



Who is a heritage language learner?

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In general, the term “heritage language learner” is used to describe a person studying a language who has proficiency in or a cultural connection to that language. However, just as there are different kinds of heritage languages (see *What is a Heritage Language?*), there are different types of heritage language learners.

For members of indigenous communities (e.g., Navajo, Hawaiian, Arapaho), any member of the community studying the language might be considered a *heritage language learner*. In such cases (e.g., Navajo children learning the Navajo language in school), all learners are members of the community and are heritage language learners regardless of their levels of Navajo proficiency. Children who come from homes where no Navajo is spoken would be considered heritage language learners, as would children who have had some home exposure to the language. In such settings, the focus of instruction might be community-oriented and focused on language preservation and maintenance, or it might be on heritage language development. Language instruction is part of a larger effort to pass on cultural connections to younger generations (Fishman, 2001; McCarty, 2002).

In K-12 public and private and college education in the United States, where English is the predominant language of schooling, languages other than English are typically considered *foreign languages*, and students of these languages are considered *foreign language learners*. However, in many classrooms, some students will have a connection to the language of study through their family and some proficiency in it. These students are also *heritage language learners*. In some educational settings where there are a large number of students with home background and some proficiency in the language, separate classes are offered for heritage language learners (e.g., see profiles in the Heritage Language Programs Database of the [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Raleigh, NC, Spanish heritage language program](#); the [Flushing High School, Flushing, NY Chinese program](#); and the [New York City Public Schools French heritage language program](#)).

Coming from the Spanish language development context, Guadalupe Valdés, at Stanford University, has formulated a basic definition that resonates with language educators and researchers. Her definition has been reprinted a number of times, including as the central definition of “heritage language learner” in *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource* (Peyton et al, 2001). It is also commonly cited in articles published in the online, peer-reviewed journal, [Heritage Language Journal](#), published annually since 2003 by the UCLA Center for World Languages.

Foreign language educators use the term to refer to a language student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English (Valdés, 2000a, 2000b). For these educators, the heritage language student is also different in important ways from the traditional foreign language student. This difference, however, has to do with developed functional proficiencies in the heritage languages (Valdés, 2001, p. 38).

This definition is especially helpful to language educators, because proficiency in the language studied is the focus of instruction. At the same time, it raises a number of issues that are of concern to language educators and are addressed in other briefs.

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