

About Heritage Language Loss

Many school personnel pursue the goal of developing English language learners' English-language and literacy skills efficiently, and this is most often implemented to the exclusion of supporting, developing, and maintaining students' heritage language skills. However, there is significant evidence that promoting bilingualism and biliteracy can significantly contribute to the effect that many school personnel want, that of efficiently developed English language and literacy skills, with the added benefit of students who can function and thrive in multilingual environments. Giambo & Szecsi

As defined in the Cambridge Dictionary, heritage language (HL) is “a language that someone learns in the home as a child, but that may not fully develop because the person uses a different language in other situations in their life.” Research suggests that heritage language loss happens to many immigrant students in the U.S. as schools teach them English (Fillmore, 1991; Hoff, 2018). Our intent here is to highlight concerns about heritage language loss and to encourage embedding such concerns into addressing barriers to learning and teaching that affect many immigrant students.

About Heritage Language Loss

Heritage language loss is a major concern in immigrant communities. As Hayes notes:

Although the United States has no official language at the federal level (some individual states do have official languages), the de facto national language is English. The use of English is reinforced through government and educational institutions, television and radio, and private business. Economic and social forces converge to make English a very valuable commodity, often to the exclusion of other languages. Though many of these forces appear benign, Henze and Davis (1999) point out that language loss is often associated with oppression. Indeed, in the realm of education, the United States has a history of suppressing the active use of non-English languages for the purpose of promoting assimilation of the speakers.

Focusing on schools, Fillmore notes that, for immigrant students whose language at home is not English, their heritage language suffers with English-only learning at school; a process dubbed as "subtractive bilingualism." At the same time, the use of different languages at school and at home complicates matters. For example, parents determined that their children maintain their heritage language may only allow that language to be spoken at home. For some youngsters, this can cause negative reactions (e.g., negative attitudes toward using the language, conflicts with parents). Other parents, trying to assimilate into U.S. culture, emphasize using English in their everyday life, reducing the input that their children receive in their heritage language.

Problems can arise at home when a child starts to lose their heritage language. Differences in language capabilities may lessen communication and cause tensions in the family. Parents may be forced to try to communicate in English with too little success, and children may not be able to fully express themselves to their parents. (Fillmore, 1991).

Heritage language loss also is associated with students pressure to assimilate. Survival and success in learning at schools and in peer relationships requires English language and “fitting in.” The need for social acceptance can lead to rejection of the heritage culture and language loss (Brown, 2011; Cowden & Kreisler, 2016).

*The material in this document builds on work done by Emilia Barriga Cortez as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2023.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Bilingual Education and Heritage Language

Bilingual instruction in the U.S. focuses on (a) teaching a second language to those who speak English and (b) teaching English to English language learners. While the value of being able to speak more than one language is widely acknowledged, bilingual education continues to be debated in the U.S., especially for immigrants just learning English (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015).

For example, one argument against bilingual education for English language learners has been that it can interfere with mastering English. However, research indicates that this is a widespread misconception (Fillmore, 1991). And those in favor of bilingual education for English language learners argue that not only can it help maintain a student's heritage language, it also can enhance academic and personal well-being (Carrier, 2005; Giambo & Szecsi, 2015; Téllez & Varghese, 2013). Of course, the impact of the language to which children are exposed highly depends on the quality of what is taught and modeled at school and at home (Hoff, 2018).

How Schools Can Help Maintain Heritage Language

Immigrant students' heritage and culture too often have been "seen as a problem that needs correction" (Osorio, 2020). Efforts by schools to foster the growth and maintenance of heritage languages are seen as a step toward countering such negative biases. And research suggests that teachers who understand the benefits of bilingualism and the drawbacks that arise from heritage language loss are more likely to promote biliteracy (Giambo & Szecsi, 2015).

Schools with a large proportion of immigrant students who speak the same language benefit from hiring personnel who are able to speak that language fluently. And with respect to teaching English Language Learners, this is especially the case.

However, it is also the case that many teachers are not bilingual. Still, opportunities can be provided to help English Language Learners maintain their heritage language and generally feel included and cared about. As Giambo and Szecsi (2015) stress

With either bilingual or monolingual books, students might participate in book talks (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) in both languages at school and at home. To ensure home and school connections, students can present this book talk to peers in English, and then present it to their parents in the HL at home. As a response, parents can write a comment or question in the HL, and students can translate the parents' feedback to the teachers and peers into English (Szilágyi, et al., 2013). Teachers can promote writing in both languages with activities that involve individuals other than the teacher to review the work in another language (Szilágyi, et al., 2013). Paraprofessionals, parents, college students and community members who speak the given language can become involved in writing activities with students. For example, with the help of parents, students can create a "Book About Me" or books on diverse topics in their HL and share it with classmates. These books might become part of the school library where native speakers of English who learn a foreign language (e.g., Spanish) can benefit from reading these books. In addition, students might translate the school news program and provide the translation in the broadcast at school. Translating the school newsletter that is sent home to parents can be of help to the school community. These examples demonstrate how cognitive apprenticeship and authentic activities make students aware of the value of literacy skills in more than one language (Brown et al., 1989). Dialog journals in two languages allow the students to use the HL for journaling an experience, while the teacher provides key vocabulary in English in her response (Pappamihel & Lynn, 2014). Engaging in sister-class projects that involve students who speak different languages, possibly from different countries, working together on creating literature and art can serve to enhance literacy skills in both languages (Cummins, 2005).

(See Giambo and Szecsi for the references cited in this excerpt.)

Minimally, schools can work to create an environment that is open and accepting of different cultures and languages and where students learn that bilingualism is an asset in their life.

The process of using two languages in a teaching environment to promote the learning of both is referred to as *translanguaging*. The goal is to ensure English Language Learners and Dual Language Learners can utilize both languages in an accepting environment. This allows immigrant students to use their heritage language in the classroom in ways that are accepted in their community. Schools are encouraged to increase use of multilingual books to demonstrate that other languages and cultures are welcomed and valued. (Conteh, 2018, Osorio, 2020)

Classroom and Schoolwide Student/Learning Supports

Over and above the concern about countering heritage language loss is the more general concern about ensuring other barriers to learning and teaching experienced by immigrant students are not ignored. For example, some of these students are living in poverty, some are undocumented, some are refugees from war zones, and so forth. The stress of coping with a new language and a new culture, a less than welcoming reception, racism, discrimination, school and community violence all are recipes for learning, behavior, and emotional problems (see Adelman & Taylor, 2015; Center for MH & Student/Learning Supports, 2011, 2016).

When schools attend too narrowly to the broad range of factors that can interfere with students' success, it is inevitable that some will not do well; and many of these youngsters will misbehave, disengage, and eventually dropout. And too many will be immigrant students.

Given this, we suggest embedding all efforts to improve how schools respond to concerns related to immigrant students into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports for all students. This can enable a school to address a broad range barriers to student learning effectively and enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond. See the following guide for prototypes for such a system:

>Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions.

Concluding Comments

Immigrant students must traverse multiple cultural worlds. In doing so, they often encounter conflicting expectations and may be torn between maintaining their families culture and language and the desire to assimilate into American mainstream culture.

Heritage language loss is a long-standing matter that many immigrants experience, especially students as they move through the U.S. education system. Evidence indicates that the loss of a heritage language can have negative consequences (e.g., produce conflicts and communication problems at home). And immigrant students, of course, often also encounter a variety of additional circumstances that can lead to learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Schools clearly have a critical role to play in countering heritage language loss while developing English language capabilities and addressing factors interfering with learning and teaching at school.

References and Resources Used in Preparing this Information Resource

- Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2015). Immigrant children and youth in the U.S.A.: Facilitating equity of opportunity at school. *Education Sciences*, 5, 323–344. <http://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/5/4/323/pdf>
- Brown, C.L. (2011). Maintaining heritage language: Perspectives of Korean parents. *Multicultural Education*, 19, 31-37. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ986889>
- Cambridge University Press. (n.d.) Heritage Language. In Cambridge dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/heritage-language>
- Carrier, K.A. (2005). Key issues for teaching english language learners in academic classrooms. *Middle School Journal*, 37, 4-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2005.11461519>
- Carter, P.M. (2014). *Why this bilingual education ban should have repealed long ago*. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/04/opinion/carter-bilingual-education/>
- Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports (2011). *Immigrant children and youth: Enabling their success at school*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/immigrant.pdf>
- Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports (2016). *Addressing the language barrier: English language learners, bilingual education, and learning supports*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/biling.pdf>
- Conger, D. (2010). Does bilingual education interfere with English? Language acquisition? *Social Science Quarterly*, 91, 1103-1122. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42956450>
- Conteh, J. (2018). Translanguaging. *ELT Journal*, 72, 445-447. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy034>
- Cowden, J.D., & Kreisler, K. (2016). Development in children of immigrant families. *Pediatric clinics of North America*, 63, 775-793. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcl.2016.06.005>
- de Jong, E. J., Coulter, Z., & Tsai, M.-C. (2023). Two-way bilingual education programs and sense of belonging: Perspectives from middle school students. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 26, 84-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1783635>
- Fillmore, L. W. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 323-346. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(05\)80059-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(05)80059-6)
- Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2006). *Educating English language learners: A synthesis of research evidence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Giambo, D., & Szecsi, T. (2015). Promoting and maintaining bilingualism and biliteracy: Cognitive and biliteracy benefits & strategies for monolingual teachers. *The Open Communication Journal*, 9, 56-60. <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874916X01509010056>
- Goldenberg, C. & Wagner, K. (2015). Bilingual education: Reviving an American tradition. *American Educator*, 39, 28-32, 44. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1076564>
- Hammer, K. (2019). Bilingual cogito: Inner speech in acculturated bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 22, 576-592. <https://doi.org/10.1007/13670050.2017.1285862>
- Haynes, E. (2010). What is language loss? *Heritage Briefs*, University of California, Berkeley. <https://www.cal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/HeritageBriefWhatisLanguageLoss.pdf>
- Hoff E. (2018). Bilingual Development in Children of Immigrant Families. *Child development perspectives*, 12, 80-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12262>
- Osorio, S.L. (2020). Building culturally and linguistically sustaining spaces for emergent bilinguals: using read-alouds to promote translanguaging. *The Reading Teacher*, 74, 127-135. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1919>
- Téllez, K., & Varghese, M. (2013). Teachers as intellectuals and advocates: Professional development for bilingual education teachers. *Theory Into Practice*, 52, 128- 135 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2013.770330>

For more references and resources, see

Zampaulo, M.S. (2022). *How to help students avoid heritage language loss*. Accessible Translation Solutions. <https://accessibletranslations.com/how-to-help-students-avoid-heritage-language-loss/>

Stegelin, D. A. (2017). *Strategies for supporting immigrant students and families: Guidelines for School Personnel*. National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. <http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/supporting-immigrant-students-and-families-2017-10.pdf>

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School
From the What Works Clearinghouse – practice guide provides four recommendations with extensive examples of activities that can be used to support students as they build the language and literacy skills needed to be successful in school.
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=19>

Resources for Developing ELL Programs
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ell/edlite-otherresources.html>

Colorin Colorado – A bilingual site for educators and families of English Language Learners
<https://www.colorincolorado.org/>

Effective Teaching Strategies for English Language Learners
<https://www.supportrealteachers.org/strategies-for-english-language-learners.html>

Edutopia – lists websites and resources to Support English-language Learners
<https://www.edutopia.org/topic/english-language-learners>

50 Incredibly Useful Links for Learning & Teaching the English Language by TeachThought
<https://www.teachthought.com/learning/50-incredibly-useful-links-for-ell-educators/>

Immigrant students Quick Find Links from UCLA Center
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/immigrantkids.htm>

Center for Success of English Learners
<https://www.cselcenter.org/>