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Multilingual Los Angeles: The Impact of Immigrant Language Communities on Language Education in Public High Schools

Introduction: The Purpose and Setting of the Study

This paper will discuss the state of heritage language offerings in public high schools in Los Angeles and will demonstrate the need for (1) offering instruction in heritage languages in areas of large immigrant communities and (2) pre- and in-service preparation for foreign language teachers who also teach heritage language learners or may be de facto teachers of heritage languages. With the rapidly changing demographics of the United States and the increasing number of speakers of languages other than English in our educational system, many students study a “foreign” language that is not at all foreign for them, but is in fact the language spoken in their homes. The table in Appendix 1 shows the numbers of speakers that comprise the 10 largest language communities in the United States. Due to their exposure to the language, the children of immigrants grow up speaking and hearing their home language, thereby gaining a certain level of proficiency at least in oral domains. Even though they bring these proficiencies to the classroom, heritage language learners are frequently taught using the same materials and curricula as students who start their language learning from a complete zero. A Spanish or a Russian class may have both non-heritage and heritage students; in classes of less-commonly-taught languages such as Thai, Tagalog/Filipino, Persian, or Armenian, everyone may be a heritage language student, albeit with different levels of proficiency attained at home. Nevertheless, the language learning materials and curricula are likely to be geared towards traditional foreign language instruction (Carreira, in press).

If we compare heritage and foreign language learners, we can see that their differences are pronounced. A typical heritage language learner without literacy may have oral proficiency at the Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-High level (Kagan & Friedman, 2004), while it takes non-heritage language learners two or more years of classroom instruction to reach a comparable level of proficiency (Rifkin, 2006). I therefore argue that teachers of heritage language learners, or teachers who are expected to teach both groups of students, need to be exposed to information on the differences between the two groups, and also need to be well versed in the methodologies of teaching heritage languages. Ideally, schools of education and foreign language departments would take the lead in preparing teachers of world languages to teach not only foreign languages, but also heritage languages. Such an approach is justified by rapidly changing demographics in the U.S.

Using information collected in Metropolitan Los Angeles, this paper provides a brief overview of the state of heritage language instruction. Los Angeles is one of the most multilingual cities in the United States, a city that, according to Waldinger (2007), “offers a distinctive ... cross section of the U.S. foreign born population” (p. 349) and can be seen as “the capital of twenty-first century immigrant America...” (p. 367). The population of Metropolitan Los Angeles is over 13 million people and it includes Los Angeles County and Orange County. There are multiple independent school districts serving the area.

To underscore language diversity, the table below compares the number of speakers of languages other than English in the United States with the number of speakers of foreign languages locally in California, in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, and in the City of Los Angeles.

United States	California	Los Angeles County	City of Los Angeles	Orange County
20.5%	43.5%	56.8%	60.2%	45.2%

Source: Table S1601. Languages spoken at home, 2008-2012, American Community Survey 5-year Estimate, United States Census (www.census.gov)

The Study

This study presents a broad picture of language offerings in public high schools in metropolitan Los Angeles, and includes interviews with teachers and administrators. The questions asked by the researcher were as follows: Do public high schools take advantage of the rich linguistic landscape of their multilingual city by offering foreign and heritage courses for languages spoken in the local community?? If heritage languages are offered, are they taught differently from foreign languages? And, finally, do teachers have sufficient preparation and resources to handle classes that are exclusively heritage or mixed (heritage and non-heritage)?

This project was carried out in 2012 and is the first stage of a larger investigation. Its purpose is to determine what kind of languages are offered in high schools,¹ whether all of the major languages of the local communities are well represented, and also whether teachers of world languages have received training to help them meet the needs of heritage language learners. In

¹ I only looked at language offerings in high schools because all high school offer languages while only some elementary and middle schools do. It will be interesting to explore the situation in elementary and middle schools, in particular because some of them offer dual immersion programs.

this paper, I use the same working definition of heritage speakers as the one used by the Title VI National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC) housed at the University of California at Los Angeles: heritage speakers are individuals “who have been exposed to a particular language in childhood but did not learn it to full capacity because another language became dominant” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). A typical heritage language speaker belongs to a 1.5 or second generation (born abroad and brought to U.S. at an early age or born in the U.S.), grew up speaking English, and has at least one immigrant parent (Kasinitz, et al., 2008). These students frequently elect to study their home language in a formal setting in order to gain literacy, to find out more about their heritage culture and linguistic roots, and to be able to talk to relatives in the United States who may not speak English well (Carreira & Kagan, 2011).

The data was collected from the most recent U.S. census and community surveys as well as school district and high school websites, the Los Angeles Times “Mapping L.A. Neighborhoods” website, and the Heritage Alliance website maintained by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) among other sources. I also conducted interviews by e-mail and phone with several administrators and teachers. I am grateful to everyone who generously provided information and answered my questions.

The urban landscape of Los Angeles is multilingual. No one living in the city is surprised by billboards like the one below, which is written in English, Spanish, Russian, and Armenian.



Some neighborhoods house more speakers of an immigrant language than speakers of English. For example, in the city of Glendale, more residents speak Armenian than English as their home language, and 40% of students in high schools are of Armenian background. In the city of Alhambra, 72% of residents are Asian, and the most spoken language is Cantonese, followed by Mandarin. The City of Los Angeles, which is just one part of metropolitan Los Angeles, is home to large Tagalog and Korean communities. Spanish, of course, is spoken everywhere.

Overall, there are close to 100 languages spoken by students and parents in the school districts in metropolitan Los Angeles. As an example of language diversity, see Appendix 2 for the languages spoken in Los Angeles County. One of the large school districts in the metropolitan area serves a population of over 3.5 million people, where 1.5 million residents are speakers of Spanish, 90,000 speak Tagalog/Filipino, and almost 90,000 speak Korean. Additionally, there are 62,000 speakers of Armenian, 58,000 speakers of Chinese, 43,000 of Persian, and 32,000 speakers of Russian. Given these numbers, it could be expected that all schools would offer

Spanish, while, depending on the neighborhood, the rest of the schools would offer courses in all or some of the other community languages. However, this is not always the case. While all schools do offer Spanish, the languages spoken in the respective communities may not be represented. Two languages with large immigrant communities—Tagalog/Filipino and Persian—are conspicuously absent in any school offerings. Russian is only offered in one school in the metropolitan area.

This curious dynamic led me to ask: How are decisions regarding language courses made? I have found out through interviews that the decision to teach a certain language primarily depends on the principal's vision, community interest (see the example of Vietnamese below) and the availability of resources, namely whether there is a teacher available to instruct the class. While the teacher can also teach another subject or another language, they must be credentialed to teach all classes they take on. An example of how that may affect language offerings will be given below.

Some school districts do offer instruction in the languages spoken in the local communities. For example, congruent with the density of the language communities, Chinese is offered in Alhambra, Armenian in Glendale, Khmer in Long Beach, Vietnamese in Orange County, and Chinese, Korean, and Arabic are offered at a charter school in Granada Hills. It does not, however, seem to be either simple or quick to introduce the instruction of a new language in public schools, even if that language is supported by a large community. The example of Vietnamese in the City of Westminster, which has its own school district, is instructive. The city population is close to 84,000, and almost 33,000 speak Vietnamese at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The Vietnamese first settled in the area in the mid-70s; however, it took almost

30 years for the school district to start teaching the language. An article in the Los Angeles Times explains: “Vietnamese parents and students had clamored for such a course since the mid-1980s. Westminster High School was the first to respond, in 1999. The Huntington Beach Union High School District now has more than 100 students studying Vietnamese and offers advanced-level courses” (Yi, 2002). At the moment, Vietnamese is taught in three schools, which makes this case a good example of what it takes to start and develop a language program. It also demonstrates that language programs can be offered and can thrive if connections are made with local communities. Another example of collaboration between the community and a school district is the case of Khmer taught in Long Beach. With over 17,000 Cambodian speakers, “Long Beach, CA has the largest Cambodian population outside of Cambodia” (Wright, 2010). Wilson High School teaches Khmer for Khmer Speakers, making it the only such program in California.

Examples of successful programs

For the purposes of this study, “success” is a label assigned to those school districts that offer language instruction in the languages spoken in the community where the school is located. I also deem it a “success” if these classes appear to target heritage speakers. In Stage II of this study, I plan to obtain access to school materials, to interview both teachers and students, and to try to determine whether or not there truly are heritage classes—meaning classes that take the initial strengths of heritage learners into account and whose goal is higher language proficiency—offered.

To determine which schools teach heritage languages to heritage learners, I will rely on my interviews with teachers. For example, a teacher of Mandarin at a high school in an area with a

large Chinese population stated: “The curriculum [for heritage students] is more challenging and the students learn about Chinese culture more in depth than the regular students” (E-mail interview, 2012). Similarly, I interviewed a teacher of Armenian who was clearly aware of her students’ language needs when she said that all her students could speak Armenian, but that they may not be literate. She also noted the lack of appropriate materials as the school uses textbooks from Armenia that are not suitable for students who have grown up speaking English as their dominant language in the United States. According to this teacher, much of the material used in the classroom is developed by teachers at the school (E-mail and telephone interviews 2012). I also interviewed a Korean teacher in a high school close to Koreatown. The school offers four levels of Korean, all taught by one teacher. This teacher reports that, in the Korean 1 course, traditional language learners have been taught together with heritage learners, and that the course includes instruction in the alphabet and in simple routine (of the heritage learners, the teacher writes that “it’s ok for them to review”). Levels 2 and 3 offer separate classes for HLLs and foreign language learners. The curriculum stresses grammar and spelling and, in Korean 3, which enrolls mostly or only heritage students, literature. (*E-mail and telephone interviews, 2012*).

Another example of success is a high school in the Long Beach Unified School District, which offers Khmer for Khmer Speakers. The success seems to be completely due to a single teacher’s preparation and creativity. The teacher has about 100 students a year and offers four levels of Khmer. Ninety percent of students who enroll in this course were born in the United States, meaning they understand spoken Khmer but have difficulty speaking. The teacher is trained in teaching ESL, and he reports that he uses “the models and samples in ESL materials” because there are limited Khmer materials available. He also stresses that he has “to create many of the

teaching materials/lessons” himself (*E-mail interview, 2012*). Wright (2010) notes that the teaching of Khmer poses difficulties which are similar to the difficulties of teaching other less-commonly-taught or heritage languages, which include the “difficulties in hiring qualified teachers..., particularly given the lack of Khmer certification for foreign language teachers at the secondary level.”

A special example of success is a charter school in Granada Hills, which offers Korean, Arabic and Chinese as heritage languages. The Language Program Coordinator is an expert in foreign and heritage language teaching. He explained in an interview that heritage language classes 1) build on the knowledge and skills that heritage speakers bring to the classroom; 2) provide students with language-use experiences that move them beyond informal situations; 3) increase student control of the formal linguistic register; 4) highlight heritage cultures within and beyond the U.S.; 5) use authentic materials to expose students to a variety of contents; and, 6) prepare them to function in the world beyond the classroom. The school used to teach Armenian but had to discontinue the program since there was no instructor who could teach both Armenian and another subject. There is also an interest in Persian and Tagalog/Filipino, but so far the school has not been able to find teachers who would either teach part-time or could teach one of these languages and another subject. (*E-mail interviews, 2012, 2014*)

These examples of successful programs for heritage language learners indicate that there is in fact a way to connect the community with their schools, as well as a way to implement heritage-specific methodologies in teaching. These examples also show, however, that there is no coherent policy of language offerings across districts or from school to school, and that school

districts and individual schools often miss opportunities to increase the offerings of heritage languages or foreign languages spoken by local communities.

While the field of heritage language education is relatively new, there is sufficient research completed in the past ten years to indicate where the focus of heritage language curriculum ought to be (Benmamoun et al., 2008), and how heritage language teaching can benefit from a macro or top-down approach to curriculum development (Potowski, 2003; Kagan & Dillon, 2009; Kagan, 2014). The STARTALK/NHLRC Online Workshop (2010) provides an introduction to curricular development and assessment for heritage language teachers and is freely accessible. It can provide teachers with the basics of heritage language instruction via lectures, readings, and tasks. In addition, in collaboration with STARTALK, NHLRC offers summer workshops for teachers of heritage languages

<http://www.nhlrc.ucla.edu/nhlrc/events/startalkworkshop/2014/home>

There may be other initiatives to promote heritage language teaching, but, as Schwartz Caballero (2014) writes, "[t]he resources available to HL teachers are impressive" but they may not be easily available. This next step—making the material available and accessible—needs to be taken by those who are in charge of preparing foreign language teachers so that teaching heritage languages becomes part of teacher preparation.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will sum up the answers to the questions I posed in this study.

Do public high schools take advantage of the rich linguistic landscape of the multilingual city to offer languages of the local community, either as foreign or heritage? The answer

seems to be mixed. Spanish and Chinese are represented in school language offerings; however, while all high schools teach Spanish, Chinese offerings are more limited. Languages of several large immigrant communities, particularly Tagalog/Filipino, Persian, and Russian, are either not taught or rarely taught. In my findings, smaller school districts seem to be more responsive to the language communities around them.

If heritage languages are offered, are they taught differently from foreign languages?

Teachers are aware that heritage learners come with a set of proficiencies, and they take this into consideration in their attempts to do what they believe is best for the students.

What is missing, however, is training in heritage language teaching and communication with colleagues in similar teaching positions at other schools and in other languages.

Unfortunately, isolation is common. Many teachers I contacted were happy to talk and to answer my questions by e-mail and telephone because it was the first time (as one of them commented) that someone had asked them about their experiences and the challenges they face.

And, finally, do teachers have sufficient preparation to handle classes that are exclusively heritage or mixed (heritage and non-heritage)? As was clear from the interviews I conducted, the answer to this question is no. Pre-service preparation that would provide the basics of heritage language instruction is a must, as are in-service workshops that bring teachers of different languages together. Both pre-and in-service courses need to focus on the differences between teaching foreign languages and heritage languages, as well as material and curriculum development for heritage speakers.

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Appendix 1. Largest language communities in the United States.

Table B16001: LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME BY ABILITY TO SPEAK ENGLISH FOR THE POPULATION 5 YEARS AND OVER	United States
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey	
Total:	294,003,714
Speak only English	232,126,499
1. Spanish or Spanish Creole:	38,325,155
2. Chinese:	2,964,393
3. Tagalog:	1,672,406
4. Vietnamese:	1,425,803
5. French (incl. Patois, Cajun):	1,350,201
6. Korean:	1,131,096
7. German:	1,063,188
8. Arabic:	1,010,748
9. African languages:	948,069
10. Other Asian languages:	946,430
11. Russian:	914,217

Appendix 2. An example of language diversity (Los Angeles County)

Table B16001: LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME BY ABILITY TO SPEAK ENGLISH FOR THE POPULATION 5 YEARS AND OVER	Los Angeles County, California
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey	
Total:	9,312,312
Speak only English	3,984,512
1. Spanish or Spanish Creole:	3,679,358
2. Chinese:	347,539
3. Tagalog:	235,625
4. Korean:	191,978
5. Armenian:	176,899
6. Vietnamese:	80,058
7. Persian:	78,789
8. Russian:	51,416
9. Japanese:	48,617
10. Arabic:	48,406