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## The Importance of Maintaining a Heritage Language while Acquiring the Host Language

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## Abstract

Few issues are as relevant to modern education as the topic of bilingual students. As the school-age population in the United States becomes increasingly diverse, teachers and other educational professionals need to know how they can best serve their English learners (students who speak a first language other than English). A common question that many educators grapple with is what role a student's heritage language (native language) ought to play in the classroom. Specifically, how important is it that students maintain their heritage language? By critically reviewing the existing literature relating to the subject, this article strives to answer that question. A number of articles spanning both a variety of disciplines and a number of years is taken into consideration. The general consensus is that the maintenance of students' heritage languages is not merely beneficial but is essential to their psychological, cognitive, linguistic, social and academic success. Rather than compromise students' English abilities, maintaining a heritage language furthers their proficiency. Far from taking away from class instruction and causing divisions in society, helping students sustain competency in their native language is an asset to both the classroom and an increasingly multicultural society. Following the argument for heritage language maintenance, this essay suggests a number of practical implications. Heritage language maintenance is not only feasible, it is an absolutely realistic and attainable goal. Those who are willing to take the necessary steps to work towards that goal will be working towards the enrichment of students and their families, schools and communities.

### The Importance of Maintaining a Heritage Language while Acquiring the Host Language

“‘Language,’ said the Spanish writer Miguel Unamuno, ‘is the blood of the spirit.’ He was right. We cannot do without our own tongue without brutally mutilating our individual consciousness, without being left without blood” (Montaner as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 164). This candid quote demonstrates the integral and vital connection between language and identity, something so obvious that it is often overlooked. Language defines how one views the world, how they form their thoughts, with whom they identify, and what worlds are open to them. It is a precious, invaluable resource that is sought after by many people in a number of schools and institutions, an enviable asset.

Yet, what is valued and encouraged in one group of people is despised and discouraged in another. As one scholar states, “Society admires the bilingualism of the diplomat but not the multilingualism of the cab driver” (Hakuta, 2011, p. 172). While the U.S. government is pouring thousands of dollars into foreign language programs, the same country’s education system is neglecting and, in some cases, opposing the maintenance of English learners’ heritage languages, despite the fact that research shows the detriments of doing so. In some cases, this is the result of ignorance; in other cases, it is the result of bias.

The aim of this essay is to give an overview of the topic of heritage language maintenance by looking at a body of research that covers many years of study and a wide variety of perspectives. In reviewing such a vast spectrum of research, this essay intends to determine the effects of maintaining contact with and proficiency in a heritage language while learning English as a second language. Practical suggestions in terms of pedagogical and political practice will then be considered, as well as implications for further research. The conclusion of this exercise is that heritage language maintenance is not only helpful but is vital to both successful

English acquisition and educating the whole child; this and the other numerous benefits that result from maintaining the heritage language imply that schools should implement policies that encourage and support the maintenance of heritage languages if English learners are to be academically successful.

## Background

### Relevance of the Issue

In the exploration of any topic one of the vital questions one might begin with is that of relevance. What is the importance of the issue? Does it really have any bearing on society? As far as the topic of English learners (ELs) is concerned, these questions can be answered with a few key statistics. According to the United States Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, there were 4,472,563 English learners in the United States during the 2011-2012 school year, a number that comprises 9 percent of the nation's students (*Profiles of English learners*). Furthermore, this population is rapidly growing: According to Thomas and Collier, English learners are predicted to be 40% of the U.S. school-age population by 2030 (as cited in Arthur-Drake, 2014, p. 327). While urban schools have traditionally hosted a number of English learners, the fact that the number of English learners increased by over 100 percent from the 2004-2005 school year to the 2011-2012 school year in states like Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, South Carolina, Maryland and West Virginia demonstrates that they are becoming commonplace in rural environments as well.

Clearly the percentage of English learners in U.S. schools is significant enough to merit attention from education stakeholders. Given that these students are the future of the United States, it is imperative that the country's schools are suited to address their various needs so they

can graduate with the same competencies as their native-English-speaking peers. Yet many schools still lack the resources and know-how that are necessary to assist their English learner students. In the absence of professional education in this area, many politicians, administrators and educators are using their intuitions and assumptions to guide their decisions. Research is needed to determine what methodologies, strategies and techniques are best suited to guide English learners towards academic achievement and what role the heritage language plays in it all. This is especially true in an age of Common Core and accountability, in which “the added pressure of high-stakes testing may actually increase the dropout rate for Latinos and other students if practices that develop academic success for these students are not implemented” (Calaff, 2008, p. 95).

Beyond educational considerations, the issue of heritage language maintenance is relevant because of the globalization of politics and the economy. “Americans’ general lack of competence in foreign languages is a national security issue and a major factor contributing to the U.S. loss of competitiveness in world economic markets” (Craig, 1996, 384). Although this quote is nearly twenty years old, it still resonates with today’s society. The increased demand for bilingual employees can be seen in the amount that the U.S. government spends on foreign language training as well as in the substantial incentives that companies offer for such skills. It is interesting to note how much is expended on the teaching of foreign languages while the language capital of English learners has been largely neglected. The maintenance of heritage language skills may be part of the solution to the growing need for multilingual and multicultural citizens.

### **History and Current Status of the Issue**

Given that the United States is a country of immigrants, it is not surprising that heritage language maintenance has been an issue for quite some time. According to Zelasko (1992), Americans have had difficulty over the years deciding whether they ought to support bilingualism or oppose it; he makes the interesting point that Americans are generally favorable towards the idea of their children being bilingual, while they are more hesitant to support bilingualism in minorities (as cited in Craig, 1996, p. 384). More often than not, the pendulum has swung towards the side of opposition to bilingualism, the result of both negative, racist attitudes towards minorities and erroneous, early research by Macnamara and others that concluded that bilingualism caused cognitive problems and confusion (P. Lee, 1996, p. 500). The resulting English-only policies give rise to school practices that “often involved physical and emotional violence” (Murillo & Smith, 2011, p. 148) and produced monolingual students.

In 1962, Elizabeth Peal and Wallace Lambert published what would later be regarded as a landmark study in the field of bilingual research in which they found that bilingual children showed many cognitive advantages over monolingual children and could indeed achieve proficiency in more than one language (P. Lee, 1996, 503). Many studies have since corroborated and expanded upon their conclusions, as will be discussed later, yet, decades later, many people are still convinced that exposing children to two or more languages will certainly cause confusion and retard their academic progress (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011; H. Y. Lee, 2014; J. S. Lee & Oxelson, 2006). Many point to the mixed success of bilingual programs as evidence, though scholars ascertain that few of the programs that label themselves “bilingual” are truly that (Krashen, 1991). As a result, parents and children are pressured to speak only English at home, a practice that “not only contributes to heritage language loss, but also is likely to lead to a less enriched language environment with fewer opportunities for interactions about

interesting topics incorporating sophisticated vocabulary, ideas, and concepts, given that many immigrant parents have limited English proficiency” (J. S. Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 462-463).

Heritage language loss is a reality in the United States of America. Fishman (1991) found that “the heritage language in most families is completely lost within three generations” (as cited in Szilágyi, Giambo & Szecsi, 2013, p. 117) – a phenomenon that can still be observed today (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). Even those who maintain ability to comprehend the heritage language are often unable to speak it (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, p. 372). In terms of the relationship between age and heritage language loss, studies show that younger students are more at risk to lose competency in their heritage language if the proper preventative measures are not taken (Carreira & Kagan, 2011; MacSwan, 2000; Porcel, 2006). According to Y. Wang, one of the main contributors to heritage language loss is the negative interactions between the heritage language and the school, specifically “negative peer pressure, discrimination, assimilative nature of curriculum,” and “lack of opportunities to learn and speak the heritage language in school” (2009, p. 15-16). Crawford concurs that societal pressure causes a shift of values within individuals which manifests itself in the neglect of the heritage language (2000).

While no exact formula has been discovered as far as what is required to maintain a heritage language (H. Y. Lee, 2014, p. 180), the difference between those who do maintain their heritage language and those who lose it can often be explained in terms of additive and subtractive bilingualism. P. Lee defines additive bilingualism as a situation in which the student is being encouraged and supported to maintain his heritage language while learning the host language, whereas subtractive bilingualism is characterized by an imposed dichotomy between the two languages that assumes only one can be attained (1996, p. 513). Too often, EL students are faced with the choice of adopting the host language at the expense of the heritage language or



holding on to the heritage language at the expense of the host language. Does research show that these are really the only two options?

Another dichotomy that can be used to think about the two attitudes towards heritage languages is the idea of the heritage language as a problem to be overcome or as a resource to be utilized (Wiltse, 2008, p. 8). Many people, including teachers, curriculum designers, administrators, politicians, parents and, eventually, the students themselves fall into the first category. The assumption that the heritage language is competing with the host language leads to conflict within the student's school and home. "Language instructors tend to look for gaps in knowledge...rather than assign value to the rich and varied linguistic backgrounds that these learners bring with them" (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, p. 373). Parents who feel delinquent for ignoring the advice of educators and professionals that they speak only English in the home stop speaking the heritage language – a tragedy when one understands that the main support for heritage language maintenance is the choice to use that language in the home (Goldberg, Paradis & Crago, 2008, p. 62).

In discussing the issue of heritage language maintenance, the opinions of the students themselves are often overlooked. Carreira and Kagan, in their study of heritage language learners' attitudes towards their heritage language, found that most of the students had "largely positive feelings and experiences" with their heritage language and had more positive than negative things to say about it (2011, p. 48). In reviewing the national heritage language survey they found that most heritage language learners who had acquired English after acquiring their heritage language did not have much exposure to their heritage language outside of the home, could understand and speak the heritage language better than they could read and write it, and

wanted to know the language to connect with their heritage language community and culture (Carreira & Kagan, 2011, p. 62).

In summary, the issue currently stands as follows: Millions of students are entering the U.S. school system with a vast treasury of heritage language capital; few are exiting the school system with the same resources. Contrary to the long-time fear of many Americans that English will soon be extinct in this country, the educational system is producing thousands of monolingual English speakers. Negative attitudes towards and perceptions of bilingualism in minorities have had a strong assimilationist effect on EL students. Given that heritage language maintenance “is beneficial to minority children’s cognitive, educational and social-emotional development” (Goldberg, Paradis & Crago, 2008, p. 62), this is tragic. Before moving on to what the research says about heritage language maintenance, the foundational theories that relate to this topic will be discussed briefly in order to complete the discussion on background.

### **Foundational Theories**

Perhaps no theories are as fundamental to the topic of heritage language maintenance as Jim Cummins’s Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis and Threshold Hypothesis. The Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis ascertains that competence in the second language is closely linked to the competence that has already been attained in the first language, while the Threshold Hypothesis proposes that “there may be threshold levels of linguistic competence which a bilingual child must attain both in order to avoid cognitive disadvantages and allow the potentially beneficial aspects of bilingualism to influence his cognitive and academic functioning” (Cummins, 1979, p. 222). In other words, in order for a child to enjoy the benefits of bilingualism, he or she must reach a certain level of proficiency in their native language. This proficiency will then serve as a foundation on which the student can build their growing

knowledge of the second language. According to Cummins, students who do not achieve a certain level of proficiency in their first language will find bilingualism to be a challenge rather than an advantage and will remain in a state of “semilingualism.”

The idea of an underlying common proficiency and interdependence between the two languages of a bilingual child has been verified by a number of studies, as the reader will shortly see. Among other things, it has been used to show the value of maintaining proficiency in the heritage language while learning the host language. It is related to the idea of transfer, in which components of the first language are transferred to the second as the student hypothesizes and experiments with the second language. While some researchers have spent a great deal of time focusing on the negative examples of transfer, positive transfer has been shown to be more prevalent and a useful strategy in working with a new language (Chen, Geva & Schwartz, 2012; Cummins, 2007; Fueyo, 1997; Figueredo, 2006; Geva & Ryan, 1993; Krashen, 1991; Nocus, Guimard, Vernaudon, Paia, Cosnefroy & Florin, 2012; Wiltse, 2008). These studies show that not only structures (i.e., phonology, morphology, lexical knowledge, etc.) but also competencies transfer from one language to another. For example, a student who has learned good reading strategies in the first language will likely exhibit these same reading strategies in the second language.

The Threshold Hypothesis, on the other hand, has received more criticism. Although Cummins maintains that the idea of “semilingualism” is not meant to imply that the minority student’s language is deficient (1979, p. 231), critics claim that the term has been the basis of incorrect notions concerning bilingual children. MacSwan, in particular, argues that the term “semilingualism” feeds into a deficit view of bilingual children and gives educators the false idea that bilingual children are unable to speak either language proficiently (2000, p. 4). Cummins’s

intention in developing this hypothesis was to encourage the continued support of the heritage language in schools (1979, p. 243); however, critics like MacSwan take it as a form of prescriptivism that implies that the speech of the majority is better developed than the speech of linguistic minorities (2000, p. 16). It is important to keep the arguments of MacSwan and his colleagues in mind and avoid prescribing to the deficit view of children who are struggling to learn the host language while continuing to learn their heritage language. However, Cummins's Threshold Hypothesis, inasmuch as it elaborates on his theory of Developmental Interdependence, does present some interesting points that are also worth consideration.

### **Psychological Considerations**

A significant number of studies have shown a link between heritage language maintenance and the psychological well-being of the student. Because language is so closely connected to self-identity, validating a student's language is equivalent to validating the student. This is just as important in the classroom as it is in the home. Piatt explains that children who see no reflection of their linguistic and cultural identity in the classroom withdraw, often demonstrate emotional disorders and unleash their frustration through hostile behavior, discipline problems and skipping school (as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 231). Other studies have also shown that a subtractive approach to bilingualism is psychologically detrimental to students, often causing them to view their families and themselves more negatively (Gaarder as cited in Crawford, 1992; Murillo & Smith, 2011; Wright, Taylor & Macarthur, 2000).

On the other hand, schools that acknowledge and utilize the student's native language and culture as resources and skills are psychologically beneficial (Lucas & Katz, 1994; Murillo & Smith, 2011; Sheets, 2009). When teachers use the heritage language in the classroom, their EL students tend to be more engaged and the interactions are more complex (Goldenberg, Hicks &

Lit, 2013, p. 27). Auerbach also makes the point that doing so reduces “the degree of language and culture shock they are encountering” (as cited in Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 539). Long and Padilla (1971) extended this to the home environment as well, stating that children whose parents valued their heritage language performed better in school than those whose parents neglected it (as cited in P. Lee, 1996, p. 513). Furthermore, J. S. Lee and Oxelson note that heritage language proficiency results in a stronger sense of ethnic identity which in turn leads to an increase in self-esteem (2006, p. 454-455). Meyer concludes that heritage language maintenance “does have lasting implications for children’s emotional well-being and academic development, as well as their access to higher education, healthy relationships, and meaningful employment” (as cited in Murillo & Smith, 2011, p. 147).

### **Cognitive Considerations**

Perhaps the most convincing argument for heritage language maintenance is the numerous cognitive benefits that it offers. Far from causing confusion, as many suppose that it does, bilingualism results in stronger cognitive skills (Fueyo, 1997; Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013; Hakuta, 2011; Mohanty, 1990). In areas where bilingual students are not at a noticeable advantage, more often than not they fare just as well as their peers. Even when negative transfer does occur, researchers have shown that it does not seriously hinder proficiency in the second language (Nitschke, Kidd & Serratrice, 2010). Because each language represents a pattern of thought and a way of perceiving and processing reality, students who are exposed to and fluent in more than one language have expanded and enriched minds. They have been exposed to different concepts and logical sequences and have greater mental flexibility (Nowak-Fabrykowski & Shkandrij, 2004, p. 289).

Specifically, heritage language maintenance “results in greater cognitive flexibility including an enhanced ability to deal with abstract concepts” (J. S. Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 455). It enhances students’ creative domain, concept formation, language arbitration, concept of quantity and spatial awareness capacities (Nocus, Guimard, Vernaudon, Paia, Cosnefroy & Florin, 2012, p. 23). Other areas that benefit from bilingualism, as suggested by research, include ability to restructure perceptual solutions, sensitivity to communication performance in rule discovery tasks, verbal ability, metalinguistic awareness, verbal originality and divergent thinking (Fueyo, 1997, p. 18; P. Lee, 1996, p. 505-506). Due to the fact that the prefrontal cortex works harder in bilinguals, working memory also benefits (Riggs, Shin, Unger, Spruijt-Metz, & Pentz, 2014, p. 918; Szilágyi, Giambo & Szecsi, 2013, p. 117).

Some researchers go so far as to say that heritage language maintenance can predict positive social, emotional, behavioral and health outcomes because of its impact on executive function. Simply put, executive function is part of the cognitive processes that are necessary for self-control and self-motivation; they are what help a person move towards a goal. Studies have shown that bilingual children consistently outperform their monolingual peers on measures of executive control, in large part because of how they have to master switching from one language to another. Researchers hypothesize that this skill may transfer to other areas of life, resulting in more successful and goal-directed individuals. (Riggs, Shin, Unger, Spruijt-Metz, & Pentz, 2014)

Related to this topic is Cummin’s Developmental Interdependence Theory, which posits that proficiency in the second language is closely linked to proficiency in the first language. Research has validated this claim. It has been shown that linguistic intelligence and processing methods in the first language transfer to the second language (Geva & Ryan, 1993; J. S. Lee &

Oxelson, 2006). In other words, students who can efficiently use language to decode texts and decipher meaning in their first language show that same efficiency in the second language. Therefore, by strengthening cognitive and academic skills in the first language, parents and educators ultimately strengthen those same skills in the second language.

### **Social and Cultural Considerations**

When discussing the education of a student, it is important to consider the whole student. The implications of heritage language maintenance stretch far beyond the typical cognitive and academic concerns into the social and cultural life of the student. Consider the following quote from a Korean American student: “I often feel that my parents and I don’t really know each other because we can’t talk about certain things” (Fernsten, 2008, p. 48). The sentiment of this statement is one with which many EL students can relate, as their decreasing proficiency in the heritage language translates into a deteriorating relationship with their family, friends and language community. One of the primary functions of languages is to build and maintain relationships. Language, after all, is “a social practice that takes place in, as well as through, social interaction and participation in communities” (Lyngsnes, 2013, p. 231). Maintaining the heritage language strengthens and reinforces bonds with the heritage community and leads to a greater overall connectedness with family and friends who also speak the language.

Furthermore, cultural traditions and values and family knowledge are all passed on through the heritage language (Y. Wang, 2009, p. 16). Those who are unable to speak the language of their parents and community are unable to fully appreciate and take advantage of the various resources and shared knowledge that has been codified in their language and culture. In a sense, they are barred from truly belonging to their heritage culture. In line with these ideas is Arthur-Drake’s argument that students from linguistically isolated communities are actually at an

advantage because they are forced to be proficient in their native language for survival purposes and often become liaisons and translators who link their community and the outside world – roles that eventually lead to greater social maturity and cognitive functioning (2014, p. 329). Heritage language communities, therefore, can actually be viewed as an asset rather than as a disadvantage.

Heritage language maintenance plays just as critical a role in the smaller context of the home as it does in the wider sphere of the community. Nicolau and Vladivieso point out that “parental responsibility is a weighty matter that involves the transmission of complicated values, discipline, knowledge, self-esteem and affection. It requires communicating with sophistication, subtlety, and nuance not available in a half-mastered language” (as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 321-322). When both the student and the parent can communicate proficiently in the same language, deeper and more meaningful communication can take place. While students are struggling to develop personal relationships in their second language, it is helpful for them to have the support of meaningful relationships in with their heritage community and family.

Language is linked very closely to identity. By depriving EL students of the opportunity to preserve and maintain their heritage language, educators are, in essence, depriving them of part of their identity. In a study on the motives of students in a complementary Chinese school, researchers found that one of the students’ main purposes for studying Chinese was that they “often saw proficiency in Chinese as the key signifier of Chinese identity” (Francis, Archer & Mau, 2009, p. 534). Various other studies have confirmed the idea that both students and parents equate the heritage language with ethnic and cultural identity (Craig, 1996; Dixon, Zhao, Quiroz & Shin, 2012; J. S. Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Murillo & Smith, 2011; Showstack, 2012 as cited in



Leeman, 2015; Trofimovich & Turuševa, 2015). Maintaining the heritage language, therefore, is just as much about preserving the student's identity as it is assisting them academically.

The acquisition of a second language and culture need not and should not equate with the rejection or loss of the first, a phenomenon known as assimilation. Bilingual children can learn to value and appreciate both; a practice that will lead to the development of respect for others and a greater ability to collaborate and share with others (Nowak-Fabrykowski & Shkandrij, 2004, p. 291). In fact, research has shown that successful bilinguals are characterized by identifying strongly with both the first and the second language and culture (Trofimovich & Turuševa, 2015, p. 239). Students who embrace both worlds have a broader perspective and more opportunities than those who choose only one.

### **Political Considerations**

Though it may not be obvious to the casual observer, the question of heritage language maintenance is intensely political. As Auerbach (1993) states, "Monolingual instruction in the U.S. has as much to do with politics as with pedagogy" (cited in Lucas & Katz, 1994, 538). Murillo claims that because proficiency in a language and identification with the culture of that language are so closely linked, any attempt to compromise or exterminate the presence of a language in society is really a form of discrimination towards that language's culture (2011, p. 147). By undermining the language of a people, the dominant group is able to undermine its culture. While the common citizen may be unaware of this reality, advocates of a monolingual society (e.g. Official English) are in essence pushing for a homogenous society. Therefore, heritage language maintenance is not just a matter of linguistic ability; it is a matter of social justice.

Oftentimes, denying students the right to maintain their heritage language not only impacts their social life but also their academic life. If all of the research that shows bilingualism to result in numerous cognitive and academic advantages is true, denying students this right is also denying them the conditions that will lead to the greatest academic achievement. The fact that schools often lack ethnic language resources and books is a reflection of this injustice (Murillo & Smith, 2011, p. 150), as is the stigmatizing attitude towards non-English languages that labels them as inferior, illegitimate and “other” (Saxena, 2009, p. 168). According to Cummins, the racially-biased nature of school systems is partially responsible for the low achievement of some linguistic minority children” (as cited in P. Lee, 1996, p. 514).

In his study on parental attitudes towards bilingualism, Craig noted that the parents recognized that “harmony and stability in American society depend upon mutual linguistic and cultural understanding, rather than upon the imposition of the dominant language and culture upon ethnolinguistic minority groups” (1996, p. 405). Heritage language maintenance, because of its strong relationship to ethnic identity, is critical to maintaining diversity in society. Crawford notes that ethnic groups who have adopted English as their only language have lost their cultural distinctiveness in U.S. society (2000, p. 1-2). Those who lose their heritage language lose the tools that are necessary to avoid total assimilation. Wendel and Heinrich point out that in order to truly reverse the tide of language loss, it would be necessary to radically alter the imbalance of power in society (2012, p. 163).

Related to this discussion is the fact that second language learners from linguistic minority groups are at a much greater risk for heritage language loss than those from linguistically dominant groups (Wright, 2000, p. 73). “Language death does not happen in privileged communities. It happens to the dispossessed and the disempowered peoples who most

need their cultural resources to survive” (Crawford, 2000, p. 63). Y. Wang uses the illustration of mainstream students being praised for learning Spanish, while native Spanish-speakers are told that their heritage language is a detriment to their academic achievement (2009, p. 16). Similarly, mainstream students who are not yet proficient in a foreign language are encouraged to keep trying, while heritage language speakers who are not yet proficient in English are labeled as incompetent. The double-standard of insisting that heritage speakers be American while simultaneously refusing them that privilege by always labeling them as different is a reflection of the racism behind policies that deny students the right to maintain their first language. Schools, it seems, do little more than “reproduce an existing social order in which people are divided, often ruthlessly, along the lines of class, race, and gender” (MacSwan, 2000, p. 7).

### **Economic Considerations**

A perspective that is often overlooked when dealing with the topic of heritage language maintenance is that of the economic impact of heritage language maintenance. One might think of the language skills of an individual as capital. This capital serves as a resource in a number of ways: opening up different communities and social networks to them, increasing their appeal to potential employers and giving them an additional resource to reference and use as a tool in the classroom and the real world. “Bilingualism offers individuals and society a wealth of important cultural, linguistic, and cognitive resources” (Winsler, Díaz, Espinosa & Rodríguez, 1999, p. 360). A child who presents to school with some proficiency in his or her heritage language, then, ought to be regarded as an individual with valuable capital that should be maintained and developed. To neglect this capital is to rob the student of it, for neglecting it will surely result in its demise.

Anyone who has learned a foreign language as an adult knows that a significant amount of time and effort must be invested into the process in order for the language to be successfully acquired. There are similar costs associated with the maintenance of the heritage language, costs that often deter students from maintaining it (Snow & Hakuta as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 387), but the costs are arguably smaller than starting from the beginning (Y. Wang, 2009, p. 17). Does it not make economic sense to make the smaller, more efficient investment of maintaining a heritage language rather than having to pay the much larger cost necessary to acquire that same language from scratch? Furthermore, the cost of maintaining a heritage language is nothing in comparison to the costs related to losing proficiency in it (Bloom & Grenier as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 448). Scholars cite economic costs such as the social psychological costs of losing access to different relationships and forfeiting self-image and the personal identity that is associated with that language and the cognitive cost of missing out on the cognitive benefits that come with bilingualism (Snow & Hakuta as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 386-388). Furthermore, the heritage language speaker who loses proficiency in their first language also loses out on the estimated 2-3% salary increase that comes with being bilingual (Saiz & Zoido, 2005 as cited in Locay, Regan & Diamond Jr., 2013, p. 548).

In addition to the individual economic implications of heritage language maintenance, there are a number of noteworthy national economic implications as well. The two are closely related. Just as the maintenance of a heritage language benefits the individual economically and is a smart “financial” move, so it benefits society and is a resourceful use of a country’s resources. Globalization has increased the demand for individuals who are proficient in other languages. Leeman notes that “increasing the proficiency of heritage language speakers is the most efficient way to meet language demands” (2015, p. 101). Snow and Hakuta note that a

tremendous amount of money goes into training foreign language teachers and teaching foreign languages to government personnel; they also note that a considerable amount of money is lost because of the monolingual nature of the American workforce (as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 386). It makes economic sense, both nationally and individually, to invest in the more efficient task of maintaining a heritage language. The commonly held belief that the priority of ELs ought to be learning English, even if it is at the expense of their heritage language, ignores the various economic advantages that come with heritage language maintenance.

### **Linguistic Considerations**

Linguistic research almost unanimously supports heritage language maintenance. Cummins's theories, in particular, demonstrate that a solid linguistic foundation in the heritage language will contribute to greater proficiency in the host language. Conceptual elements, metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies, pragmatic aspects of language use, specific linguistic elements and phonological awareness have all been shown to be transferable from one language to another (Chen, Geva, & Schwartz, 2012; Cummins, 2007; Figueredo, 2006). Furthermore, the prerequisites for literacy skills are more easily developed in the heritage language (Cummins, 1979; Krashen, 1991). Though evidence for negative transfer has been found (Figueredo, 2006), such transfer is relatively negligible and eventually dissipates as the learner progresses in their competency of the language.

In their study of Inuit students in different school contexts, Wright, Taylor and Macarthur found that the students who had the greatest proficiency in L1 did much better in their acquisition of L2 (2000, p. 82), a pattern that has been verified by other research (Hakuta, 2011; Zamlut, 2011). Studies in younger students have found that "at best, instruction in the home language contributes to growth in both English and home language skills; at worst, there is no

difference in English achievement but an advantage in home language achievement” (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013, p. 27). Other studies have concluded that “school input is sufficient for societal language development” (Dixon, Zhao, Quiroz, & Shin, 2012, p. 558). Maintaining and encouraging heritage language proficiency, it appears, actually results in greater competency in the host language. A few additional benefits that have been found include a “greater sensitivity to linguistic, perceptual and interpersonal feedback cues” (Cummins, 1979, p. 228) and “a wider perspective on language and...a greater awareness of language variation and the possibilities of expressing the same idea by different linguistic means” (Ringbom, 1987, p. 112).

Another important though not as commonly mentioned consideration is that of the death of a heritage language. Some students are members of a relatively small group of heritage language speakers. The death of heritage language proficiency in a single student thus contributes to the overall death of the language. Wright, Taylor and Macarthur state: “The death...of the heritage language itself...by extension represents a serious threat to their cultural existence” (2000, p. 64). An example of this is the rapidly decreasing number of Native American languages in the United States: of the 175 indigenous languages still spoken in the United States, 155 are considered moribund” (Crawford, 2000, p. 52-53). While this dilemma only represents a small percentage of EL learners, it is still worth taking into consideration.

### **Pedagogical Considerations**

One of the fundamental debates regarding education is what means it should achieve. Wright, Taylor and Macarthur note, “English-only advocates claim that a school’s purpose is to prepare students to function in the dominate society while heritage-language advocates believe that schools ‘should reflect and support the heritage cultures of the children they serve’” (2000,

p. 63). However, it need not be an either-or situation. As society becomes increasingly multicultural, it is necessary that students learn how to function in the context of difference. Heritage language maintenance, to the extent that it does not interfere with acquiring English, is one way that schools can prepare students for this. Furthermore, cultivating proficiency in the heritage language and developing academic excellence are actually complementary goals (Crawford, 2000, p. 85).

Studies have shown that the natural course of the U.S. education system is such that heritage language attrition is often inevitable (Chu, 2011; Smith, 2002; Y. Wang, 2009; Wright, Taylor, & Macarthur, 2000). Schools often enforce and instill the dominant language, values and culture. Furthermore, “schools in the United States have been structured to only serve students who speak English and are acculturated to mainstream society” (Chu, 2011, p. 201). The disjointedness that culturally and linguistically diverse students encounter between their homes and school contributes to a lag in academic achievement. Schools that incorporate students’ heritage culture and language into the curriculum and classroom alleviate this discrepancy and, thus, help students do better in terms of academic achievement.

Because, as has been laid out in the previous discussion, heritage language maintenance validates students and paves the way for greater English proficiency, it has a number of positive consequences in terms of education. In a study of Inuit children in different school environments, it was found that Inuit children who were in schools that encouraged the maintenance of their heritage language had a greater school retention rate, better academic success, more involvement in terms of their parents and the community and found their schools to be more conducive to multiculturalism and diversity. The fact that there is no direct relation between the amount of time spent in English instruction and academic achievement in English, while there is a

relationship between time spent in primary language instruction and academic achievement in English shows the importance of this practice (Fueyo, 1997, p. 19).

One of the main reasons why heritage language maintenance is educationally beneficial for students is because it takes into account the resources that students bring with them to the classroom. Nowak-Fabrykowski and Shkandrij note the importance of validating a child and instilling within them a sense of belonging in attempting to reach and teach them (2004, p. 289). Using the heritage language to both build and access background knowledge has been shown to be an invaluable practice when working with EL students (Krashen 1991; Sheets, 2009; Smith, 2002). Students who explore topics through reading in their heritage language and have a broader knowledge of the world will do much better than students who have better English proficiency but less experience in the subject matter because “concepts established in one language are more readily learned in the other language than totally new concepts” (Dixon, Zhao, Quiroz, & Shin, 2012, p. 542). Additionally, research has shown that encouraging the use of the heritage language does not interfere with developing academic skills in English (Mohanty, 1990; Nocus, Guimard, Vernaudo, Paia, Cosnefroy & Florin, 2012; Schecter & Bayley, 2002 as cited in Wiltse, 2008, p. 11).

In terms of how heritage language maintenance is to be accomplished in the school setting, there are a number of different options: immersion schooling, bilingual schooling, transitional bilingualism, heritage language classes, and foreign language classes. Some are better than others at truly encouraging bilingualism. Crawford found that schools that encourage the use of heritage languages were “helpful in overcoming other obstacles such as poverty, family illiteracy, and social stigmas associated with minority status” (2000, p. 85). One study showed that dual language programs (or bilingual programs) served to counteract the trend of



heritage language loss in the particular area of Arizona in which they were located (Smith, 2002).

### **Legal Considerations**

Legally, heritage language maintenance can be viewed as a protected right. In the *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision of 1974 it was determined that students must be “provided meaningful access to a school’s educational program” (Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 539). The court stated, “There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education” (as cited in Hakuta, 2011, p. 163). Furthermore, in the *Castañeda v. Pickard* case of 1981 the precedent was set that schools must base their educational practice on sound educational theory and research (Hakuta, 2011, p. 165). The combined impact of these and other court cases is such that schools are responsible to do what is necessary to ensure academic achievement for their EL students. Given that the research shows a definite cognitive, psychological and academic advantage for students whose heritage language is maintained, it can logically be concluded that schools ought to integrate practices that encourage heritage language maintenance into their curriculum if they wish to make the content accessible to their EL students.

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

The implications of this research for educational practice are abundant. Perhaps the most obvious way to put this research into practice is to incorporate the heritage language and culture into the curriculum. Dube and Herbert (1997) “found that school performance and linguistic proficiency in both languages increased when children’s mother tongue was valued and used in

the classroom” (as cited in P. Lee, 1996, p. 513). Lucas and Katz make the point that this need not be an all-or-nothing phenomenon (1994, p. 537). Well-designed bilingual programs, though they are quite effective in terms of heritage language maintenance (Krashen, 1991), are not feasible for every school district. However, every teacher, regardless of their linguistic abilities or resources, can find simple ways to include their students’ heritage languages and cultures in the classroom. Simply expressing an interest in the heritage language and treating it as a resource can go a long way (Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 456).

Field trips into the community and visits from members of the community create a link between the classroom and the heritage culture. While a teacher may have no ability to speak in his or her students’ language(s), there are likely community and family members who can; bringing them into the classroom both validates the students’ heritage language(s) and strengthens the school-community bond. Incorporating contributions from the heritage language and culture into the curriculum creates a celebratory and validating atmosphere that encourages a greater acceptance of diversity in all students.

Other strategies for incorporating the heritage language may be as simple as pointing out cognates between the two languages or asking students how a certain word or phrase is said in the heritage language. This “can make texts in English more accessible to ELLs and possibly make them aware of linkages across languages” (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013, p. 27). Seizing any and every opportunity to acknowledge the importance of students’ heritage language knowledge, whether it be linguistic or content knowledge, affirms the importance of it (Figueredo, 2006, p. 898). Furthermore, *all* students in the classroom will be enriched by these opportunities to have their perspective broadened and their knowledge base expanded.

The heritage language can be incorporated in many different areas of the classroom environment. Teachers can encourage students to use the heritage language with peers during group and pair work. Teachers can also allow code-switching for students who have limited oral proficiency. High achieving students who speak the heritage language can tutor low achieving students in that language. The teacher can also use the heritage language to build relationships and “establish rapport” with the students or to clarify concepts when teaching (Lucas & Katz, 1994, p. 537). The schools that Calaff studied implemented many of these practices, along with allowing students to use home language websites and books to do research (2008, p. 104). Including heritage language books, magazines and CDs in the classroom and school library is another practical way to provide extra opportunities for developing the heritage language. Teachers might even give awards for excellence in the heritage language (Cummins, 2007, p. 226).

Szilágyi, Giambo, and Szecsi propose a number of interesting and practical strategies for heritage language maintenance in their article (2013). They suggest that teachers look at similarities and differences in the students’ primary language and English when opportunities arise. Another method they mention is creating dual language books and including bilingual books in the classroom library. Students can also give book reports to their parents in the heritage language. They propose creating a school newsletter in the heritage language as a means of communicating important information to parents and giving students an opportunity to practice literacy skills in that language. Because this activity has a real audience and a real purpose, it is likely to be highly motivating for students. They also suggest that teachers find academic websites and games in their students’ heritage language for them to use in and outside

of class. Finally, they note that using bilingual students as mentors for newly arrived EL students is a way to give both parties an opportunity to use their language skills for a practical purpose.

The basic principle of all of these ideas is that the school should work to alleviate and lessen the disparity that often occurs between the heritage culture and the school culture. This is done by “acknowledging and understanding the role that race, language, and ethnicity play in teaching and learning...In other words, culturally responsive teaching uses the child’s culture to build a bridge to success in school achievement” (Chu, 2011, p. 25). The idea is not to neglect English, as students need this skill to succeed in academia, but rather to encourage simultaneous heritage language maintenance. School administrators and policy makers must face the fact that schools are the ones that need to change if academic achievement is to be attained by the nation’s culturally and linguistically diverse students.

In implementing strategies for heritage language maintenance, there will likely be concerns about the students’ host language development. While many of these concerns are unjustified, the legitimate ones may be addressed by explicit literacy instruction in the classroom. “English L2 children who receive good reading instruction in the early grades are capable of developing strong reading comprehension skills, and potentially close the oft-reported L1-L2 gap” (Chen, Geva, & Schwartz, 2012, p. 1800). Furthermore, any apparent disadvantages that may result from encouraging the maintenance of heritage language can be accounted for by social factors and can be made up for by quality instruction (Chen, Geva, & Schwartz, 2012).

Another practical implication deals with the relationship between parents and the school. Because many parents are under the false impression that speaking English at home is the best way to ensure their child progresses in the language, it is vital that teachers encourage parents to expose their children to written and oral forms of the heritage language in the home and

communicate that bilingualism is a valuable and special achievement (Dixon et al., 2012, p. 544; Fueyo, 1997, p. 19). Specifically, encouraging parents to read with their children in the heritage language will boost their vocabulary in that language and will expose them to a broader range of concepts and perspectives (Prevoo, et al., 2014, p. 965). When EL children come from poor families, as is frequently the case, schools need to reach out to families to educate them as to how they can seek out resources in their heritage language (Dixon, et al., 2012, p. 558).

Beyond encouraging parents to use the heritage language at home, teachers can also communicate with parents in the heritage language in order to ensure good communication and make them feel more respected. Using the internet, schools can easily connect with online translators or locate local translators who can help them in this endeavor. In the same vein, teachers can also invite parents to come into the classroom and share a bit about their heritage language and culture and enlist their help in finding heritage language resources to incorporate in the classroom. All of these practices regard parents as resources and allow them to be more actively involved in their child's academic success and communicates an appreciation of their unique linguistic and cultural background (Fueyo, 1997, p. 20).

One should also consider the perspective of teachers when discussing implications for the sphere of education. Research shows that teachers who have no background in ESL education or any kind of language acquisition are more likely to fail to think about (and, therefore, meet) the needs of their EL students. Because many teachers without any training in this area regard bilingualism as a problem rather than an asset, students are likely to encounter biased attitudes and low expectations in many of their classes. Furthermore, research shows that even when untrained teachers view bilingualism as a positive thing in theory, they rarely reflect this practically in the classroom (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011; Ramos, 2001). Lee and Oxelson's

findings suggest that teachers' attitudes were strongly influenced for the better by professional development and personal experience in learning an additional language (2006). They argue that teachers need to be educated about the critical role that heritage language maintenance plays in the overall achievement of EL students. Additionally, it would be beneficial to empower teachers with practical and tangible strategies for heritage language maintenance in the classroom (Szilágyi, Giambo, & Szecsi, 2013, p. 118). Murillo and Smith suggest that training be implemented into teacher education programs for all teachers, so they might understand the benefits of heritage language maintenance from an academic and scientific perspective (2011, p. 15).

Sheets states that culturally inclusive teachers should “consider the diverse characteristics, strengths, and competencies of their students” (2009, p. 13). Such teachers need to know how to connect the students' prior knowledge with content area knowledge. They need to know how to identify cultural displays and address them properly in order to socially support their EL students. Little of this is intuitive; it requires training. Schechter, Parego, Ambadiang, and James go so far as to suggest that training be implemented for anyone involved in the world of education (administrators, teachers, policy-makers, etc.) that teaches the value of heritage language maintenance and incorporation in the classroom (2014, p. 140).

Other options are available for schools that have more resources. Bilingual programs, for example, encourage simultaneous development in the heritage language and the host language. Heritage language classes are another strategy that has been implemented in some districts; others have broadened the curriculum of foreign language classes to accommodate heritage speakers of that language. Some schools also give academic credit to students who attend heritage language classes outside of school (Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 467).

### **Implications for Policy**

As should be clear from the above discussion this topic deals with political biases and societal beliefs, which are deep-rooted and will not be easy to overcome. That said, there are changes that can and should be made. The most obvious and needed policy is one that allocates funds for and legally requires the maintenance of students' heritage languages. Epstein calls this "affirmative ethnicity," asserting that all students should be afforded this right (as cited in Crawford, 1992, p. 337). The same author agrees with the many scholars who believe that a more widespread societal change is necessary if this issue is to be resolved. Policies that "promote language variation as a societal practice and that legitimize language varieties" ought to be put in place (Schechter, Parejo, Ambadiang & James, 2014, p. 141). A practical example of this would be a foreign language requirement for all students that would push them beyond basic proficiency. Though not every citizen would become fluent, the process of studying a foreign language and culture would likely result in a greater appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity (Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 467). Additionally, the translation of signs, instructions and other written material would validate other languages and help monolingual citizens to become more accustomed to the idea of a polylingual society. These are just a few basic suggestions to get the reader thinking of policies that would encourage the maintenance of students' heritage languages. Ultimately, a societal paradigm shift that recognizes heritage languages as a resource rather than a nuisance is necessary if English language learners are to receive widespread support and encouragement to maintain their heritage language.

### **Conclusions**

#### **Who is Responsible?**

Who is responsible for heritage language maintenance? The answer, put simply, is everyone. “Heritage language maintenance is not solely an individual process, but a societal process that involves participation from all sectors of society including schools and teachers” (Lee & Oxelson, 2006, p. 467). The only way that heritage language maintenance is to be achieved is if everyone does their part. Schools are responsible to create a culture of acceptance that not only supports students in their effort to maintain their heritage language but also equips them to do so (Cherciov, 2012). Teachers need to examine their own attitudes and create a classroom environment that validates the students’ heritage languages and cultures. The responsibility of parents lies in creating a home atmosphere that is saturated with the heritage language, both in oral and written form. They can also help by instilling ethnic pride in their children (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, p. 377). Society, too, plays a role in the way that it views multiculturalism and bilingualism and treats it in its policies and practices.

### **Further Research**

While a great deal of research has been completed about heritage language maintenance, much remains to be done. Future researchers might consider looking with more detail into the conditions that produce bilingual and multilingual students. Why are certain countries and regions more successful than others in this endeavor? Additionally, more research is needed to determine what EL students’ parents believe about heritage language maintenance. Specifically, what are they told by their children’s teachers? It would also be beneficial to look more thoroughly at classroom practices in terms of incorporating heritage language(s) into the curriculum in order to discover what percentage of classrooms are actually implementing these strategies on a regular basis.

### **Conclusion**



To conclude, heritage language maintenance is critical to the psychological, cognitive, linguistic, social and academic success of English learners. Far from interfering with the acquisition of English, research has shown that heritage language maintenance actually benefits and furthers students' English proficiency. Politically and legally speaking, it is a matter of social justice: heritage language competency is a right and an asset that should by no means be taken away from students. In an increasingly globalized and diverse society, maintaining the heritage language of English learners in the U.S. school systems is a simple, economical solution to the growing need for bilingual citizens. While fostering a more positive societal attitude towards bilingualism is a tremendous undertaking, assisting students in maintaining their heritage language is absolutely attainable. It begins with individuals, as most social change does. Educators, parents, community members and students who take the necessary steps to create an environment that promotes heritage language maintenance will benefit and enrich students, schools, families, communities and the nation as a whole.

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