very similar in everyday colloquial usage, they are mutually incomprehensible in their more formal and literary varieties (Gambhir, 2009). Many colleges and universities have long offered courses in Hindi-Urdu as one language, but religious and cultural organizations that serve the distinct religious and cultural needs of the two linguistic communities have been more likely to distinguish between Hindi and Urdu.

Both Hindi and Urdu became objects of political contention following the partition of India, which led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. In both highly multilingual countries, Hindus and Muslims looked to Hindi and Urdu respectively to reflect their distinct religious, and now national, identities. Hindi and English were adopted as co-official languages of India, while each state adopted its own regional language. Urdu was established as the official language of Pakistan and one of the many national languages of India.

Because of British colonial influence in India and Pakistan, immigrants from these countries to the United States often speak English along with Hindi, Urdu, or one or more of their regional languages. In addition, many of these immigrants are highly educated. U.S. immigration policies have favored highly educated scientists and engineers since passage of the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (the Hart-Celler Act). However, recent shifts in immigration policy have allowed for family reunification, resulting in an influx of less highly educated immigrants, who may not be as proficient in English. Still, more than 90% of Hindi-Urdu speakers in the United States say that they speak English well or very well (Shin & Kominski, 2010).

Despite the status of English as a language of prestige and power in South Asia, the linguistic diversity of the region is also an important factor influencing the language use patterns of speakers of Hindi and Urdu in the United States. While these two languages are official languages of immigrants' home countries, they are not always the regional languages spoken in these immigrants' homes. India alone has 22 regional languages. While the first generation of immigrants is proficient in Hindi or Urdu, which is often needed for everyday communication in their home countries, the second generation may have very little exposure to these languages, unless they are spoken in their homes or in the community due to community-based heritage language maintenance efforts. However, second-generation youth and young adults often feel a need to learn Hindi or Urdu—to travel to India or Pakistan without their parents, to understand and develop their ethnic cultural identity, or simply to better understand the Bollywood films and Indo-Pakistani pop music that they have access to in the United States. These youth have often grown up with minimal exposure to Hindi or Urdu, but they have had substantial exposure to South Asian cultural elements. Observing these complexities in the needs of Hindi-Urdu heritage language learners, Gambhir (2008) formulates a pedagogic definition of heritage learners of Hindi, which also applies to heritage learners of Urdu:

> A heritage learner of Hindi is a student whose family may speak Hindi or another Indian language at home. The student may or may not be able to speak or understand Hindi but is familiar with the Hindi language and its culture through his or her connection with the heritage land.

Gambhir has also developed specific pedagogical approaches to language instruction for these learners, as described in the next section.

Heritage Language Programs

Due to a dramatic increase in the number of heritage learners enrolling in post-secondary Hindi-Urdu courses, there is now discussion among university educators about how to best teach these students (see, e.g., Gambhir, 2008). Prominent programs include the Hindi-Urdu Flagship at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin, the Department of South Asia Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, the South Asia Language Resource Center at the University of Chicago, and the Department of South Asia Studies at the University of California (UC) at Berkeley. Funding has come, in part, from U.S. Department of Defense initiatives, such as the National Security Education Program (NSEP), which provided funding for UT Austin's South Asia Institute to establish the Flagship program in 2007.

The programs differ in their approaches to the two languages and to teaching heritage and non-heritage students. While the University of Pennsylvania and UC Berkeley offer distinct programs in Hindi and Urdu, UT Austin's Flagship program combines the two in order to help students understand the cultural range of both languages and qualify for a range of careers in South Asia. ([Visit the Hindi-Urdu Flagship website](#) for a discussion of the approach to teaching the two languages.) The University of Pennsylvania's program offers courses specifically for heritage learners who can understand or speak conversational Hindi but have limited literacy. Other programs allow these speakers to bypass introductory courses but do not have separate courses or tracks for heritage learners.

Gambhir (2008) found that most universities do not offer separate tracks primarily for logistical reasons, including lack of faculty and uneven enrollments at different proficiency levels. She emphasizes the success of the separate tracks approach used at the University of Pennsylvania and lists the following as effective strategies used by teachers who teach mixed-level courses: common course goals, open-ended tasks, small-group activities, experiential learning, adaptable assessments, use of student portfolios, equitable top-down and bottom-up approaches to instruction, computer-mediated instruction, supplementary materials, and individualized assignments.

A handful of Hindi-Urdu programs exist at the K–12 level. The Hindi-Urdu Flagship program partners with high schools to provide support for teacher training and curriculum development. Bellaire High School in Houston, Texas, for example, has the oldest high school Hindi program in the United States, offering five levels of Hindi coursework to 90 enrolled students. Teachers at the school report that more than half of these students are of non-Indian origin, and that most of the heritage learners do not speak Hindi at home (Reese, 2010). The Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District in Texas began offering Hindi classes to middle school students in 2007, the Edison School District in New Jersey established a high school Hindi program in 2008, and California's Fremont Unified School District offers accreditation in Hindi. All of these schools are located in regions of the country with significant South Asian immigrant populations and are able to serve many heritage and non-heritage learners.

The National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) has helped to broaden the scope of Hindi-Urdu courses offered to K–16 students across the country through the [STARTALK program](#). STARTALK supports students and teachers of these languages through high-quality summer programs offered in almost every state of the United States. Many STARTALK programs, such as the one at the University of California Los Angeles, are specifically designed for heritage learners who already have oral and receptive Hindi-Urdu language skills. Many others, such as the 2011 HindiUSA summer program in New Jersey, are intended to introduce the languages and cultures to both heritage and non-heritage learners.

In addition to these formal educational opportunities, hundreds of community-based language education programs are located in temples and other religious and cultural centers. Parents, grandparents, and other community members serve as educators in these programs and strive to impart linguistic, religious, and other cultural knowledge to community youth. One prominent program is [HindiUSA](#), based in Edison, New Jersey, and serving over 2,000 students at 28 HindiUSA schools in New Jersey and Connecticut (López, 2009). Like many other community-based programs, this program springs from the desire of first-generation immigrants to help their children better connect with their parents' home country, culture, and relatives still living in South Asia.

Currently, there are more Hindi than Urdu heritage language programs. This is likely due to the much larger number of immigrants from India than from Pakistan and the fact that immigrants from India tend to identify more with Hindi than with Urdu. While nearly 3 million Americans described themselves as Asian Indian on the 2010 Census, fewer than 400,000 described themselves as Pakistani (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Future Prospects for Hindi-Urdu Programs

India and Pakistan are becoming increasingly important to the global economy and to U.S. national security interests. As this happens, proficiency in Hindi and Urdu is becoming more important for Americans in business, government, nonprofit, and media sectors. With growing public and private support for education in these two critical languages, native speakers as well as heritage and second language learners are finding more opportunities to develop their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Therefore, the prospects for Hindi and Urdu heritage language education in the United States seem to be steadily improving.

To ensure the sustainability and viability of current upward trends in Hindi and Urdu language education, there needs to be articulation between the community-based programs that serve young children, the K–12 programs that serve primarily high school students, and the university programs that serve college students. The successful K–12 outreach efforts of the Hindu-Urdu Flagship Program can serve as a national model of partnerships between K–12 and higher education. These efforts not only increase access to heritage language learning resources, but they also ensure a steady pipeline of students for formal language learning at the post-secondary level.

Search for Hindi and Urdu heritage language programs in the Alliance Heritage Language Programs Database.

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