

2010

# Depositioning the "Foreign": Considering the Challenges and Opportunities of a Postmodern Foreign Language Education

Manuela Wagner  
*University of Connecticut*

Terry A. Osborn  
*Fordham University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fordham.bepress.com/jmer>

Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Wagner, Manuela and Osborn, Terry A. (2010) "Depositioning the "Foreign": Considering the Challenges and Opportunities of a Postmodern Foreign Language Education," *Journal of Multilingual Education Research*: Vol. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://fordham.bepress.com/jmer/vol1/iss1/6>

This Article on Theory and Research is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Multilingual Education Research by an authorized editor of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact [considine@fordham.edu](mailto:considine@fordham.edu).

Footer Logo

# Depositioning the “Foreign”: Considering the Challenges and Opportunities of a Postmodern Foreign Language Education

---

**Manuela Wagner**

University of Connecticut

**Terry A. Osborn**

Fordham University

---

This article focuses on how attitudes toward HLLs have changed, both with regard to program development and in learning and teaching. First, the ambiguity towards heritage language preservation is illustrated by examining historical aspects of heritage languages in the United States. Secondly, a closer look at two examples of heritage language learning, namely Korean and Spanish, reveals the complexity of language policies and funding decisions regarding HLL. Finally, research in language teaching and linguistics confirms that a shift in attitude toward the HLL is underway. Rather than considering HLL as a pedagogical challenge or problem, researchers and practitioners start investigating and reporting the opportunities of HLL for the classroom as well as for second language acquisition research.

---

Non-English language education has been a source of controversy for over 170 years, since Germans entering the United States wanted to hold onto their religious and linguistic heritage, saw saving the faith as synonymous with saving the language (Edwards, 2006). In Ohio, in 1840, German-speaking citizens lobbied for and won the passage of a law requiring the teaching of German in the local school system if the number of requests reached 75. At least seven other states followed suit. In St. Louis, as well, persuaded by a threat of public school boycott, the board initiated German-language classes at the elementary level. Enrollment consisted not only of students of German descent, but also Anglo-American pupils as well (Tyack, 1974).

Tyack (1974) describes this process as “immigrant groups seeking symbolic affirmation of their worth” (p. 108). But, this affirmation often includes attempting to block the introduction of other languages. Tyack (1974) reports of a German-American leader who decried the potential introduction of the languages of Hungarian, Polish, and Italian peoples, and documents other language curricula that were introduced into the common school, including Polish, Italian, Czech, Norwegian, French, Spanish, and Dutch, among others.

However, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Dicker (1996) reports, the English-speaking population became increasingly concerned with the increase of linguistic diversity in

the United States. The Edwards law in Illinois (1889) and the Bennett bill in Wisconsin (1889) attempted to prohibit instruction in languages other than English in both public and private schools. One state made teaching German illegal, one made speaking German in public a punishable offense (Dicker, 1996). In 1917, as the United States entered the conflict of World War I, and thus German became the "enemy's language," the anti-German sentiment escalated to the level of hysteria. In 1923, the Supreme Court finally overturned the laws that made teaching non-English languages illegal.

Language education, and specifically foreign-language education, continues to be seen in modern times through two lenses simultaneously, both as a necessity to protect a nation's interests and, paradoxically, as a threat to a nation. For example, in referring to the study of Arabic in Israel, Brosh (1993) notes: "Arabic is perceived as inherently connected to an ill-esteemed, dangerous, and hostile collective. As a result, the language is perceived as a marker of inferiority, and possessing it could be a source of negative gratification" (p. 355).

As we work our way through 2010, we note that projections indicate that by the year 2040 the number of non-English speakers in the United States will have climbed to 98.7 million, or 28% of the population (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1995). Foreign language educators have rediscovered our connections to the historical patterns of immigration as we have increased attention of late to the language learning of first-, second-, and subsequent generation non-English speakers:

For those of us committed to the goal of preserving our nation's rich linguistic heritage, the times are at once troubling and hopeful. At the same time that a well-organized and highly publicized English-only movement has rolled back bilingual education in California and Arizona, grassroots efforts are quietly underway in ethnic communities, schools, and colleges to preserve what language educators call heritage languages—the non-English languages spoken by newcomers and indigenous peoples. (Kreeft Peyton, Ranard & McGinnis, 2001, p. 3)

In foreign language classrooms, it is not uncommon to hear the term "heritage language learner" (HLL) in conversations connected to pedagogical challenges. In much the same way that citizens saw Germans as a challenge to "American" society a century ago, foreign language<sup>1</sup> instructors at all levels have asked themselves how to integrate students of a "foreign" language, who already have some knowledge of the language. A rather neatly organized curriculum based on a homogenous group of students is threatened by a diverse group of students with various levels of skills in the language in question. These challenges mainly are practical in nature and are concerned with pedagogical aspects.

Lately, however, more often than not, we are also discussing the opportunities that HLLs offer. Government agencies hope to produce foreign-language speakers of critical languages faster and more efficiently by recruiting HLLs (e.g., Halam Sweley, 2006 ) to bolster efforts at national defense and expanding global markets. Almost three decades ago for example, The President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies suggested that "the

nation was in serious trouble in terms of the second language competence of its citizenry” (Omaggio, 1986, p. 10). In *Strength Through Wisdom* (1979), the commission concluded that “American’s incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous” (p. 12). These concerns have been tied specifically to defense and economic needs:

The president’s commission believes that our lack of foreign language competence diminishes our capabilities in diplomacy, in foreign trade, and in citizen comprehension of the world in which we live and compete. . . . Nothing less is at issue than the nation’s security. At a time when the resurgent forces of nationalism and of ethnic and linguistic consciousness so directly affect global realities, the United States requires far more reliable capacities to communicate with its allies, analyze the behavior of potential adversaries, and earn the trust and sympathies of the uncommitted. Yet, there is a widening gap between these trends and the American competence to understand and deal successfully with other peoples in a world of flux. (*Strength Through Wisdom*, 1979, p. 11)

Many are looking to HLLs to address this major deficiency in our nation’s language assets, and all the more so since the tragedies of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent military action.

Applied linguists and educators as well point to the importance of addressing the HLL as a field in research (e.g., Lynch, 2003; 2008; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). Administrators of world language programs at all levels try to respond to the increasing demand for languages traditionally considered “less commonly taught” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007; Welles, 2002). This demand for a greater variety of languages is often initiated by HLLs.

The focus of this article is to explore how attitudes toward HLLs have changed, both with regard to program development and in learning and teaching. We will use two examples of heritage language learning to point to the importance of the specific context of each language when it comes to language policies. Finally, we will report from research in language teaching and linguistics that indicates that the attitude toward heritage language learning has also changed in these areas. Rather than providing a comprehensive review of existing literature, we chose to use few select examples to show this shift in attitude toward the HLL.

There are numerous discussions around the nomenclature and definition of HLL. As Baker and Jones (1998) point out, the term *heritage* itself is problematic, as it can be considered to refer to something not contemporary (see Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003 for a discussion of the definition of HLL). Considering “English only” movements and thereby a suppression of languages other than English, any heritage other than English can also be seen in a negative light. Lynch (2003) discusses another problem that is linked to terminology used with HLLs, namely the difficulty of linking proficiency with the term heritage speaker, which has implications for the context of teaching HLLs and foreign language learners. In the context of Spanish, Lynch (2003) describes this common problem:

A heritage learner (HL) of Spanish is generally considered to be someone born and educated entirely in the United States, whose family members use Spanish

restrictedly. The term “heritage” learner should not invoke lesser or greater degree of bilingual competence through classifications such as “second,” “third,” or “fourth” generation. (p. 30)

Attempts at easy classification of HLLs often fail and discourage either HLLs, second-language learners (SLLs) or both. Lee (2005) shows that even a differentiation between heritage and non-heritage speakers is not as simple as it would seem. In the current article, we include the variety of HLLs and call for an approach that takes into consideration each specific case in its own context. Therefore, we also adopt Van Deusen-Scholl’s (2003) inclusion of heritage learners and learners with a heritage motivation.

Heritage learners are students who have been exposed to another language in the home and have either attained some degree of bilingual proficiency or have been raised with a strong cultural connection to a particular language through family interaction. Learners with a heritage motivation—sometimes labeled pejoratively as heritage seekers—may perceive a cultural connection that is more distant than that of, for example, first- or second-generation immigrants. (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003, p. 222)

Researchers have also emphasized the multifaceted nature of heritage language acquisition (HLA) (e.g., Lynch, 2008; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). Questions of importance include but are not restricted to: What is the (historical) background of the speakers of the language and their relationship to the USA? When did the immigration occur? How was/is the immigrant group perceived by the dominant group in the USA? What was/is the current political trend with regard to “foreign policy”? What was/is the current trend in language policy? What were/are the theories and methodologies available in second language acquisition (SLA)? What were/are the financial and political realities of educational institutions with regard to language instruction? How can foreign-language education incorporate the political and social realities of the United States into the curriculum at different levels of instruction and in the various educational contexts?

A brief overview of heritage language learning in the United States helps illustrate how attitudes to the HLL have been influenced by some of the factors mentioned above but also other factors specific to a particular HL. We will then take a closer look at two examples of heritage languages and their development in the United States.

Fishman (2001) divides the over-three-century-long history of heritage language teaching in the United States in three main categories, (a) indigenous heritage languages, (b) colonial heritage languages, and (c) immigrant heritage languages. According to Fishman (2001), the number of Amerindians studying their respective indigenous languages is now higher than ever:

The combination of Indian *primum mobile* (they were here first) and mainstream guilt feelings over past injustices to Indians have finally resulted in much greater language consciousness among Amerindians themselves and more sympathy

among mainstream authorities and foundations for Amerindian heritage education. It is unfortunate that we often wait until matters become extreme before paying attention to them and taking ameliorative steps that are in everyone's best interest. (p. 83)

The ambiguity towards HL preservation becomes especially clear in the case of Amerindian heritage. Fishman (p. 83) elaborates further that there is a lack of "mainstream conviction that Amerindian societies that preserve their own languages are better off—richer, healthier, less dislocated, less alienated and hopeless, and therefore, less problem-prone." Rather, he credits the Amerindian efforts for the revival of Amerindian HL education. Even though the case of Amerindian struggles to preserve their heritage is unique in the history of the United States, other language groups faced problems as well.

Fishman (2001, p. 84) reports that among the colonial heritage languages, languages such as Swedish, Finish, and Welsh have not been transmitted as a mother tongue and their only reminders are place names. Speakers of French, German, and Spanish have not been more successful in the transmission of their heritage languages. German is the exception in its "Pennsylvanian German incarnation . . . [that] holds the distinction of being the only colonial language with an uninterrupted, though not completely unaltered, tradition of heritage language community life and, therefore, of heritage schooling in the United States" (Fishman, 2001, p. 84). Fishman emphasizes that this was only possible due to the immense efforts of the community to preserve their heritage rather than a result of mainstream support.

Immigrant heritage languages, the third and last group of heritage languages mentioned by Fishman (2001), face an even more problematic situation because they do not have the two characteristics of indigenous languages (prima mobile and sympathies due to guilt) and are often not major languages with regard to number of speakers. An important factor for whether a language is adopted in the educational system is the social/political/instrumental value of the heritage language. For example, similar to Russian in the Sputnik era, after 9/11 Arabic was considered a "critical language" for the safety of the United States. As such, speaking the language was considered a plus. State agencies posted ads in search of heritage speakers of critical languages, considering heritage speakers of critical languages as opportunity to gain higher proficiency in the foreign language faster, and also because of the value of cultural competencies.

Meanwhile, DoD<sup>2</sup> is reaching out to the nation's heritage communities and informing them of opportunities to serve. On the civilian side of this effort, National Language Flagship Program initiatives allow students to progress from elementary school through high school with more advanced levels of language proficiency in strategic languages such as Arabic, Hindi and Urdu.

On the military side, the Army last month activated its first company of native linguists-turned-soldiers, which represent the service's newest job: 09L, referred to as "09 Limas." This new military occupation employs heritage speakers as

interpreters and translators, representing a new phase in the service’s reinvigorated approach to foreign language. (Kruzel, 2008; ¶ 7, 8)

On the other hand, any person with an “Arabic heritage” appearance was potentially considered a threat to national security, as reports of discrimination against Muslims showed (e.g., Elias, 2006). Even though Arabic-language programs boomed all over the country, the motivation to study Arabic was often closely linked to instrumental reasons, again an example of ambiguity with regard to HL education.

We now share a couple of examples of HL, namely Korean and Spanish, in order to examine the role different contexts play. In both languages, interest in learning the HL has grown in the past years. However, additional factors, such as an increased participation of the government of the origin of the heritage language, are also important factors that can influence whether a language experiences increased interest and funding, which in turn determines whether HLLs have an opportunity to learn their HL or not.

In the first example, Byon (2008) examines the reasons that the development of Korean started slowly in the 1940s, but since the late 1970s had a “period of rapid growth” and strong Korean-language programs at all levels of education.

Recent growth is attributed to three main factors: the increasing visibility of South Korea on the international stage, greater number of Korean immigrants in the USA, and increasing involvement of the Korean government in the teaching of Korean internationally. (p. 244)

The increasing visibility of South Korea certainly is related to the enormous economic growth the country has experienced since the mid-1960s. Massive Korean immigration waves since the 1960s have further created need for Korean heritage language programs. Finally, Byon notes, the Korean government engaged in efforts to teach Korean, resulting in a number of organizations fostering Korean-language instruction internationally. In addition, U.S. foreign-language policies and the status of Korean as a critical language has provided opportunities for institutions to build Korean programs.

However, the growth of Korean language programs needs to be regarded in context. More institutions teaching the language may do so (and often do) only at the beginning levels (the first two years). Another noteworthy feature of Korean as an example, is that according to Byon’s (2008) research, due to the high heritage speaker proportion of Korean language students most of the postsecondary Korean-language programs cater to heritage language students rather than students who have no prior knowledge of the language. However, Byon also found an increasing number of non-heritage students in Korean courses in his research and points to the necessity of addressing pedagogical issues and problems arising from heritage and non-heritage learners attending the same classes.

In the case of Spanish, Lynch (2003) attributes changes in heritage language acquisition (HLA) to changes on the “internal, professional level” and the “external, social level” (p. 26). This

researcher explains that the external changes were the massive immigration waves of Spanish speakers from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. What followed were increased efforts by lobbyists in the 1990s that eventually led to a very strong English-only movement, resulting in California and Massachusetts abolishing bilingual education. Despite these movements, enrollments in Spanish-language programs by heritage and non-heritage language speakers have experienced a steady growth (e.g., Brod & Welles, 2000; Lynch, 2003; Welles, 2002). Again, this growth of Spanish language programs does not come without problems. Lynch (2003) summarizes one aspect:

At a time in U.S. education when general interest in humanities is waning, one might think that the extraordinary growth experienced by Spanish language programs would be welcomed. But at many postsecondary institutions, the increasing popularity of Spanish among undergraduate students has not been met with open arms by some colleagues and administrators in humanities units. (p. 27)

This may be in part due to the lack of positions provided for Spanish departments to meet the growing need, which puts more burden on instructors in such programs because they cannot spend as much time on their research and professional development. Moreover, one could conceivably imagine tensions that could result from much higher numbers in one language program compared to other language programs in the same unit.

The examples of Korean and Spanish provide a glimpse into the many different situations heritage language programs face. In these examples, we only considered a few of the factors that play an important role, including, (a) the level of the heritage language without consideration of these languages in each specific context, such as the geographical region, language policies in the state and at local level, (b) the attitude towards the heritage language and the speakers of the heritage language in the specific community of the program, and (c) the financial situation of language programs.

Let us now take a look at some of the challenges and opportunities of heritage language education at the programmatic level as well as at the practical level of teaching HLLs in the classroom. The first challenge is to provide opportunities for HLLs to indeed be able to learn their language. Success of putting language programs in place that can serve HLLs depends on the many factors mentioned above, such as attitudes of the stakeholders involved in making foreign language policy and program decisions, the status of the HL in a certain community, the instrumental value of the language, and, currently, the omnipresent budget crisis that has proven to be especially detrimental to language programs. Once language programs are in place, another obvious challenge is the question of how to place and teach heritage language learners. This is a question that influences heritage language learning both at the programmatic as well as the teaching level. Many world language programs responded to the large numbers of HLLs by creating classes especially for “natives” or “bilinguals.” As Lynch (2003) indicates, HLLs might actually shy away from enrolling in classes with *bilingual* or *native* in their titles because they do not feel that they know enough of the language to be considered bilingual or native. Lee (2005) provides a compelling argument for further investigation of learners in a classroom.

Pedagogically, instructors need to be aware that the categories of heritage and non-heritage language learners are not mutually exclusive and be prepared to recognize and address the “heritage-like” needs and goals of their non-heritage language learner group and the “non-heritage-like” needs of their heritage language learner group. The study points towards the need to broaden our understanding of the division between the two categories of heritage and non-heritage learners as a crucial first step in reconfiguring the development of student-centered pedagogical strategies by recognizing the range of individual variations that learners bring. (p 562)

Resulting questions/challenges include: How can we best make use of what HLLs already know? How can we address their specific needs, which might vary significantly from one HL student to the next, especially when they are in the same course with foreign-language students? Lynch (2008, p. 270), who conducted a study in which he compared low-proficiency Spanish-heritage students with SL students, found striking similarities between the two groups, concluding, “It seems, in sum, that there is no compelling reason to assume a priori that the outcome of acquisition of specific linguistic features by Spanish heritage learners is—or somehow must be—very distinct from the outcome of second language learners who reach more advanced stages of Spanish L2 learning.”

The challenge of classifying HLLs leads to opportunities within SLA research and education. Whereas in the past heritage language learning was generally considered a challenge, the field is now starting to address the opportunities that an exploration of heritage language learning offers not only to itself but generally to furthering our knowledge of how we learn languages. Valdés (2005) argues for a reconceptualization of SLA, specifically, the inclusion of research in heritage language learning rather than merely investigating the study of a second or foreign language:

Expanding SLA to engage in the study of the possible results of L1 instruction for students who have already acquired some competence in this language bridges the distance between language education and a research field. Experience in attempting to teach the L1 to speakers who use the language in their everyday lives raises key questions that directly complement interests in L2 acquisition that have shaped the field. These questions include variability in learner language, the significance of learner error, the impact of input and interaction, language transfer, the characteristics of learner systems at different points in the acquisition/reacquisition/development process and, perhaps most important, the impact of formal instruction on the reacquisition/development of language. (p. 423)

In other words, Valdés points to the fact that we can apply what we learn from studying heritage language learning to research in second language acquisition. Similarly, we know from experience that HLLs can indeed have advantages learning a language and can also be extremely helpful if they are integrated in a community of language learners in which they can benefit from

their strengths and share these positive aspects with their peers while at the same time being made aware of their individual challenges.

## Conclusion

In this article we have provided a glimpse into the complexity of issues involved in heritage language learning. We see it as our task as educators, administrators, and learners of languages to consider all aspects involved in shaping the specific context of each HLL before we make curricular, programmatic, or language policy decisions. We call for the inclusion of an open discourse between all parties involved, such as the community in the specific areas in which the question of learning a heritage language is posed, the HLL community, policy makers, administrators, and educators. An important aspect in this discussion is an awareness of the ambiguity that has always been connected to heritage language programs. HLLs have often been considered a “problem” in the classroom rather than a challenge that also presents opportunities. Moreover, even when languages clearly have an instrumental value, they still suffer from a negative image, as for example a threat to the nation (Brosh, 1993). Disregarding these ambiguities constitutes a disservice to HLLs as well as foreign-language learners since we neither can benefit from the resources for language and culture learning and teaching already available in our communities nor make sure that HLLs do not lose their heritage altogether out of fear and ignorance of the parties involved. In an era in which bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism become desirable again, we do well celebrating diversity and gaining from its resources through developing research and outreach programs.

## References

- Baker, C. & Jones, S. P. (1998). *Encyclopedia of bilingual education and bilingualism*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Brod, R., & Welles, E. B. (2000). Foreign language enrollments in United States institutions of higher education, Fall, 1998. *ADFL Bulletin*, 31(2), 22–29.
- Brosh, H. 1993. The influence of language status on language acquisition: Arabic in the Israeli setting. *Foreign Language Annals*, 26(3), 347–358.
- Byon, A. S. (2008). Korean as a foreign language in the USA: The instructional settings. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 21(3), 244–255.
- Center for Applied Linguistics. (1995). *National profile of the United States. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Language Education Study*. Washington, DC: Author
- Dicker, S. J. (1996). *Languages in America: A pluralist view*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Edwards, R. (2006). *New spirits: Americans in the gilded age, 1865–1905*. New York: Oxford.
- Elias, M. (2006). USA's Muslims under a cloud. *USA Today*. Retrieved July, 26, 2009, from [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-08-09-muslim-american-cover\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-08-09-muslim-american-cover_x.htm)

- Fishman, J. (2001). 300-plus years of heritage language education in the United States. In J. Kreeft Peyton, D. Ranard, S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 81–97). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Halam Sweley, M. (2006). Heritage language: Where we stand today. *The Language Educator*, April 2006, 20–24.
- Kreeft Peyton, J., Ranard, D., McGinnis, S. (2001) (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Kruzel, J.J. (2008) *Defense department navigates language roadmap*. American Forces Press Service. Retrieved July 23, 2009, from <http://www.defenselink.mil/News/newsarticle.aspx?id=52090>
- Lee, J. S. (2005). Through the learners’ eyes: Reconceptualizing the heritage and non-heritage learner of the less commonly taught languages. *Foreign Language Annals*, 38(4), 554–563.
- Lynch, A. (2008). The linguistic similarities of Spanish heritage and second language learners. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41 (2), 252-281. DOI: 10.1111/j.1944-9720.2008.tb03292.x.
- Lynch, A. (2003). Towards a theory of heritage language acquisition: Spanish in the United States. In A. Roca, M. C. Colombi (Eds.). *Mi lengua: Spanish as a heritage language in the United States* (pp. 25–50). Georgetown University Press.
- MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. (2007). *Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a changed world*. Retrieved July 14, 2009, from [http://www.mla.org/pdf/forlang\\_news\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/forlang_news_pdf.pdf)
- Omaggio, A. C. (1986). *Teaching language in context: Proficiency-oriented instruction*. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.
- Strength through wisdom: A critique of U. S. capability*. A report to the President from the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. (1979). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system. A history of American urban education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Valdés, G. (2005). Bilingualism, heritage language learners, and SLA research: Opportunities lost or seized? *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 410–426.
- Van Deusen-Scholl, N. (2003). Toward a definition of heritage language: Sociopolitical and pedagogical considerations. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2(3), 212–230.
- Welles, E. (2004). Foreign language enrollments in United States institutions of higher education, Fall 2002. *ADFL Bulletin*, 35 (2–3), 7–26.

## Notes

1 We have chosen to use the term “foreign language” in recognition of the problems with that term. Non-English languages are no more foreign to the United States or to citizens in the United States than English. “Foreign,” however, is more readily recognized as a descriptor of the field and serves as a reminder of the work to be done.

2 DoD stands for “Department of Defense,” which has played an important role in the development of foreign language policies.