



What is a heritage language program?

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In its broadest sense, a heritage language program is any language development program that is designed or tailored to address the needs of heritage language learners (see related Heritage Brief, *Who is a heritage language learner?*). The Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Language (the Alliance) is building a database of program profiles—descriptions of heritage language programs throughout the United States. Learn more about the [Database of Heritage Language Programs](#), including how to add a program to the database.

Heritage language programs may be at any level or setting, including community-based, K-12, or higher education, and vary in terms of their approaches to teaching, populations they serve, and other factors. The following overview provides a basic outline of heritage language programs in these three major educational contexts.

Community-based programs

Historically in the United States, the strongest efforts for the teaching of heritage languages have occurred outside of mainstream schooling where, until recently, education in languages other than English was characterized almost exclusively as foreign language teaching (Fishman, 2001; Valdés, 2001). Heritage language schools are often created out of a community's desire to pass on their language and culture from one generation to the next in order to maintain connections within families and communities.

Community-based schools or programs are organized privately rather than within the public education system (Fishman, 2001). Because of this, no centralized government records have been maintained, but the linguist Joshua Fishman undertook two separate projects (1960-1963 and 1980-1983) to identify and document such schools. His more recent study identified over 6,000 heritage language schools, teaching 145 different languages. Of these languages, 91 were indigenous American languages. The majority of the schools taught the following languages: Chinese, French, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. (See Compton, 2001, for discussion of heritage language communities and schools.)

Community heritage language programs vary a great deal with regard to populations served, program structure and organization, focus of instruction, instructional methods, materials used, staff qualifications, articulation with school-based programs, and funding sources. What they do have in common is that they

are organized by community members—families, community leaders, churches, or civic organizations. Culture, traditions, and other content are often taught through the language, rather than focusing strictly on language as the object of instruction. Many schools incorporate community events and holiday celebrations into the curriculum and rely on the involvement of community members as staff volunteers, teachers, and school leaders. At the same time, schools strive to meet high educational standards, and some are organized into networks at the regional or national level. Examples include a national organization for private German language schools, the [German Language School Conference](#), and the two national associations of Chinese schools, [the National Council of Associations of Chinese Schools](#) and the [Chinese School Association in the U.S.](#) These associations, and some individual schools, are creating linkages to the formal education system by offering AP credit-bearing courses at the community schools.

K-12 education

The situation at the K-12 level is complicated because schools do not always identify or support specific “heritage” language programs. Rather, they may have immersion or two-way (dual language) programs that include heritage language speakers, or they may have classes within the foreign language education program for heritage or native language speakers. (See, e.g., Christian, Howard, & Loeb, 2000; Genesee, 1999; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Montone & Loeb, 2000, and Webb & Miller, 2000 for overviews of such programs.) This situation is different for Spanish, with many Spanish for Spanish Speakers (or Spanish for Native Speakers or Spanish for Fluent Speakers) programs in school districts across the country. (See Wang & Green, 2001, for discussion of heritage language programs in K-12 education; Peyton, Lewelling, & Winke, 2001, for discussion of Spanish for Spanish Speakers programs.)

Higher education

In general, heritage language programs in higher education are those that have separate classes for students with home background in the language of study. University heritage language programs can also provide courses for students who identify with a language and culture even if their home background is not in the language of study. (See Gambhir, 2001; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003; Kono & McGinnis, 2001, for discussion of heritage language programs in higher education.)

Information about university-level heritage language programs is being collected by the [National Heritage Language Resource Center at the University of California, Los Angeles](#).

Conclusion

Despite the personal, community, and societal benefits of bi- and multilingualism, educational conditions in the United States still make it likely that languages other than English are lost across generations (Fishman, 1991), although there is variation within families and communities that shows this tendency is not inevitable

(Schechter & Bayley, 2002; Zentella, 1997). Language education that values, builds on, and promotes the development of heritage languages, as a complement to the development of English, has an important role to play in reversing this trend. A great deal of work needs to be done to strengthen the programs described here in community-based, K-12, and higher education settings.

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