

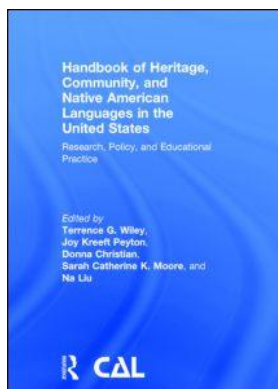
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **Handbook of Heritage, Community, and Native American Languages in the United States Research, Policy, and Educational Practice**

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### **Heritage Language Students**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203122419.ch3>

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**Published online on: 13 Jan 2014**

**How to cite :-** Guadalupe Valdés. 13 Jan 2014, *Heritage Language Students from: Handbook of Heritage, Community, and Native American Languages in the United States, Research, Policy, and Educational Practice* Routledge

Accessed on: 23 Oct 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203122419.ch3>

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# Heritage Language Students

## Profiles and Possibilities<sup>1</sup>

*Guadalupe Valdés*

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New awareness of language rights and new efforts to right old wrongs have prompted educators around the world to recognize the importance of ethnic and heritage languages. In some countries, this recognition has led to policies that support the teaching of these languages as subjects in school, to learners with a home background in the languages, and as foreign languages to students with no background in them. Supporters of these policies believe that they give these languages both legitimacy and attention.

This development offers both new opportunities and new challenges to educators. This chapter examines these opportunities and challenges in the context of the United States, where demographic shifts are changing how we think about the teaching of languages that, until recently, were taught exclusively as foreign languages.

### **The Language Characteristics of Heritage Language Speakers**

#### *Bilingualism and Bilingual Individuals*

In spite of a growing commitment by some educators to developing heritage languages in this country, the challenges surrounding the teaching of students with a range of language skills—heritage learners and those without proficiency in the language—are not simple. In the case of monolingual English-speaking heritage students of some immigrant and indigenous languages, challenges may include making decisions about the variety of the language to be taught, developing a writing system, developing language teaching materials, and identifying remaining speakers of the language, to name a few. For other languages, the major challenge may be to provide instruction that capitalizes on personal connections to the heritage language. In the case of the teaching of heritage languages as academic subjects to students with some proficiency in the language, challenges include determining the range of proficiencies that these students have already developed in the language and understanding the ways to strengthen these proficiencies.

Heritage language students raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speak or only understand the heritage language, and who have some proficiency in English and

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is an abridged version of Valdés, G. (2001). *Heritage Language Students: Profiles and Possibilities*. In J. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource* (pp. 37–77). Washington, DC, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems, Inc. It has been adapted with permission but not updated.

the heritage language are to some degree bilingual. It is important to point out, however, that for many people—indeed for some scholars—the term *bilingual* implies not only the ability to use two languages to some degree in everyday life but also the skilled superior use of both languages at the level of the educated native speaker. For individuals who subscribe to this narrow definition of bilingualism, a bilingual person is two monolinguals in one who can do everything perfectly in two languages and who can pass undetected among monolingual speakers of each of these two languages. While absolutely equivalent abilities in two languages are theoretically possible, individuals seldom have access to two languages in exactly the same contexts in every domain of interaction. Nor do they have opportunities to use two languages to carry out the exact same functions. Thus, they do not develop identical strengths in both languages.

Those who define bilingualism more broadly and whose research involves the investigation of bilingualism in communities where two languages are spoken suggest instead that there are many different types of bilinguals and that bilingual abilities fall along a continuum. From this perspective, bilingualism is seen to be a condition that essentially involves competence in more than one language, however small it might be. The comparison group against which bilinguals of different types are to be measured is the monolingual group, the group of individuals who have competence in only one language. A native speaker of English who is literate in English and who reads French, for example, is clearly more bilingual than an individual who can read in only one language. Similarly, an individual who is fluent in English and understands spoken Polish has developed dual language abilities very much beyond those of speakers who understand only English. Neither of these individuals is completely bilingual. What is important is that neither of these individuals is completely monolingual, either.

In addition to varying across bilinguals, bilingualism is best seen as a dynamic condition. Over the course of a lifetime, a single individual's bilingual profile can vary immensely, depending on experience and schooling. An immigrant child, for example, may grow up in a household in which mainly Russian is spoken. Over the years, depending on the amount of contact with Russian, that person may become much more English dominant than Russian dominant. It is possible, however, that in older adulthood, perhaps because of marriage late in life to a newly arrived immigrant, that individual will once again use Russian predominantly in everyday life.

In addition, immigrant bilingualism tends to follow a specific generational pattern. Bilinguals of different generations have different proficiencies in English and in the heritage language. Many first-generation immigrants will remain monolingual in their first language throughout their lives. Others will acquire some English and become incipient bilinguals but will still be strongly dominant in the heritage language. By the second and third generation, most members of the immigrant community will have acquired English quite well. The majority of these individuals will be, if not English dominant, English preferent. Many, nevertheless, will continue to function in two languages in order to communicate with members of the first generation. Finally, by the fourth generation, most individuals of immigrant background will have become monolingual English speakers. Only a few will retain some competence in the heritage language.

### *Language Characteristics of Immigrant Students*

Many immigrant students who come to this country as young children enter American schools with little knowledge of English and are referred to as English language learners (ELLs). By the time they arrive in high school and college, however, most will have acquired some English. Some will continue to be heritage language dominant; that is, their overall abilities in the heritage language will be much greater than their English language abilities. Second-, third-, and fourth-generation students, however, will be generally English dominant. Their strengths in English will often very strongly overshadow their abilities in the heritage language.

To make matters even more complex, many immigrant students are often speakers of nonprestige varieties of their heritage language. They may speak a rural variety of the language or a stigmatized variety associated with nonacademic uses of language, or their productive abilities may be limited to a very narrow repertoire of styles and registers. The spoken language of these students often contains a number of features typical of colloquial and informal registers of the language that are totally inappropriate in the classroom. Registers, it will be recalled, include very high-level varieties of language, such as those used in university lectures and the writing of academic articles. They also include midlevel varieties, such as those used in newspaper reports, popular novels, interviews, and low-level registers used in intimate and casual conversation. Not all speakers of a given language develop identical linguistic repertoires. High-status groups generally have access to language use in a number of contexts (e.g., academic, religious, administrative) in which the high/formal varieties are used in narrowly prescribed ways. As a result, the linguistic features characterizing the high varieties of language tend over time to characterize the speech of high-status groups as well. Lower-status groups, on the other hand, given their limited access to these same contexts, tend to develop a narrower range of styles in both the oral and the written modes. Their speech is characterized by the use of features normally found in the informal/colloquial varieties of the language that they use with greater frequency.

Heritage language speakers in the United States, like their monolingual counterparts in their home countries, reflect the complexities of class and access. The linguistic repertoires of upper-middle-class individuals contain a broad range of registers including varieties appropriate for situations (e.g., academia) in which oral language reflects the hyperliteracy of its speakers. The repertoires of individuals of lower-ranked groups, especially those who have had little access to formal education, are much narrower in range and do not normally include ease with hyperliterate discourse. It is important to note, however, that some scholars (e.g., Kroch, 1978) have suggested that other factors, in addition to access to different contexts of language use, have an impact on the differences between the speech of high- and low-status groups in a given society. Kroch argues that dominant social groups tend to mark themselves off from lower-status groups by means of language and that speakers of prestige language varieties deliberately work to distance themselves linguistically from the nonelite groups in their society. This would suggest that speakers of prestige varieties consciously and unconsciously work to distance themselves from their nonelite conationals. Members of nonelite groups, on the other hand, must consciously work to acquire ways of speaking that characterize the elite groups to which they aspire to belong.

Unlike monolinguals, however, heritage speakers have grown up in bilingual communities in the United States. As in monolingual communities, different registers are used in different situational contexts. What is different, however, is that the high registers of English are used to carry out all formal/high exchanges, while heritage languages and the informal registers of English are used as the low variety appropriate primarily for casual, informal interactions.

In addition to being characterized by what has been termed *diglossia* (the functional differentiation of languages) and bilingualism, bilingual communities also reflect the social class origins of their residents. In the case of immigrants from certain countries (e.g., Mexico), evidence suggests that a large majority of persons who emigrate to the United States do not come from the groups with high levels of education. Other immigrants, however, from countries such as Korea and Taiwan are more often members of the professional and well-educated elite. A further complication in the study of heritage languages spoken in bilingual communities by first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants is the fact that these languages—isolated as they are from the broad variety of contexts and situations in which they are used in the home country—are at risk of undergoing significant changes. Some researchers (e.g., de Bot & Weltens, 1991; Maher, 1991; Olshtain & Barzilay, 1991; Seliger & Vago, 1991) maintain that immigrants experience language attrition and the languages undergo structural loss.

In sum, the heritage languages that are spoken in bilingual communities in the United States and acquired by immigrant bilinguals reflect the class origins of their first-generation speakers. If these speakers did not have access to the range of situations and contexts in which formal high varieties of the heritage language are used, the language is characterized by a somewhat narrower range of lexical and syntactic alternatives than is the language of upper-middle-class speakers. Perhaps more importantly, because in these communities the use of the heritage language is restricted to largely low-level functions and private-sphere interactions, over time “the immigrant language falls into disuse,” as Huffines (1991, p. 125) points out. As a result, many young people in bilingual communities may not acquire a full mastery of the registers and styles characteristic of even working-class monolinguals from the home country. The heritage language may be characterized by the use of stigmatized features as well as features that are a direct result of contact with English. In school, in comparison to students who have acquired the language exclusively in the classroom, the heritage language student may seem quite superior in some respects and quite limited in others. For example, there may be little or no proficiency in reading and writing the language. As is the case with most native speakers of a language, the heritage language speaker “knows” the language and uses a set of internalized grammatical rules but generally does not have the metalanguage to talk about the grammatical system itself. (See also, Valdés, 1995, 2000; Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998, for discussion of the language characteristics of immigrants and heritage language speakers.)

## Language Instruction for Heritage Speakers

### *The Development of Pedagogical Theories*

In order to support the growing interest in developing heritage language resources through the educational system, a coherent body of pedagogical theories is needed about what can be accomplished in a classroom setting relative to out-of-school acquisition, functions, and rewards, recognizing the complex diversity of learner language characteristics. Very little empirical research about the outcomes of different kinds of instruction is available. Foreign language instruction at the high school level is generally still aimed primarily at monolingual English-speaking, college-bound students, and college and university language instruction is still largely defined by the literature-focused upper-level courses in which students are eventually expected to enroll. Specific goals have not been established for the teaching of Spanish and other languages as heritage languages, and no policies directly guide the implementation of programs, the training of teachers, and the measurement of outcomes.

Heritage language educators are concerned with such questions as the acquisition of a standard dialect, the expansion of bilingual range, the transfer of reading and writing abilities across languages, and the maintenance of immigrant and other heritage languages. In each of these areas, existing practice is informed to a very limited degree by research carried out on societal and individual bilingualism. Language professionals working in the area of Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) have utilized descriptions of U.S. Spanish, for example, to prepare materials and to predict difficulties that students will have. They have not yet developed theories, however, about how standard dialects are acquired, how bilinguals expand their range in each language, or how skills transfer across languages. More surprisingly, perhaps, there is little examination of the results of teaching practices in order to draw important insights about both language and language learning.

In moving toward the development of more coherent pedagogical theories for the teaching of heritage languages, one important option is to draw directly from practices and theories used initially in the teaching of either first or second languages and to extend the implications of these practices to the teaching of heritage students. Valdés and Geoffrion-Vinci (1998), for example, attempted to understand the development and use of academic registers of Spanish by Chicano

students by extending Nemser's (1971) view of "approximative" high registers and evolving competencies originally found in the second language acquisition literature. Some instructors (e.g., Pino, 1997), guided by Heath's (1983) work in conducting community ethnographies with monolingual students and teachers, have used this approach with heritage speakers. Others (Politzer, 1993; Valdés, 1981) have pointed out the need for the field of heritage language teaching to review the research on nonstandard varieties of English and the early pedagogies developed for the teaching of Standard English (Allen, 1969; Bartley & Politzer, 1972; Feigenbaum, 1970; Stewart, 1970).

In order to advance the effectiveness of and theoretical foundation for heritage language instruction, the field of heritage language education needs to develop coherent pedagogical theories for the teaching of heritage languages that are based not only on theories of bilingualism and bilingual language development but also on the actual outcomes of heritage language instruction. Objectives and practices in heritage language instruction must be carefully examined in order to identify successful practices and outcomes that—although not directly based on clear pedagogical theories—may potentially contribute to the development of such theories by providing evidence of the kinds of language development that can take place in classroom settings for bilingual learners.

Similarly, it is important to determine to what degree pedagogical theories and approaches used in the teaching of first or second language learners can be applied to the teaching of heritage speakers. For example, theories of extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998), although originally developed with second language learners in mind, may be effectively used or adapted in expanding the restricted range of registers used by Latinos in this country. Similarly, pedagogical theories of native language writing development—for example, those used to support the teaching of written academic discourses to unskilled or minority writers (Bizzell, 1986; De & Gregory, 1997; DiPardo, 1993; Fox, 1992; Hill, 1990; Hull, 1991; Lisle & Mano, 1997; McCarthy, 1987; Perl, 1979; Rose, 1985, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1977; Walters, 1994)—may well be used successfully for teaching academic literacies in the heritage language to bilingual learners. We know that some classroom practices in the teaching of heritage languages have been borrowed from native and second language instruction (e.g., the teaching of traditional grammar). It is important, as well, to identify novel adaptations of pedagogical theories and practices (e.g., genre analysis in Swales, 1990; community ethnographies in Heath, 1983; reformulation in Cohen, 1990) drawn from the fields of first and second language development and acquisition that can inform the continued development of theories and practices in the teaching of heritage languages.

### *A Framework for Planning Instruction for Heritage Language Speakers*

Instruction for heritage language speakers who are to some degree bilingual requires that language educators build on these students' existing language strengths. One possible approach is suggested by the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). The standards were the result of the national standards-setting movement and involved members of most of the associations of language educators in the country. Because the standards-writing team included from its inception individuals actively engaged in the teaching of heritage languages, the standards offer a view of the goals of language study that are of direct relevance to those of us concerned with this instruction. The goals of foreign language study that serve as the organizing framework for the standards are the following:

- Goal 1. Communication
- Goal 2. Cultures
- Goal 3. Connections
- Goal 4. Comparisons
- Goal 5. Community

The standards perspective on language learning views language study as leading to the ability to function in the target language. Students who study language will communicate with others, will explore other disciplines using the target language, and will use it to participate in multilingual communities in this country and abroad. Moreover, through their study of language, students will learn about culture itself as well as about the nature of language.

In this framework of the goals of language study, even though linguistic abilities are still seen as central to the acquisition of language, there is no longer a preoccupation with the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—as separate language abilities. The standards also allow us to think about instruction for heritage language speakers in an entirely new way. In examining the five listed goals, for example, it is clear that no matter how much they already know, heritage speakers must continue to focus on Goal 1, which involves interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication. They must continue to develop a greater bilingual communicative range. Heritage speakers need to gain knowledge and understanding of other heritage language cultures (Goal 2). They need to use the heritage language to connect with other disciplines and viewpoints and to acquire new information (Goal 3). They need opportunities to develop even more insights than they already have into the nature of language and culture through making comparisons around the nature of language and culture (Goal 4). Finally, they must be encouraged to become lifelong learners of the language by participating in multilingual communities at home, beyond the school setting, and around the world (Goal 5).

The communications goal (Goal 1) as outlined in the standards is of particular relevance to our understanding of the unique language strengths of heritage language speakers. From the point of view of the standards, communication in a language involves much more than simply speaking and listening. The standards recognize three “communicative modes” (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) and place primary emphasis on the context and purpose of the communication. Each mode involves a particular link between language and the ways in which interaction takes place. Moreover, various skills, such as listening and speaking or reading and writing, occur together within a single mode of communication.

The interpretive communication mode involves understanding what is communicated by others in both oral and written texts. When students read literary texts, for example, or listen to lectures in the language they are studying, they are engaged in interpretive communicative activities. The abilities required for engaging in this type of communication are primarily the receptive skills of reading and listening.

The presentational oral communication mode involves communication with a group of listeners or readers. It can take place in both written and oral language. As will be evident, oral communication in the presentational mode is quite different from oral communication in the interpersonal mode. In the presentational mode, there is little opportunity to read body language and to clarify or reformulate. Oral communication in the presentational mode is in fact much like formal written communication in this same mode and requires a sense of the audience as well as planning and preparation in presenting an argument, explaining, or summarizing information.

For students with a home background in the language being studied, the standards framework of communication modes provides a useful way of conceptualizing both learners’ strengths and needs. As discussed earlier, heritage learners may enter formal language instructional programs with considerable ability in the interpersonal mode. However, they may not have completely developed the interpretive and presentational communication modes. While many heritage learners are quite fluent in oral interpersonal language, many need to develop a greater bilingual communicative range. They need to develop their interpersonal skills in order to interact with a broad range of individuals of different backgrounds and ages for a variety of purposes. In terms of the interpretive and presentational communication modes, heritage language speakers need to learn how to read skillfully in the heritage language, to interpret subtle meanings found in both oral and written texts,

and to present information in both oral and written forms intended for audiences with which they do not have immediate contact.

As will be evident from work with these communication modes, using a standards-based perspective, instruction directed at heritage language speakers can move beyond a focus on prescriptive grammar, transfer of skills, and basic language maintenance. This kind of instruction can directly contribute to the expansion of bilingual range in that it can help students grow in their competence to carry out face-to-face interactions, comprehend live and recorded and extended oral texts, comprehend written texts, and use language in written and oral form to present information to groups of listeners or readers.

### **Toward the Establishment of a New Profession**

Heritage language speakers present new challenges for the field of foreign language education. Most teachers have not been trained to work with students who already speak or understand the target language or who have a strong connection with it. Similarly, language teachers brought in from countries in which the languages are spoken have little or no idea about bilingualism and about the language competencies of heritage students who have been raised in this country. For individuals and groups concerned about the role of instruction in maintaining or revitalizing heritage languages, the basic pedagogical issues, however, are similar to those of foreign language instruction. The challenge involves understanding the needs of minority language communities and of particular groups of learners and adapting or developing pedagogical approaches that can bring about the best results.

In this chapter, I have attempted to describe the characteristics of language students who are raised in homes in which the language being studied is still spoken. The pedagogical challenges I have discussed, the need for theory, and the suggested framework based on the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006) apply primarily to heritage students with this kind of profile. As we move to the establishment of a heritage language teaching profession, it is important that we keep in mind that what brings us together is our commitment to the study and teaching of non-English languages in the United States to students who have a personal investment in these languages. As we work together, it is important that we discuss with each other details about the specific challenges of instruction in various heritage languages. If we are to build on each other's experiences, we need to share answers to questions such as the following:

- What are the characteristics of the community in which the heritage language was or is spoken?
- Does the heritage language teaching effort involve language revitalization or language maintenance?
- How many school and college-age students have functional proficiencies in the heritage language?
- What kinds of language backgrounds do these students bring to the classroom? (Are they first, second, or third generation? Are they biliterate?)
- What kinds of strengths in those languages do they bring?
- Are members of the community interested in developing, maintaining, or revitalizing the heritage language?
- Do individual students wish to develop or maintain the heritage language?
- How large is this group?
- Are these students willing to request instruction in the language, if not available, and to apply pressure on the academic institution to respond to their request?



- Is the heritage language commonly taught as an academic subject in schools or colleges in the community? Should it be?
- What kinds of support are available to carry out such instruction and to plan pedagogical practices?
- Is an out-of-school teaching context likely to be more effective?
- Are teachers of the heritage language available?
- Are pedagogical materials available?
- Are teacher preparation efforts in place or likely to be put in place?
- In cases in which instruction in the heritage language is already part of a school or college program, are heritage language speakers well placed in existing language sequences?
- How well can students' strengths be developed by existing instruction?
- What are legitimate and valid language development goals for these students?
- What kinds of special courses have to be developed to bring about those goals?
- Are school and college faculty interested in heritage language students and willing to work closely with them?
- Can school and college administrators be persuaded to support the teaching of the heritage language?

Sharing such information, cataloguing ways in which challenges have been addressed, and examining why efforts have been successful or unsuccessful will directly benefit others who are working to bring about the continued development and maintenance of heritage languages.

Heritage language speakers bring with them many strengths and many different abilities, and heritage communities are very different from each other. In preparing ourselves to teach heritage students, we must see their strengths, value them, and take joy in the fact that in spite of negative sentiments toward non-English languages in the United States, many languages are alive and well. To be successful in helping to maintain these languages, we must firmly resolve as a profession that we will learn from each other, that we will share what we learn, and that we will endeavor to extend lessons learned by others to our own contexts. We must continue to find strength in the fact that we value heritage languages and heritage language speakers and that we are convinced that language maintenance efforts are vitally important to our country and to our society.

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