What Do We Know About Heritage Languages?

What Do We Need To Know About Them?

BY GRACE CHO, FAY SHIN, & STEPHEN KRASHEN

Heritage languages (HL) are language spoken by the children of immigrants or by those who immigrated to a country when young. The purpose of this article is to briefly review what is known about heritage language development over time and to identify some gaps in our knowledge.

We will consider three aspects: how much HL speakers use their HLs, how well they know them, and the attitudes they have toward their HLs, focusing here on older children, adolescents, and adults.

Use

There is no question that the use of the HL declines as second generation students move through school. Table 1, from Garcia and Diaz (1992), is from a survey of Spanish-speaking high school students in Miami in their senior year of high school. Thirty percent of the sample were born in the U.S., but all, apparently, did all of their schooling in the U.S. There is a clear decline in the percent of students who report mostly or all Spanish use.

We can get a more revealing view of language use by focusing on the informal domain, the use of language in the family and among friends. Table 2 presents two studies that investigate this, one done with Hispanic high school students in their senior year (Garcia & Diaz, 1992) and a second done with Vietnamese speaking children in elementary and middle school (Nguyen, Shin, & Krashen, 2001). Both show that HL use is higher with parents, less with siblings, and even less with peers

Grace Cho is an assistant professor in the Department of Secondary Education at California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton, California.

Fay Shin is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at California State University, Long Beach, Long Beach, California.

Stephen Krashen is a professor emeritus with the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Table 1
Language Use Pre-School, Junior High School, and High School

	Prior to Elementary School	Jr HS	Sr Yr HS
Spanish	85%	37%	18%
Both	8%	36%	63%
English	7%	27%	19%

Spanish = Spanish only or mostly Spanish; English = English only or mostly English.

From: Garcia & Diaz, 1992.

Table 2
Informal Use of the Heritage Language

	Senior year HS Spanish	Elementary/Middle Vietnamese
With parents	76%	69%
With siblings	32%	15%
With friends in school	20%	8%

Senior year HS: from Garcia & Diaz, 1992.
Elementary/Middle school: from Nguyen et .al., 1991.

(see also Wong-Fillmore, 1991, for similar results).

An interesting question is the developmental path of such differences. It is reasonable to hypothesize that use of HL with parents is fairly consistent over time, as is the preference for the use of English with friends. Use with siblings might change over time. (The higher use of the HL with siblings in the Garcia and Diaz study in Table 2 is probably a result of the high level of use of the HL in the community (Miami).

Competence

HL competence declines with age. The clearest evidence for this are studies that test HL speakers at two different points in time and studies that compare HL competence with competence in the majority language.

Decline over Time

Merino (1983) found a clear decline in oral Spanish competence between ages 5 and 7: On a test of oral language production, mastery of the past tense fell from 87% to 74%, relative clauses from 100% to 44%, and mastery of the subjunctive from 70% to 55%.

Zhou (2001) reported on HL competence among Vietnamese background teenagers at age 14 (time 1) and two years later. Sixtyone percent of the sample of 363 were either born in the US or arrived before age six. The decline in self-reported HL competence (Table 3) was accompanied by an increase in reported English competence. A similar pattern was noted by Espiritu and Wolf (2001) among Filipino background students.

Comparison with Majority Language Competence

A number of studies confirm that by the time second generation HL speakers reach high school, they are dominant in the majority language.

Table 4 is based on data gathered by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) on children of immigrants whose average age was 14. All subjects were U.S. born or had arrived in the U.S. by age 12. For every country of origin, these teenagers report higher competence in English than in their heritage language, even though a substantial percentage of parents report speaking the HL with their children.

Portes and Rumbaut also point out that "no second language group on the average can be considered fluent in their parents' native tongue"(p. 127): ratings were on a 1-4 scale, with 1 = not at all and 4 = very well. No group achieved 3.5 and many were well below this. Note, however, that all groups were fluent in English or very close.

Similar results were reported by Veltman (1983) and Tse (1996). The 394 Cuban-American high school seniors interviewed by Garcia and Diaz (1992) reported similar results for writing, but not for understanding, speaking or reading: ratings in both languages were high, however.

Table 3
Decline in Heritage Language Competence over Two Years

	Time 1	Time 2
Speak very well	41%	34%
Understand very well	43%	38%
Read very well	17%	14%
Write very well	16%	11%

From Zhou, 2001, p. 200.

Attitudes

Attitudes toward the heritage language are quite positive in the elementary and middle school years. Investigators have used a variety of questions to probe attitudes, but results are similar.

Ninety-six percent of elementary and middle school Hmong HL speakers agreed that "it is important to maintain the Hmong language" and 88% said they would like to learn to read and write Hmong in school (Shin & Bo, in press). Similarly, 80% of elementary and middle schoolers who spoke Vietnamese as a HL agreed that "it is important to speak, read and write Vietnamese (Nguyen, Shin, & Krashen, 2001) and 67% said they would like to study Vietnamese in school.

Ghuman (1991), in a study of 13 to 15 year old Asian adolescents who had been schooled entirely in England reported that 96% considered themselves to be bilingual,

Table 4
English and Heritage Language Competence

National origin	English	HL	N	Parent speaks HL with child
Argentina	3.93	3.02	37	71%
Chili	3.86	2.97	26	79%
Columbia	3.9	3.22	185	86%
Costa Rica	3.91	3.02	11	83%
Cuba	3.9	3.13	968	83%
Dominican Republic	3.8	3.09	78	88%
Ecuador	3.89	3	27	72%
Guatamala	3.89	2.85	25	67%
Hondura	3.76	3.08	42	81%
Mexico	3.62	3.33	599	85%
Nicaragua	3.78	3.23	281	95%
Panama	3.92	2.82	15	17%
Peru	3.88	3.13	28	80%
El Salvador	3.84	3.35	26	85%
Venezula	3.87	3.08	13	67%
other Latin America	3.9	2.84	30	70%
Haiti	3.87	2.44	135	77%
Cambodia	3.38	2.4	89	99%
Hong Kong	3.78	2.28	17	100%
China (PRC)	3.54	2.23	35	78%
China (Taiwan)	3.57	2.24	18	70%
Philippines	3.87	2.08	724	37%
Hmong (Laos)	3.21	2.66	50	100%
India	3.89	2.42	16	37%
Japan	3.93	2.07	24	54%
Korea	3.63	2.27	15	50%
Laos	3.37	2.42	144	99%
Pakistan	3.95	2.38	10	50%
Vietnam	3.42	2.54	310	94%
other Asia	3.83	2	12	80%
Middle East, Africa	3.97	1.88	42	12%
Europe, Canada	3.98	2.06	55	26%
Total	3.77	2.75	4288	73%

From: Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, pp: 128-129.

although nearly all preferred to speak English "most of the time" (p. 333). Ghuman reported that "over 90% expressed the wish to learn their mother-tongue" (p. 333).

Moving to high school, 80% of Garcia and Diaz' high school seniors agreed that "Spanish is very important." Not surprisingly, slightly more (91%) said the same about English.

Ramirez (2000) asked Hispanic high school students from six different cities in the U.S. a number of questions about the value of Spanish. There was some variation among cities, with those in Miami and Los Angeles tending to value Spanish more highly than those in the Bronx and Amsterdam, New York.

In addition, the high schoolers tended to value Spanish more highly for some reasons than for others, e.g., they valued Spanish more highly as a means of interacting with different people than as a means of achieving educational goals. But the important finding is that responses were positive overall. Spanish was not valued negatively by any group for any goal: On a 1 (very high value) to 5 (very low value) scale, the most negative was 2.41 (Amsterdam, NY) for the use of Spanish to achieve educational goals. Most mean scores were below 2.0.

Rivera-Mills (2000) asked 24 second- and 10 third-generation Hispanic residents of a northern California city about their HL. All 24 second generation subjects agreed with the statement "It is important for me to maintain my Spanish." Only half of the third generation agreed, however.

Disturbing these cheerful pictures, however, are studies showing some negative attitudes toward HL's beginning in adolescence. Tse (1998) notes that some language minority group members go through a stage in which the desire to integrate into the target culture is so strong that there is apathy toward or even rejection of the heritage culture and language. Tse refers to this stage as Ethnic Ambivalence or Ethnic Evasion. Typically, this stage occurs during childhood and adolescence, and may extend into adulthood. Those in this stage have little interest in the heritage language, and may even avoid using it:

> Maria Shao recounted how her knowledge of Chinese was a source of shame. She recalled that when she was in elementary school, "if I had friends over, I purposely spoke English to my parents. Normally, we only spoke Chinese at home. Because of the presence of a non-Chinese, I used to purposely speak English." (Tse, 1998, p. 21)

Orellana, Ek, and Hernandez (1999) provide additional examples: Their subject, "Andy," an 11 year old child of Mexican immigrants, "said he didn't like to speak Spanish, because then people thought he was from Mexico ..." (p. 124).

It is clear from these cases and others reported by Tse (1998) that Ethnic Ambivlance is real. Unknown is the frequency of Ethnic Ambivalence and the conditions that cause it. A reasonable hypothesis is that it is less frequent when HL speakers live in areas in which the HL is more widely spoken.

A probable contributor to Ethnic Ambivalence is less than perfect competence in the HL, which could lead to negative reactions from more competent HL speakers. Some imperfect HL speakers (often a younger sibling) report that their efforts to speak the heritage language are met with correction and even ridicule by more competent HL speakers, a reaction that discourages the use of the HL, and thus results in less input and even less competence (Krashen, 1998).

Adulthood

Some adults who spoke a HL when they were younger enter a stage called Ethnic Emergence (Tse, 1998). Those in this stage show a renewed interest in the ethnic heritage. This typically occurs in early adulthood following wider exposure to the world through travel and/or study and encounters with prejudice.

Cho (2001) presents another important reason adult HL speakers seek to improve their HL competence. In a series of studies of second generation Korean HL speakers who sought to improve their Korean language competence, Cho reported that many cited the need to improve communication with members of the older generation, confirming observations made by Wong-Fillmore (1991). A remark by one of Cho's subjects (Cho, forthcoming), Harris, is unfortunately typical:

> It is frustrating when I'm speaking to my parents and can't fully comprehend what we're trying to say to each other. I hate it when I eat dinner with my parents that they always carry on their own conversation that I can only half understand. Yet, they complain that we don't eat as a family enough. I hate having something to say, but not being able to say it.

As one would expect, the problem tends to get even more serious when communication is with grandparents. Another of Cho's subjects, Jessica, explained:

> The situation in which I most desperately want to speak Korean is when I am with my grandmother. Although we manage to express ourselves through simple words, I can't help but feel frustrated when it comes to talking with my grandmother. I want to ask her so many things: how things were, what has changed, what has not, and such. I want to ask her about our family history and world history. I want to talk to her instead of just "parroting" phrases my mother tells me.

Summary of Findings

Overall, among the second generation, the use of the HL and HL competence clearly decline as children get older. Remarkably, however, attitudes remain positive, except for those who experience Ethnic Ambivalence in the adolescent years. It also appears that a significant number of HL speakers want to improve or continue to improve their knowledge of the HL when they reach adulthood (and in some cases recover their lost competence). There are obvious practical reasons for improving one's HL, but one that appears to be very important to HL speakers is improved relationships with family and extended family.

Improving Heritage Language Competence

Language acquisition theory tells us that we acquire language when we understand it. If this is true, "comprehensible input," messages we understand, will be the way to improve HL's as well. Thus far, research is consistent with this view.

Tse (2001) reported that those managing to maintain unusually high levels of competence in their heritage language had access to reading materials in the HL, and nearly all developed an interest in reading in the HL for pleasure.

Cho and Krashen (2000) found four independent predictors of HL competence among second generation Korean HL speakers, all related to comprehensible input: parental use of the HL (see also Hinton, 2001), trips to Korea, TV watching, and reading.

Theory as well as these results predict that HL classes that emphasize pleasure reading and other forms of comprehensible input will work, and McQuillan's studies confirm that they do for college students enrolled in Spanish for Native Speaker classes (McQullan, 1998).

There is no reason not to encourage HL development. There is no evidence that HL development harms linguistic or cognitive development: In fact, there is some

evidence that it helps (Krashen, 1998). It has obvious practical advantages, especially in terms in international relations and trade, and, for no extra cost, allows the HL speaker to learn from the older generation.

References

Espiritu, Y. L. & Wolf, D. (2000). The paradox of assimilation: Children of Filipino immigrants in San Diego. In Rumbaut, R. & Portes, A., Eds., *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp.157-186.

Cho, G. (2001). The role of HL in social interactions and relationships: Reflections from a language minority group. *Bilingual Research Journal, 24(4),* 369-384.

Cho, G. & Krashen, S. (2000). The role of voluntary factors in heritage language development: how speakers can develop the heritage language on their own. *ITL: Review of Applied Linguistics 127-128,* 127-140.

Garcia, R, & Diaz, C. (1992). The status and use of Spanish and English among Hispanic youth in Dade County (Miami) Florida: A sociolinguistic study. *Language and Education 6,* 13-32.

Ghuman, P.A. S. (1991). Have they passed the cricket test? A "qualitative" study of Asian adolescents. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 12*(5*), 327-346.*

Hinton, L. (2001). Involuntary language loss among immigrants: Asian-American linguistic autobiographies. In Alatis J. & Tan, A.H., Eds., *Language in our time: Round table on languages and linguistics, 1999.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. pp. 203-252.

Krashen, S. (1998). Language shyness and heritage language development. In Krashen, S., Tse, L., & McQuillan, J., Eds., *Heritage Language Development.* Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates. pp. 41-49.

McQuillan, J. (1998). The use of self-selected and free voluntary reading in heritage language programs: A review of research. In Krashen, S., Tse, L., & McQuillan, J. Eds., *Heritage Language Development.* Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates. pp. 73-87.

Nguyen, A., Shin, F., & Krashen, S. (2001). Development of the first language is not a barrier to second-language acquisition: Evidence from Vietnamese immigrants to the United States. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism 4(3),* 159-164.

Orellana, M,, Ek, L. & Hernandez, A. (1999). Bilingual education in an immigrant community: Proposition 227 in California. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism 2(2),* 114-130.

Ramirez, A. (2000). Linguistic notions of Spanish among youths from different Hispanic groups. In Roca, A., Ed., *Research on Spanish in the U.S.* Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press. pp. 284-295.

Rivera-Mills, S. (2000). Intraethnic attitudes among Hispanics in a Northern California community. . In Roca, A. Ed., *Research on Spanish in the U.S.* Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press. pp. 377-389.

Shin, F. & Lee, B. Language shift co-occurs with positive attitudes toward the heritage language. *Mosaic* (in press.)

Tse, L. (1998). Ethnic identity formation and its implications for heritage language development. In Krashen, S., Tse, L. & McQuillan, J. (Eds.) *Heritage language development*. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates. pp. 15-29.

Veltman, C. (1983). *Language shift in the United States.* Berlin, Germany: Mouton.

Wong-Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly 6,* 323-346.

Zhou, M. (2000). Straddling different worlds: The acculturation of Vietnamese Refugee Children. In Rumbaut, R. & A. Portes, A. (Eds.) *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp. 187-227.