



What are the similarities and differences among English language, foreign language, and heritage language education in the United States?

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This brief describes the importance of developing proficiency in languages in addition to English, whether a student is a native speaker of English, a native speaker of a language other than English, or bilingual. It also addresses social, political, pedagogical, and curricular differences among K-16 English language, foreign language, and heritage language programs in the United States. These differences have important implications for how we approach the teaching and learning of languages other than English.

Social and political factors in language education

English language and literacy development, as a first or a second language, is one of the fundamental goals of public education in the United States. Development of literacy in English takes place both explicitly in language arts classes and implicitly as a medium of instruction in content courses. For students who come from English-speaking homes, there is often a relatively high degree of continuity between the language spoken in the home and the language of schooling. At the same time, even for English-speaking students, fostering literacy development is not without social complexity.

Research shows that the norms of English language use that children develop in the home and community vary a great deal based on social factors such as ethnicity, class, and region (Heath, 1983; Zentella, 1997, 2005a). Students who grow up speaking varieties of English that differ from the academic standard face barriers to achieving school success for a number of reasons. These include the beliefs and values that are tied to expectations about academic English literacy (e.g., Gee, 1996). Authors such as Delpit (1995) argue that academic success does not have to be predicated on accommodating to majority discourse norms at the expense of home and community language use. Rather, the focus in school should be on expanding students' abilities to use language across the full range of social contexts in which they need or wish to participate.

In a similar vein, proponents of heritage language development take the view that the development of English does not have to come at the expense or loss of the other languages that students speak. (For a definition and discussion of "heritage language" see the Heritage Brief: *What is a heritage language?* See also Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003; Wiley, 2001). From 1968 until 2002, the Bilingual Education Act provided federal support for the education of speakers of languages other than English. The Bilingual Education Act underwent a number of challenges and reauthorizations through the years, but while it was in effect, it provided some basis for the legal protection of education for language minorities. Implementation of the law differed across settings, but until recent years, instruction in English could be supplemented by first language support, or bilingual language programs. The situation changed in states such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts between 1998 and 2002, with the passage of "English-only" initiatives that restrict students' access to first language support in addition to English instruction. This also changed at the federal level when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) superseded the Bilingual Education Act. At that point, all mention of "bilingual" education was dropped. Instead, NCLB focuses solely on English language development for immigrant and U.S.-born "limited English proficient" students. For example, a study by Wright (2007) of the impact of NCLB legislation on heritage language programs in California, Arizona, and Texas found that school-based heritage language programs are vulnerable to decreased support or elimination. Additionally, NCLB's focus on accountability has resulted in increased emphasis on standardized testing, thus further limiting time for first language use in the classroom.

For newcomers to the United States, learning English is an important and desirable goal. It is viewed as the basis for mainstream educational achievement and civic participation, and it is related to processes of acculturation or adaptation to a new social environment. However, learning English does not have to come at the expense of continuing to develop a heritage language. Maintaining a heritage language, while also developing proficiency in English, is important for the well-being, cohesion, and the vitality of families and communities (Fishman, 1991; Shechter & Bayley, 2002; Wong Fillmore, 2000). Research also shows that bilingual literacy development (simultaneously supporting the development of both a heritage language and a mainstream, dominant language) produces equal, and in some cases, better learning outcomes for bilingual students. (See reviews of bilingual education outcomes in Baker, 2006; Baker & Pyrs Jones, 1998; and Cummins, 2001.)

Advancing the perspective that English ability can develop along with the maintenance and development of another language is particularly important given our increased mobility and interconnections with other parts of the world. Knowledge of other languages and cultures (whether "foreign" or "heritage") is increasingly recognized as important. Particularly since September 11, 2001 (9/11), there has been an increasing focus on a gap in the U.S. foreign language capacity to fulfill its economic, strategic, military and diplomatic needs (e.g., Brecht & Rivers, 2000; National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, n.d.); Peyton, Carreira, Wang, & Wiley, 2008; Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001).

One recent publication showing recognition of this gap is the Modern Language Association's report, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World" (2007, <http://www.mla.org/flreport>). The report examines the current state of the field and makes wide-ranging recommendations for addressing the "language deficit." Many areas of controversy and debate remain (see, e.g., the "Perspectives" section of the *Modern Language Journal*, Byrnes, 2008), but the need for building language capacity and the value of education in languages other than English are now seen as non-controversial. As the MLA report states, "In the context of globalization and in the post-9/11 environment, then, the usefulness of studying languages other than English is no longer contested. The goals and means of language study, however, continue to be hotly debated" (Background, para. 4). Most significant for language educators is the fact that this discussion of "foreign" language education at the university level also includes *heritage* language education as a significant component.

Pedagogical and curricular factors in language education

Heritage language speakers' background knowledge and relationship with a community of speakers make their educational needs different from those of foreign language learners in terms of program goals, materials, and curriculum. However, in school-based programs, many teachers of classes for heritage language speakers have been trained as foreign language teachers and assigned to teach heritage language classes. One of the greatest challenges for these teachers is the variability in language skills that heritage language speakers exhibit; some are fully fluent and literate, some are fluent with no literacy skills, some have heard the language but have limited productive abilities, and still others are fluent in a non-prestige variety of the language (Kondo-Brown, 2005; Lynch, 2003; Valdés, 1995, 2001). The last point is of particular importance. Students' families and communities often speak a language that is different from the standard variety taught in school programs and spoken by teachers in the programs, and this variety may have undergone even more changes as a result of isolation from the home country (Silva-Corvalán, 2005; Valdés, 2001; Zentella, 2005b).

An important factor in heritage language programs is community involvement because of the differences between the language varieties spoken by teachers and their students. Kagan (2005) presents heritage language learning as a triad that includes community, family, and formal education. If all three elements are not in place, the acquisition process suffers. Edelsky and Hudelson (1980) discovered that first grade English speakers who were in a bilingual English/Spanish program acquired very little Spanish without home and community reinforcement, and similar trends have been demonstrated in other research (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Qin, 2005). In contrast, a major challenge for foreign language programs is that students typically do not have previous familiarity with the cultural and linguistic underpinnings of the target language, and access to culture and linguistic reinforcement can be very difficult without traveling to a country where the language is spoken. Foreign language programs must, therefore, differ from heritage language programs in how they present and utilize cultural and linguistic elements of the language.

On the other hand, foreign language programs benefit from being able to focus on a standardized, formal variety of the language, for which there are numerous teaching materials. As discussed above, heritage language learners come to their programs with a variety of skills and language backgrounds. They may have strong grammar skills but lack sufficient vocabulary to communicate successfully (Fairclough & Mrak, 2003), or they may be fluent in the language but have no literacy skills (Valdés, 1995). Therefore, the focus in heritage language programs must vary based on students' needs. However, materials are often not available to meet the diverse needs of heritage language programs. While texts may exist for heritage languages that are also taught as foreign languages (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Russian), existing texts are often inappropriate for the learners. Several researchers point out the need for authentic texts that haven't been translated from English (Hernández, Takahashi-Breines, & Blum-Martínez, 2003; Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003; Kapon, 1994), while others argue that foreign language teaching texts don't take into account the varieties and dialects of heritage language learners (Bernal-Enríquez & Chávez, 2003).

Finally, the goals of heritage and foreign language learners may differ greatly. While both groups of speakers may desire language knowledge for socioeconomic and professional purposes, heritage language learners are more likely to have personal or familial reasons for maintaining their language skills. The goals of individual heritage language learners range from personal (e.g., the desire to communicate with a relative), to community cohesion, to religious participation, to ideological (e.g., the desire to see one's language or culture preserved), to academic and professional. However, the two types of programs do share the ultimate goal of producing fluent or nearly fluent speakers who can interact successfully with speakers of the language in a variety of social contexts.

Conclusion

Historically, policy on language development in the United States has been written from varied views toward bilingualism – some policies promote English language development for speakers of other languages, while others promote foreign language study for monolingual English speakers (Crawford, 2004; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). The passage of "English-only" initiatives at the state level and NCLB's move away from the possibility of mother-tongue maintenance while acquiring English, are indicative of a resistance to supporting the development and use of languages other than English for immigrants and minorities. Researchers such as Wright (2007) have found that NCLB has a negative impact on heritage language programs. Unfortunately in this country, maintenance of a heritage language has been viewed as anti-assimilationist and therefore anti-American (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2000; Spolsky, 2004). As Wang (2007) points out, education policy is not consistent when students' language abilities are regarded by many as having positive value from the standpoint of national capacity, while at the same time as being a detriment from the standpoint of NCLB's designation of the same students as "limited English proficient." The recent recognition of the importance of heritage languages as part of "foreign" language education is one step toward resolving this policy inconsistency. With greater recognition of the personal and social benefits of

multilingualism, research indicating positive educational outcomes for students who continue to develop a heritage language (along with English), and better understanding of the unique challenges of heritage language education, there may be opportunities to make changes in language policy and instruction that will promote multilingualism for all.

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