

Heritage Language Learning

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For years, there have been immigrants from all over the world coming to live and work in America in order to create a better life for themselves and their families. As a result, America has become more culturally and linguistically diverse. The number of people who speak languages other than English continues to increase along with the number of languages spoken in America. In 2000, the foreign born population in this country reached 30 million, which is slightly over 10% of the US resident population, making this the highest proportion of foreign-born residents in the US since the early 1900s (Peyton et al., 2001, p. 6). However, as the number of immigrants has increased, the tolerance for linguistic ethnic diversity has decreased because English speakers felt threatened by the increasing minority languages. This intolerance for linguistic ethnic diversity has resulted in the development of the English-only movement, which has made many immigrants quickly and easily give up their old languages and ways (Peyton et al., 2001, p. 3). As a result, the immigrants from foreign countries and different cultures assimilated to the America culture and became one nation. This has brought the country to become known as a “melting pot.” Many groups struggle to maintain their languages and traditions today. But recently, there has been resurgence in the interest of heritage languages and many parents encourage their children to learn their heritage language along with the prominent language, English.

Prior to this resurgence of heritage language interest, there has often been a negative view on heritage language. As the number of minority languages in America was increasing, people felt that the English language was being threatened so they made English the official language of America. As a result, the English-only movement was formed. English-only advocates believe that bilingualism would put the country at risk of being divided by the non-English language groups. They also believe that immigrants should only learn English because the English

language can improve their socioeconomic and geographic mobility in America. Furthermore, English-only advocates believe that bilingual education has a negative affect on cognitive abilities and overcrowds children's cognitive circuits because there is only a limited amount of information that can be processed by a child at any particular time (Padilla, 2014). This misplaced perception of bilingualism is known as the Separate Underlying Proficiency (SUP) Theory. The SUP suggests that the two languages of an individual are housed separately within the mind so it has half the capacity of a monolingual mind and the languages work against each other resulting in confusion and failure in language production (May, Hill & Tiakiwai, 2004, p. 37). Such beliefs often prevent the maintenance of heritage languages and traditions within immigrant groups.

Despite these negative views on bilingualism and heritage language maintenance, research has shown that learning an individual's heritage language alongside a prominent language, which allows for bilingualism, provides many benefits to individuals. Bilingualism provides cognitive benefits such as cognitive flexibility, advantages for learning multiple languages, and enhanced metalinguistic awareness. Bilingualism also provides social benefits such as more job opportunities, sense of identity, cultural maintenance, and prevention of detachment from family. These benefits should encourage immigrants to teach and maintain their heritage language to their children in order to prevent language loss.

One of the most compelling reasons for maintaining heritage language is the positive impact it has on cognitive development. Studies have shown that bilingualism provides individuals with cognitive flexibility, which is the ability to view the world in more than one way. Each language provides a different way of thinking, feeling, and believing. In a study done by Lambert (1977), individuals were told to think of a paper clip and list the different things that

can be done with it. Bilinguals were shown to have come up with more innovative solutions as opposed to monolinguals. As a result, people who can speak more than one language have more creative and flexible thinking.

Another cognitive benefit of heritage language maintenance is that bilingualism will help to enhance metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to tend to and reflect upon properties of a language such as the phonology and syntax (Davidson & Raschke, 2011, p. 1). Metalinguistic awareness may be enhanced in bilinguals because learning two languages requires the individual to focus on the properties of both of the languages. As a result, metalinguistic awareness provided improved reading ability in young children (Davidson & Raschke, 2011, p. 1). Metalinguistic awareness is also the ability to notice what kind of speech is appropriate in a specific environment with certain people. This is important, as it will help you to use the correct language in the right context.

Heritage language maintenance also provides the cognitive benefit of an advantage to learn another language. Heritage language learners who are able to learn their language proficiently are also able to achieve proficiency in their second languages. This shows that academic knowledge and skills transfer across languages and that “the strongest predictor of second language achievement is the amount of schooling in the first language (Thomas & Collier, 2002).” The more schooling that is provided in the first language, the more likely second language proficiency will be achieved. Bilinguals also show improved ability to learn a third language because they already have experience learning a second language.

Bilingualism not only has cognitive benefits but it also has social benefits. A social benefit of bilingualism is that it provides socioeconomic advantages. Bilinguals are given more job opportunities because employers look for bilingual employees to provide services to a wider

range of people in our diverse society and global economy (Larsen, 2011, p. 9). Bilinguals are also given financial incentives because there are limited numbers of qualified bilingual professionals. The Los Angeles Police Department offers a 2.75% salary increase for officers who can speak Spanish or an Asian language and 5% salary increase for those who can read and write those languages (Larsen, 2011, p. 10).

Another social benefit of heritage language maintenance is that it strengthens the development of identity, self-esteem and mental health. Individuals who develop their heritage language abilities tend to identify strongly with their heritage culture. When individuals know their heritage language, it allows them to become apart of their ethnic group, which shapes their identity. When individuals feel more connected to their community, it also strengthens their self-esteem because it gives them a sense of belonging (Larsen, 2011, pp. 12-15).

Heritage language maintenance also helps to maintain the heritage culture. When immigrants move to America, they need to learn English in order to function in the community. After generations have been raised in America, the number of the heritage language speakers would end up decreasing and they may end up losing the heritage language. When you lose a language, “you lose a rich source of knowledge such as knowledge of the culture” (Bot, 2005). Without the language, the thinking and the worldview encoded in the language will also be lost (Wilson & Kaimana, 2006, p. 157). As a result, it is important for individuals to teach their children their heritage language in order to maintain their culture and prevent the language loss.

As the heritage language is maintained within the family, it prevents detachment from family. In a study done by Jinhee Kim (2011), she found that parents want their children to learn their heritage language in order to prevent detachment from family because their child’s restricted limited Korean proficiency limits the communication between the children and their

families, which weakens their relationship (p. 137). Younger generations of immigrants who are raised in America end up going to school and learning English but not their heritage language so they may start to lose it. On the other hand, the parents stick to the heritage language and don't learn English. As a result, there is no shared language between the child and parent so they would have difficulty having conversations with each other and this would affect their relationship. Heritage language maintenance allows for communication within the family, which in turn strengthens the relationship.

In order to gain these benefits of learning the heritage language, the heritage language needs to be maintained. The framework for heritage language maintenance is the family language policy. Family language policy is the planning for language use within the home among family members (King, 2008, p. 907). Family language policy can be developed within the home to ensure bilingual development for the child so that they can learn the heritage language along with the majority language. One of the language maintenance approaches that families can use is the one-parent, one-language approach (OPOL), where parents have different native languages and each parent speaks their native language to their child (King, 2008, p. 914). Non-OPOL approaches such as both parents using minority languages or code-switching could also be used for language maintenance. However, studies have shown that a lack of consistency in these language policies can result in less than optimal outcomes (King, 2008, p. 914). Therefore, in order for language policies to ensure bilingual development, these policies should be made consistent within the home.

The language of interaction in the home is not the only factor that influences maintenance in early childhood bilingualism, parents' attitudes and efforts and the language experience with neighbors, networks of friends, and media can also be a major influence on the maintenance of

the language. Studies have shown that children who maintained heritage language received encouragement from their parents to learn their heritage language. Guardado (2002) found that in order for children to successfully acquire their heritage language, parents should display positive attitudes toward heritage language and attempt to fulfill their children's needs in maintaining it (p. 36). Parents can help to fulfill their children's needs in maintaining the heritage language by providing resources such as books, shows, movies, and games in the language. Parents can also help by providing their children with exposure to a community that speaks the heritage language to allow the children to socialize with others outside of the family in the language.

The heritage language can also be maintained by having the children go to dual-language education schools so that the child does not only use the language at home but also in school and they would achieve both basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in the languages. BICS are the language skills needed in social situations such as on the playground, while CALP is the language skills needed for formal academic learning (Baker, 2011, p. 170). Bilingual education focuses on developing literacy and academic content in both the prominent language and the heritage language. The goals of bilingual education is for students to develop high levels of language proficiency and literacy in both languages to demonstrate high levels of language achievement and to develop an appreciation for and an understanding of diverse cultures (Thomas & Collier, 2002, p. 2). There are many types of bilingual educations that children can be enrolled in such as two-way immersion schools and English as a second language classes and different types of bilingual educations can lead to different outcomes. However, bilingual education, overall, has proven to be very effective in helping to maintain heritage language.

An alternative to bilingual education for heritage language maintenance is heritage language programs. Heritage language programs are programs that teach heritage language as a supplement to the English-only instruction students receive in public school. The classes in this program teach the heritage language for two to four hours a week on Saturday, Sunday or after school in the church, temple, in a community cultural center, on a college campus, or in a public school (Larsen, 2011, p. 24). These programs are created out of a community's desire to maintain their language. The primary goal of these programs are to maintain heritage language and culture by giving students a safe place to interact with others similar to themselves and to explore their bilingual and bicultural identities (Larsen, 2011, p. 24).

Another approach to heritage language maintenance is the language nest program. This type of program is geared more toward language revitalization and maintenance. The language nest program, in specific, would be beneficial for heritage languages that are dying. In this program, children are immersed in the heritage language from birth to five years old. Language nests are an effective means of passing on the heritage language to children and in turn revitalizing the language (Parker & Gessner, 2014, p. 7). This program is designed to immerse children in the heritage language in order to pass the language on by incorporating their culture into all aspects of the program and involving family members and elders in the day-to-day activities (Parker & Gessner, 2014, p. 7). This program immerses children in their heritage language and culture from early childhood in order to ensure that they learn the language to help maintain and revitalize it.

There are many different actions that can be taken to help maintain the heritage language in children. However, not all heritage language maintenance approaches will work for every child. Research should be done to find out the best approach that will work for your child. The



reason for this is that there are many factors that influence heritage language acquisition. Some of the factors that influence heritage language learning are birth order and age. These factors vary from one individual to another and they can either maximize or minimize the benefits of heritage language learning (Garcia, 2009, p. 101). These factors affect the acquisition of heritage language so they should be taken into account when trying to figure out how to teach and maintain heritage language through your child.

Siblings can play an important role in shaping the heritage language learning of an individual. Siblings can provide examples of language use and traditional ethnic practices. However, siblings raised in the same house with the same language background and experiences can still end up with different proficiencies in the heritage language. This may be the result of parents' differential treatment of their children based on their birth order. In a study done by Karen Pyke (2005), she found that eldest children are typically given more responsibilities, which serves to bind them more tightly to their ethnicity than their younger siblings (p. 499). The eldest children have greater proficiency in their heritage language than their younger siblings because of their stronger sense of identity to their ethnicity. Pyke (2005) also found that because the older children are bonded more closely to their ethnicity, they are more likely to be the traditional siblings (p. 498). The younger siblings tend to be the assimilated siblings who are able to adopt the values and ways of the new society more easily (Pyke, 2005, p. 498). As a result, many of the assimilated siblings were not able to speak their heritage language fluently while the traditional siblings tend to speak it more fluently.

Another factor that affects heritage language learning is the age of language acquisition. Individuals who learn both their heritage language and the prominent language simultaneously from early childhood are known as simultaneous bilinguals while individuals who acquire the

prominent language after the heritage language are known as sequential bilinguals (May, Hill & Tiakiwai, 2004, p. 15). Studies have shown that simultaneous bilinguals tend to achieve higher levels of both the heritage language and the prominent language (May, Hill & Tiakiwai, 2004, p. 16). As a result, individuals should be taught the heritage language in early childhood in order to gain higher proficiency in the language, especially if the child is going to be raised bilingually.

In conclusion, there are many benefits to learning an individual's heritage language. When an individual learns their heritage language, it allows them to become bilingual which provides them with cognitive and social benefits such as cognitive flexibility, advantages for learning multiple languages, enhanced metalinguistic awareness, more job opportunities, sense of identity, cultural maintenance, and prevention of detachment from family. Heritage language learning also helps individuals to maintain their culture because without their language they would not have their culture. Heritage language learning also further helps to prevent detachment from family because it allows you have communication with your family. But in order to gain the benefits of heritage language learning, the language should be maintained and it should be maintained by being taught not only in the home but also in school. However, not everyone can be taught the same way because there are many factors that influences heritage language maintenance such as birth order and age. Therefore, these factors should be considered when deciding on the approach to use for heritage language maintenance. That is why and how heritage language should be maintained.

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