

# Supporting Heritage Learners

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## EDITOR'S NOTE:

In this issue, we present articles on the Focus Topic, "Supporting Heritage Learners." The submissions for this issue were blind reviewed by two education experts, in addition to staff from *The Language Educator* and ACTFL. We thank Maria M. Carreira, co-director of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA and Professor of Spanish at California State University, Long Beach, and Claire Hitchins Chik, Associate Director of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA, for writing an introduction to this important topic.

## Supporting Heritage and Native American Language Learners: Framing Why and How

The focus topic of this issue of *The Language Educator* explores two of the recommendations made by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) in 2017: supporting heritage languages (HLs) and Native American languages. Commissioned by a bipartisan group of members of Congress, *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* advocates for building language capacity and outlines a national strategy for expanding language education, including the above-mentioned recommendations, along with building teacher capacity, supplementing language education through public-private partnerships, and promoting study abroad.

Supporting HLs and Native American languages is not a new topic. Starting in the 1970s, Guadalupe Valdés of Stanford University advocated for specialized courses of Spanish-for-native-speakers, leading to important research and pedagogical advances. The field of HL education as we know it today,

encompassing many languages and with a coherent research and pedagogical agenda, started roughly 20 years ago, when the National Foreign Language Center and the Center for Applied Linguistics launched the Heritage Language Initiative "with the goal of building an education system that is responsive to heritage communities and national language needs and capable of producing a broad cadre of citizens able to function professionally in both English and another language" (Brecht & Ingold, 2002, p. 5). The 1970s also saw the birth of Native American bilingual education programs, which were subsequently expanded starting in 1990 with the passage of the Native American Languages Act which aimed to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice and develop Native American languages" (Collier, n.d.).

### Heritage and Native American Language Education: Shared Principles, Goals, and Practices

There are important differences between the fields of heritage and Native American studies, particularly regarding the history and social conditions characterizing their attendant languages and communities of speakers, not the least of which is a past of colonization and genocide for Native American populations (McCarty, 2003). At the same time, both fields concern themselves with non-national languages (Duff & Li, 2009) and share core pedagogical principles, goals, and practices. This makes it fitting to discuss them together in the context of this issue, which aims to help language educators respond to the recommendations of the AAAS. Notably, both fields are premised on the idea that their learners are different from second language learners and require specialized instruction to build on their skills and respond to their needs. The fields also share a recognition that,

without proper instruction and support, minority languages are fragile and subject to eroding and, in some cases, disappearing altogether. In the case of HLs, research shows that they are lost within three generations; that is, most grandchildren of immigrants do not remain bilingual. This has negative consequences for individuals, including a loss of intergenerational communication and social and professional opportunities, and, for the nation as a whole, a reduction in valuable language capacity in diplomacy, business, etc. With Native American languages, the situation is particularly concerning. Of the approximately 300 languages once spoken in the current U.S., only 170 remain. Alarming, some have very few remaining speakers, many are spoken only by the older generation, and only 20 are naturally acquired by children (McCarty, 2003). As such, “disappearance” with Native American languages means the complete loss of the language from the world’s linguistic inventory. This is typically not the case with HLs, where the loss is confined to individuals and communities in the U.S. For this reason, language revitalization is a key component of Native American language education.

However, within these two fields, language is not the sole focus: Social and affective factors are also at the heart of their educational mission. This is because typically both HL and Native American students want to strengthen their community connections; understand themselves vis-à-vis their family background; grapple with a variety of emotions, including feelings of linguistic insecurity and ambivalence; as well as successfully navigate the uncertainties surrounding their biculturalism and bilingualism (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). Important consequences for instruction follow. As noted by Helmer (2014), this means that instruction must offer “meaningful activity and authentic materials that connect the curriculum to students’ linguistic strengths, target culture knowledge, and the communities from which they came” (p. 186). Native American specialists often frame this as offering education that is “culturally based,” “culturally relevant,” and “culturally responsive” (McCarty & Lee, 2014). In addition, issues of tribal sovereignty are of the essence in creating a “culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy”—that is, a pedagogy that recognizes “the right of a people to self-government, self-education, and self-determination,” and which strives to serve the needs of indigenous communities as defined by those communities (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103).

As a consequence, heritage and Native American languages present a complex and varied set of socio-affective issues that must be factored into teaching and curriculum design, along with language issues. When both of these components of instruction are recognized and dealt with appropriately, students don’t just expand their command of the target language, they also strengthen their general academic skills and feel more connected to what happens in school. In this way, Carreira (2007) argues that HL education can help narrow the Latino academic achievement gap, and McCarty (2012) makes a similar claim in reference to Native American education.

## Speakers and Learners

To further explore the connection between socio-affective and language issues in the context of instruction, it is useful to consider a distinction made in the field of HLs between an “HL speaker” and an “HL learner.” Adapting these terms for purposes of this discussion, we will use the terms “speaker” and “learner” in reference to both HL and Native American students.

A speaker is an individual 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 English” (Valdés, 2001, p. 38). The term learner, on the other hand, refers to a student who has a familial, and thus personal and cultural, connection to the target language, but does not necessarily speak or understand it, often as a result of not growing up surrounded by the language. Many third generation immigrants fit this description, as do many Native American children. Figure 1 captures the relationship between the two terms.

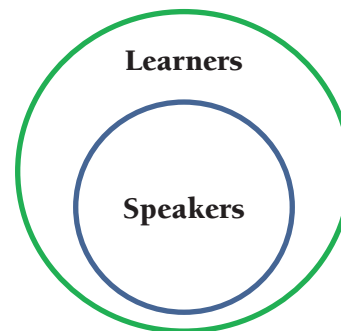


Figure 1

As depicted, all “speakers” are “learners” in the sense that they have personal and cultural connections to the target language and culture. In terms of teaching and learning, the result is that these connections matter for both populations of students, regardless of whether or not they speak the target language or how well they speak it. On the other hand, not all learners are speakers, in the sense that not all learners have some proficiency in their ancestral language. This means that language instruction must take into account the different linguistic starting points of these two populations of learners. With speakers, the goal is to help them function in a wider range of communicative contexts by building on the skills they bring to the classroom, for example using their relatively strong listening skills to scaffold demanding reading or speaking activities. With learners, it is essential to help them develop a sense of ownership of their cultural and linguistic legacy. Their identity as members of the target language community should never be doubted just because they don’t speak the language.

## Responding to the Recommendations of the AAAS

The checklist below can help educators create, adapt, and evaluate instructional materials and practices to serve the needs of their students.

1. Are the materials and activities authentic and relevant to students' lives?
  - Created for native speakers, authentic materials are linguistically and culturally rich, but also demanding, which can overwhelm students if they don't get adequate preparation. The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (ACTFL, 2012) can help teachers gauge the difficulty of authentic materials and design appropriate scaffolding and follow-up activities.
  - To learn what students find relevant, instructors can use exit cards (also called tickets-out-the-door), which involve answering a prompt at the end of class such as: "What I find most interesting about today's reading is \_\_\_\_\_," and "I would like to learn more about \_\_\_\_\_."
2. Do materials and activities align with the perspectives and respond to the needs of the community?
  - Community-based internships and service learning, as well as projects that involve interviews and surveys of target language speakers, can foster a community-responsive pedagogy.
3. Does instruction build on students' funds of knowledge?
  - Students' home-based bilingualism and biculturalism can support learning and promote engagement. All learners should be encouraged to recognize, share, and build on their knowledge of the target culture and, if applicable, their language skills. For model programs involving Native American languages, see McCarty and Lee (2014).
4. Does language instruction follow a macro-based approach?
  - Macro-based (also known as top-down) instruction starts out with the "big ideas" and the meaning associated with authentic materials rather than with a point of grammar or vocabulary. It strives to develop real-world language use as early and naturally as possible in the instructional sequence, introducing form-focused instruction to achieve this goal rather than as an end in itself. Reading a short story for the purpose of discussing the content is an example of a macro-based activity. Using the story primarily as a tool for practicing particular grammar points is not. ACTFL's Guiding Principles are useful for implementing macro-based instruction (ACTFL, n.d.).
5. Are the language topics appropriate?
  - Students with some proficiency in the target language do not need comprehensive coverage of grammar following the model of L2 instruction. For example, they do not usually need instruction on conjugations of common verbs or on everyday vocabulary. Instead, they benefit from selective instruction targeting knowledge gaps that arise from their life experiences. Notably, for HL and Native American children raised with some knowledge of the target language, the start of mainstream schooling in English around the age of 5 leads to a steep decline in input in the home language while the acquisition process is still ongoing. As a result, we see language gaps involving aspects of grammar, functional skills, and vocabulary associated with the wider societal use of the language beyond the home, particularly in the context of formal education. Aspects of grammar that tend to be underdeveloped include case, irregular gender, the subjunctive, and aspectual differences (i.e., perfective v. non-perfective morphology). In terms of functional skills, many students lack the ability to use connectors to produce language beyond the sentence level. The rich vocabulary and complex structures associated with literacy and the formal registers are also in need of development (see Montrul, 2016, and Pascual y Cabo, 2017). Syllabus design should take a selective approach to language instruction targeting these and other relevant topics.

## Thank You TO OUR REVIEWERS

The *Language Educator* featured special focus topic sections in our four most recent issues:

**Aug/Sept 2017:** *Empowering Learners*

**Oct/Nov 2017:** *Using Authentic Resources to Support All Three Modes of Communication*

**Jan/Feb 2018:** *Leading Change: Leading with Culture*

**Mar/Apr 2018:** *Supporting Heritage Learners*

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6. Does instruction provide multiple pathways for students at different levels of proficiency?

- Heritage and Native American students exhibit a wide range of skills, needs, and dispositions depending on their life experiences. As such, instruction needs to be learner-centered and differentiated, rather than one-size-fits-all. Differentiated instruction makes extensive use of formative assessment (i.e., ongoing, low-stakes assessment aimed at helping teachers gauge where learners are with regard to a given point of instruction) and, building on this, modifying their teaching as needed to reach all learners. Some formative assessment tools include: (1) checks for understanding: The instructor poses a question during the course of instruction that all students respond to at once with a hand gesture such as thumbs up or down, clickers, or by other means that make it possible to quickly identify successes and failures in understanding; (2) exit cards (described earlier) such as, “What is one point about today’s lesson that remains unclear to you?” or “Describe an ‘aha’ moment from today’s class,” are also useful for gauging student understanding and interest;

(3) low-stakes quizzes or homework assignments: These can also have a formative function, if they are used to inform instruction rather than just give a grade. As a next step, the information obtained from these and other tools can guide the use of strategies such as flexible grouping and mini-lessons to differentiate instruction (Carreira & Hitchins Chik, in press).

### Putting It All Together

The recommendations central to this focus topic cannot be enacted in a vacuum; they are inseparable from the other AAAS recommendations, particularly building teaching capacity and supplementing language education through public-private partnerships. Crucially, promoting and supporting heritage and Native American languages hinges on having well-trained educators as well as communities that support, inform, and benefit from what happens in the educational context. Ultimately, working towards an educational system that responds to the needs and builds on the strengths of HL and Native American learners not only engages these learners and advances their language ability but also benefits society as a whole.

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