



What languages are taught as heritage languages in the United States?

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Heritage language teaching takes place in many different instructional settings – in community-based programs, public and private K-12 education, and higher education. In part, because different program types and organizations are involved, there are no current, comprehensive studies that list all of the languages taught as heritage languages in the United States. Further, factors such as immigration and education policies have an impact on which languages are taught in addition to where and how they are taught. This brief gives information about languages taught as heritage languages, gathered through the Heritage Language Programs Database of the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, and offers a brief discussion of some of the social and political factors that affect the availability of heritage language instructional opportunities.

The languages outlined below provide a sample of languages represented in the Alliance's [Heritage Language Programs Database](#):

Languages indigenous to the U.S.: *Anishinaabemdaa, Chinuk Wawa, Denaakk'e Athabascan, IchCinshKiin, Navajo*

Latin American and European Languages: French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian

East Asian, South Asian, and Pacific Island Languages: Chinese, Hindi, Ilokano, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Samoan, Tibetan, Tongan, Urdu

This list represents only a small number of the languages currently taught as heritage languages. The Alliance is working to expand the profiles in the Heritage Language Programs Database, concentrating on community-based and K-12 programs.

You can help the Alliance with this effort.

- [Complete a program profile.](#)
- [Contact the Alliance](#) with programs we might contact and profile.

The National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC), housed at UCLA, is conducting a survey of heritage language teaching in higher education. For information or to participate in the NHLRC survey, [visit the NHLRC website](#).

What does it mean that a language is “taught as a heritage language”? The term “heritage language” signals a particular relationship between a learner and the language of study, which is taken into consideration in program design and implementation. (See the Heritage Brief, “What is a heritage language?”) There is no single model of heritage language teaching, but heritage language programs build on the experiences that students have with the language and culture of study outside the classroom, in their families and communities.

Not all programs that fit this description are called “heritage language” programs. *Heritage language programs in community settings*, often administered through civic or religious organizations, rarely carry this title but are important heritage language programs that promote language maintenance across generations. Often heritage language literacy is taught as a way to educate children about traditional cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Languages as diverse as Chinese, German, Japanese, and Yiddish have strong traditions of having been taught through community schools in the United States.

Many other immigrant languages are now taught through community programs, and as new groups of immigrants and refugees from around the world come to the U.S., they have established their own community schools. As an example, after the political upheaval in Iran in the late 1970’s, many Iranians came to the United States. In the early 1980’s, recent immigrants established Persian (also called Farsi or Iranian) language schools principally in areas with large Iranian communities. Over a similar period of time, due to political turmoil in Southeast Asia, many Hmong immigrated to the U.S. Now Hmong communities in the U.S., including those in areas of Wisconsin and California, have established community-based organizations that support the teaching of the Hmong language. (For more information, visit the [Hmong Cultural Center](#).)

According to research done by Joshua Fishman in the 1980’s (Fishman, 2001), at least 145 different languages were being taught in heritage language schools (community-based schools) that at that time were operating outside the public education sector in the United States. Of these languages, 91 were Indigenous languages. Since then, the focus on teaching heritage languages has made its way into higher education and the public K-12 system (primarily through programs like dual-language immersion that educate speakers of two different languages, English and another languages, in both languages). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) officially recognized the unique needs of heritage learners and began establishing standards for these students as part of their national standards in the late 1990’s (ACTFL, 2006).

Heritage language programs in public schools include Spanish, Chinese, Denaakk'e Athabascan, Navajo, French, German, and Korean. For more information about K-12 heritage language programs, see the [Heritage Language Programs Database](#).

Heritage language classes at the university level are often taught through "dual-track" programs, where there are separate classes for foreign language and heritage language learners in the lower levels of the curriculum (Kondo-Brown, 2003). Spanish and Chinese have both been taught through this type of program structure, and Russian is emerging as another case (Kagan & Dillon, 2003). Dual-track systems seem most likely to emerge in contexts where a foreign language program exists and heritage language learner enrollments are increasing. At the higher education level, Japanese is another case that fits this profile. Classes focused on the less commonly taught languages (e.g., Arabic, Hindi, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese) are usually only available as a single track (foreign language and heritage language speakers are in the same class).

References

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