



French Heritage Language Schools in the United States

*David Lasserre, French Heritage Language Program
Sandy Lamplugh, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Na Liu, Center for Applied Linguistics*

French is spoken by 220 million people in over 55 countries around the world (Baudry, 2011). The French language emerged in the United States as a colonial language along with Spanish and German and was widely used before English gained dominance (Fishman, 2001; Wiley, 2007). There are approximately 1.33 million French speakers in the United States, making it the fourth most commonly spoken non-English language in the country, after Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). At the same time, lack of intergenerational transmission of French has resulted in a decline in French speakers (Valdman, 2010). This brief will describe French heritage language initiatives in public schools that seek to revitalize French language communities and use of French as a language in everyday life.

History of French in the United States

The presence of significant French-speaking communities in the United States is not surprising. In the 1600s, French colonists (Acadians) settled in the Canadian Maritime Provinces of present-day Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (called Acadia at the time) to set up residence as hunters and fur traders. A settlement named New France was established in present-day Quebec. French-speaking communities settled in the United States when economic hardships drove settlements out of the Quebec province and into textile mill towns in New England and the upper Midwest. In 1755, the Acadians were exiled from what is now Nova Scotia by the British government (*le grand dérangement*) and relocated in France, the West Indies, and the American colonies. Between 1765 and 1780, approximately 4,000 Acadians found permanent refuge in Louisiana, and today the people of this community are known as Cajuns. (See Valdman, 2010, for a discussion of the history of French in the United States.)

French in the United States Today

Determining the exact number of French speakers in the United States is a complex task, because many are also speakers of additional languages (e.g., Haitian Creole, Wolof, and Bambara). The 2011 U.S. Census reports that 1.33 million people speak French at home, and 646,000 speak French Creole at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Haitian expert Flore Zéphir (2004) estimates that approximately 20% of Haitians residing in the United States speak French fluently.

The majority of French speakers live in the six New England states, northern New York state, and southern Louisiana, because these were historically regions of French settlements. While residents of these historically French regions account for only about a quarter of U.S. speakers of French at home, they are noteworthy, because they have preserved indigenous vernacular varieties of the language (Valdman, 2010). At the same time, while French is still spoken in New England, it is not a living language in New Orleans. Even though part of the identity of being from New Orleans is embracing the French heritage of the city, less than 1.5% of the population of New Orleans spoke French in 2000 (Eble, 2009).

Major concentrations of French speakers also live in New York City, southern Florida, and southern California. New York's French speakers number slightly more than 1 million (Peckham, The Globe-Gate Project, 2011). Scholars such as Zéphir (2004) and Peckham (2011) argue that there are about 200,000 Haitian and Haitian American inhabitants in Brooklyn, New York, where there is an *Alliance des émigrés haitiens*. These scholars estimate the total Haitian population of New York City to be over 400,000, which includes an estimated large number of undocumented residents. The Consulate General of France reports that about 60,000 French expatriates live in New York, and the Quebec Government Office reports nearly 100,000 Quebec immigrants from Quebec in New York (Ross & Jaumont, 2012). New York residents with family connections to various parts of the French-speaking world include French speakers from Canada, Haiti, Senegal, Mali, Togo, the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Belgium, Switzerland, and Luxembourg.

Most of the speakers of French in southern Florida are likely bilingual members of the Haitian Diaspora, who also speak Haitian Creole. In California, those who report use of French at home are mostly French expatriates or relatively recent immigrants from French-speaking countries such as Senegal, Mali, or the Ivory Coast (Lindenfeld, 2000).

French Heritage Language Programs

The date that French heritage language programs emerged in the United States is unclear, but their existence is relatively recent (in the 1980s). Many community-based organizations have attempted to create programs in the past, but most of them failed in some way due to lack of funding, limited opportunities for teacher training, and limited student participation. More recently, French heritage language programs have developed needed expertise and resources, and maintaining them has become a more stable endeavor. Programs focus on empowering French-speaking communities, assessing the needs of each community, making the communities more visible, and developing motivation and ability of individuals to learn the language.

Of the programs in existence, most are after-school programs sponsored in part by the French government and the parents of French-speaking students. FLAM (Français Langue Maternelle – French as a Native Language) was created in 2001-2002 by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the initiative of the members of the Superior Counsel of France Abroad (CSFE) and senators representing citizens of France living abroad. FLAM promotes the use of the French language by French children who attend a school in another language by supporting the establishment of after-school French language classes and cultural activities. In the United States, FLAM supports approximately 10 community-based programs in Florida, New York, New Jersey, Texas, the San Francisco Bay area, greater Seattle, greater Boston, Atlanta, and Sacramento.

In New York, bilingual French-English classes have been established in 6 schools (Mokha, 2011), where half of the students are French speakers. Education Française à New York (EFNY) and the French Embassy played a key role in starting the new programs (Ross & Jaumont, 2012). Many more private initiatives cater specifically to French heritage speakers, particularly those accredited by the French Ministry of Education.

The [French Heritage Language Program](#) (FHLP) is another successful school-based and community-based program, established in New York in late 2005 for children, teenagers, and adults. Its goals are to help students develop their proficiency in French and maintain a connection to their respective cultures, while also increasing opportunities for success in their new environment. The program is offered in 12 locations in New York City and has recently expanded to Miami and Maine. The program is sponsored by FACE (French American Culture Exchange), a non-profit organization dedicated to nurturing French-American relations through innovative

international projects in the arts, education, and cultural exchange, in partnership with the French Embassy of the United States.

The New York programs partner with the Malian Cultural Center, Haitian Americans in Action, and the [International Network for Public Schools](#). The Miami program partners with the Miami Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance and receives additional support from the City of Miami, the Little Haiti Cultural Center, and the French Consulate in Miami. In Maine, partners include the University of Maine at Augusta, the Franco-American Heritage Center and the Québec-based Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques.

Most of the students enrolled in the French Heritage Language Program are not French speakers from France. Students in New York and Miami are Haitians and Africans, and the material taught is based on the unique cultures of the students in each classroom. In Maine, many students are of Franco-American background or have close connections with a French-speaking heritage.

Challenges

French heritage language programs face many challenges. Like many other heritage language programs in the United States, it is difficult to find teachers, teacher training, relevant instructional materials, and financial support. Also, the language profile of heritage French speakers is complex. Many French speakers know several other languages as well, and maintaining French is not as high a priority for many families as promoting an all-English lifestyle due to societal pressures. Use of French is sometimes seen by parents as a barrier to their children's social integration and success in school. French does not have a large functional role in the United States, and opportunities to speak French in natural settings are limited. In some cases, the focus on standard French in classrooms negatively affects the maintenance of indigenous vernacular varieties (Valdman, 2010), which makes the use of pedagogy and materials that are responsive to student backgrounds and needs all the more critical.

Conclusion

Although French is spoken in some communities in the United States, it has experienced a decline in number of speakers between 1990 and 2011, due to low levels of immigration of French speakers and low rates of intergenerational transmission of the language (Valdman, 2010). In addition, the teaching of French and German has declined significantly at both elementary and secondary school levels over the past decade. French was taught in 27% of elementary schools in 1997 and 11% in 2008; 64% of secondary schools in 1997 and 46% in 2008 (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). With the diminishing role that public schools play in French language teaching, French heritage language schools and programs play a role of crucial importance in maintaining French as a heritage language in the United States.

- Search for [French heritage language programs](#) in the Alliance Heritage Language Program Database.
- Read about the [French language](#).
- Read about The [French Heritage Language Program](#) in the United States.

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This Heritage Brief was prepared by David Lasseure, Sandy Lamplugh, and Na Liu for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC.

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