



The Role of Heritage Language Schools in Building a Multilingual Society

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Heritage language schools have a history of over 300 years in the United States (Fishman, 2001). Fishman's comprehensive study of heritage language schools in the early 1980s identified more than 6,500 heritage language schools outside of the public sector, teaching 145 languages, including Amerindian, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, and Yiddish. Three types of schools are categorized based on frequency of instruction and number of instructional hours per week: all-day schools, weekday afternoon schools, and weekend schools. Other types of schools are summer programs, evening classes, and special classes in community centers (Fishman & Nahirny, 1966). Examples of schools described in this brief are primarily from weekend schools.

Heritage language schools were established by ethnic groups to support the learning of their languages and cultures (Bradunas, 1988; Fishman, 2001). They continue to be a vibrant force for preserving and developing the linguistic and cultural traditions of ethnic communities. "The role that these schools play in supporting multilingualism and linguistic diversity is significant" (Compton, 2001, p. 162). For example, according to McGinnis (2008), the Chinese heritage language education sector has replaced both the college/university and K-12 sectors as the majority provider for Chinese language instruction in the U.S. over the past several decades.

The Linguistic Function of Heritage Language Schools

The linguistic function of heritage language schools is important to heritage language school stakeholders. In the Ethnic Heritage and Language Schools Project undertaken by the American Folklife Center in the summer of 1982, many community members indicated language instruction as one of the main reasons to establish heritage language schools (Bradunas, 1988). A recent study by the author (Liu, 2010) revealed that the majority of stakeholders (principals, teachers, and parents) firmly believed that the main role of heritage language schools was to teach children their heritage language and culture. While they recognized that their children would not become fully proficient in their heritage language by studying it two hours per week, they believed that the school at least provided an environment for children to learn the language systematically and made learning the language part of a routine.

According to one stakeholder, attending heritage language schools was better than watching TV at home. One teacher interviewed compared the learning at heritage language schools to the hibernating plants in the winter. She stated that parents sent their children to heritage language schools to keep their heritage language seed hibernating, and whenever these children focused on their heritage language later in their lives, they could pick it up with greater ease.

The Non-linguistic Function of Heritage Language Schools

Wong and Lopez (2000) argue that heritage language schools are not primarily language teaching institutions, but rather they serve vital non-linguistic functions. They propose that the most important function of heritage language schools is to create a sense of cultural and ethnic pride. This point is echoed by Wong (1988), who claims that the primary function of heritage language schools is not linguistic, but rather the sense of cultural and ethnic pride created.

A survey of thirty-two Chinese language school teachers in upstate New York found that the majority of teachers felt that they were not successful in teaching students to speak Chinese (Chuang, 1997). Moreover, only 22 percent of them believed that teaching students to communicate in Chinese was the most important goal of the school. They noted the following goals for their programs: Be proud to be Chinese, have a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, and realize the benefits of relearning the mother tongue. Fishman (1980) claims that a primary function of ethnic-community mother-tongue schools is to teach children about their ethnic identity, and he contends that heritage language schools "must be recognized as filling an important identity-forming and identity-providing function for millions of Americans (p. 237). Long (1988) has a similar view toward heritage schools: "By giving him [the student] the opportunity to know his background, the school provides the child with more options to choose from when he begins to develop his own perspective on his identity" (p. 135).

Another non-linguistic function of heritage language schools is to provide an occasion for socializing and group involvement among parents and opportunities for children to interact with those with similar backgrounds, which enhances ethnic pride (Wong & Lopez, 2000). Shibata (2000) is more explicit about the school as a place for socialization:

The role of the [Japanese] Saturday school is not only to teach the Japanese language and culture but also to offer a place to use it [this knowledge] through interaction with other children and adults. School is also the place to nurture ethnic identity and friendship[s] among children of the same age or beyond (p. 471).

Wang (1999) echoes Shibata's statements and claims that heritage language schools perform important roles in immigrants' lives beyond language teaching and learning. Using the example of Chinese schools, Wang states that these schools perform a cultural and social role in Chinese immigrant communities and become an extended family, where Chinese immigrants, children and adults, can socialize regularly with people of their own ethnic background. McGinnis (2005) described the role of Chinese heritage language schools thus: "Chinese community schools are beginning to play a significant social service role that transcends more narrowly educational functions, as exemplified in their support work for the adoptive Families with Chinese Children (FCC)" (p. 593).

Changing Role of Heritage Language Schools

The role of heritage language schools in communities and society generally does not stay static; it is fluid and changes depending on social contexts. For example, the role played by Chinese heritage language schools has undergone constant revision with changes in American foreign policy and in the composition of the Chinese American community (Wong & Lopez, 2000). In the 1920s when Chinese were segregated in Chinatowns, the role of Chinese heritage language schools was not to preserve immigrant children's threatened language and culture, because the use of Chinese as mother tongue was virtually universal among second-generation Chinese Americans (Li, 1982). Moreover, harsh restrictions on Chinese immigrants made the prospects of returning to China someday very real. Therefore, the role of heritage language schools was to supplement an American education with a Chinese one (Wong & Lopez, 2000).

After World War II, the social and political status of Chinese immigrants in the United States gradually improved. The younger generation was attracted to mainstream American culture and made English their primary medium of communication (Lai, 2004). Even many parents did not see Chinese language education as important (Wong & Lopez, 2000). Rather, many parents wanted their children to do well in their studies at English language schools, enabling them to take advantage of career opportunities that were just starting to open up to minorities (Lai, 2004). Therefore, the role of heritage language schools was weakened to a certain extent.

After the U.S. Congress eliminated the Exclusion Act in 1965, Chinese immigration increased dramatically. At the same time, American society was changing. Ethnic awareness among different minorities was heightened, with revived interest in groups' histories, languages, and cultures. Moreover, China was playing an increasingly important international role (Lai, 2004). All of these factors led to a revival of Chinese heritage schools, which started to play a more important role in the lives of second- and third-generation Chinese.

In summary, heritage language schools perform valuable linguistic roles such as building students' language and cultural competence in a multilingual society. They also perform important non-linguistic roles, such as creating a sense of cultural pride and identity. These two roles complement and reinforce each other. Furthermore, the role of heritage language schools in U.S. society is under constant revision with changes in social contexts. When we look specifically at the changing role of Chinese heritage language schools, we see ebbs and flows in their importance with a currently strong role in developing linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and community connections of heritage and non-heritage Chinese speakers.

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