

# **Situating Heritage Language Learners in Japan: Social Identification and Academic Learning**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to contextualize the issues of heritage language (HL) education in Japan to better understand the learners' sociolinguistic characteristics and the underlying factors such as identity and motivation. While many recognize the irreplaceable roles those HL learners are to play for the globalization of the country, few attempts have been made to understand their sociolinguistic characteristics and the context surrounding them. By examining the socio-educational as well as the theoretical issues of HL education and learners, we attempt to identify the challenges they may face in the context of Japan. We argue that a more concerted research effort at all levels of socio-educational strands is needed to: 1) correctly identify the HL learners' needs, and 2) establish an academic support system to promote the HL learners' growth as national human resources.

*“Schools that fail to promote students’ linguistic talents are also failing to fully educate them.” (Cummins, 2014, p.1)*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

For the past several decades, Heritage Language (HL) learning and education have drawn attention from educators in many countries. The U.S., along with Canada, is the leading country in the field of HL education and research, in which Spanish is the most widely spoken HL, followed by Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Persian, Armenian, Korean, and Tagalog (the U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). There is a journal specifically designated to the topic (*“Heritage Language Journal”*), there is a substantial amount of research dealing specifically with HL education (Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2008; Montrul, 2016; Trifonas & Aravossitas, 2017), and there are yearly workshop events and conferences organized by UCLA. In the U.S., immigrant children have historically been educated to give up their home language and shift to English to adapt to the mainstream society. In recent years, however, educators started to regard the HL as an advantage rather than a deficiency based on the belief that “heritage language students’ rich linguistic and cultural resources are invaluable national assets” (He & Xiao, 2008; Kondo-Brown, 2001; Li & Duff, 2018). Yet, even in the U.S., the curriculum designed for HL learners has not fully been developed. Without relevant options, many HL learners may be misplaced in the traditional foreign language classes, and it is necessary to offer them classes that are tailored to meet their special needs (Kondo-Brown, 2001; Oguro & Moloney, 2012).

In the case of Japan, with the rapid cultural and linguistic diversification, it is no longer a country in which everybody speaks the same language. Statistics show there are around 44,000 students in public elementary and junior high schools who have roots outside of Japan and need Japanese instruction (MEXT, 2016). This tendency might be accelerated

by the Abe cabinet's recent plan to create a new residence status to accept more foreign workers. Previous studies (Garcia, 1985) have shown that immigrants who maintain their HL did academically better and had higher educational expectations than those who speak only the dominant language. This means that nurturing bilingual students who speak both Japanese and their HL must be one of the goals of education in Japan in realizing a truly diversified society.

While there is a large amount of research on the socioeconomic or sociocultural situations of the long-existing ethnic minorities in Japan, such as Chinese and Koreans (Fukuoka, 2000; Okano, 2011), and on "return migration" by Nikkei Brazilians and Peruvians (de Carvalho, 2003), not many studies have looked at the lives of the youth with ethnic roots in other countries. With the recent surge of immigrants from Southeast Asian countries including Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia, and the greater need for their educational support, it is essential to find a way to accommodate their needs and provide them with adequate support; the fundamental question of which is how to value the cultural and ethnic diversity that they bring into the Japanese society.

At the center of the issue, with the increase in immigrants and the needs for their educational supports, are multiethnic students studying their non-Japanese parent's home language, who can be referred to as "heritage language" learners. An effort to understand the sociolinguistic situations of HL learners is clearly visible. Some studies have examined the HLs spoken by the indigenous people—the Ainu and the Ryukyans (Heinrich, 2008; Teeter & Okazaki, 2011). However, only a limited number of researchers have investigated the children of recent immigrants and their maintenance of the heritage languages, such as Vietnamese (Kitayama, 2012; Kondo & Shimizu, 2012; Kondo, 2017; Ochiai, 2012) and Chinese (Majima, 2019).

## **II. HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS: DEFINITIONAL ISSUES**

The term “heritage language learner” has been defined differently depending on the context where it is used and on the researcher who studies it (Abdi, 2011; Polinsky, 2011; Write & Bayram, 2016). A traditional definition given by Valdés (2000, 2001) describes a HL learner as “a language student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English” (p. 38). However, Valdés’ linguistically-oriented definition of such has been questioned as the field of HL education has seen the emergence of non-traditional HL learners such as mixed HL learners and later generations of immigrants. Unlike Valdés (2001), Fishman (2001) categorized HL learners into three language groups based on their socio-historical backgrounds in the U.S.: 1) indigenous languages, 2) colonial languages, and 3) immigrant languages. Fishman’s categorization may be of some use in defining the pre-existing HL learners of Ainu and Ryukyuan, and also of Chinese and Korean languages in Japan.

As the backgrounds of HL learners diversify and become complicated, it has become inevitable for researchers working on HL education to pay more attention to how such changes may affect the way HL learners are identified, educated, and researched. More importantly, they have examined how the changes may have an impact on the way those learners interact with the mainstream society and other monolinguals (Chen & Kim, 2016). That is, contrary to how researchers in the field have traditionally attempted to define HL learners, others argue that one should pay more attention to their self-awareness than to their linguistic ability and socio-historic backgrounds. Hornberger and Wang (2008), for example, view HL learners as “individuals with familial or ancestral ties to a language other than English who exert their agency in determining if they are HLLs of

that language” (p.27). They further point out that it is the learner who may or may not perceive the learning of the language as part of his/her HL learning. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned linguistic and socio-historic definitions of HL learners become crucial especially when the learning of their HL occurs in a formal classroom. Wright and Bayram (2016) suggest that regardless of their proficiency level, HL learners should be regarded differently from other foreign language learners, as most (may not be all) of them are exposed to their HLs since birth; hence, their psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic characteristics will be different from those of other foreign language learners in the classroom.

Many of the HL learners come with ethnic ties to their heritage, and they may maintain their HL contact with one or more family members who are the native speakers of the target language. In most cases, HL learners naturally grow up speaking or at least listening to the HL at home, while they interact with the monolinguals of the dominant language in the mainstream society. In some cases, however, the parents believe the ability to speak their heritage language will hinder the children’s academic achievement and may not encourage them to study their HL in and outside their home. The fact that every HL student has a different background and motivation for their HL learning indicates that the instructors need to pay close attention to their socio-ethnic status and the unique sociolinguistic characteristics they may bring to their classrooms, as such differing characteristics may have a direct impact on the way they acquire the target language. Likewise, depending on how HL learners position and embrace their bi- or multicultural identities, the level of their motivation will vary, and consequently, contribute to its development and maintenance in differing degrees.

### **III. LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS IN HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNING**

As suggested by Hornberger and Wang (2008), one way to explore HL education is to meticulously investigate the individual learner as to how she/he perceives her/himself as a language learner, which highlights the significance of looking into the learner identity in the HL research. Historically, in the U.S., the interest in the interrelationship between the HL learning and learner identity arose as the need for researching the development of Spanish as a Heritage Language became evident in the 1970s and 1980s (Leeman et al., 2011). In the following years, researchers have empirically studied the systematic relationship among the HL proficiency, identity, and self-esteem or self-efficacy by HL learners (Garcia, 1985; Lee, 2002; Lee, 2005; Whitesell et al., 2009; Yu, 2015).

A heritage language differs from a mother tongue in that it is the language in which the speaker's identity fluctuates, while a mother tongue serves as the foundation for the speaker's identity (Nakajima, 2017). In the same manner, the HL speakers' perceptions and attitudes toward their HL are dependent on how the HL is viewed or evaluated by others and society. Today while children of immigrants in many countries outside Japan are treated as prospective citizens who are indispensable to society, as Nakajima (2017) points out, in Japan they can at best be the target of special instructions in the Japanese language, and their HL maintenance is very likely to be neglected, let alone their identity.

Underlying the HL research is the fundamental idea that every HL is a valuable resource to the society. Focusing on the HL use and maintenance by Peruvian immigrant communities in Japan, Shintani (2018) shows that the HL is positively related to the HL learners' self-esteem and confidence, and the HL must be preserved with the help of the community, teachers, and parents.

The importance of the community and the family is emphasized by other HL researchers. In an ethnographic case study of HL learners in Hawaii, Sugita (2000) investigated the identity of four Japanese American university students in their study of the Japanese language. The findings revealed that the learners' "continuity" with other Japanese Americans in Hawai'i and their "connection" to the home language and culture in Japan significantly influenced each student's identity construction. Likewise, in the context of HL learners in Japan, a more scientific investigation must be made regarding the HL learners' continuity with their family or community within the society, as well as their connection to their parents' home culture.

#### **IV. HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS IN JAPAN**

Prior studies (He & Xiao, 2008; Muramoto & Karsten, 2017) have reported that the HL learners help not only enrich the language classrooms culturally and linguistically but also dynamically promote the other students' understanding of and sensitivity to different languages and cultures, and that, in return, promotes the pride and self-esteem of the HL learners (Nakajima, 2017). Thus, growing up and educated multilingual with rich cultural sensitivities, those HL learners can contribute both to the language classrooms and to society, and to the nation as a whole to a great degree. In order for such potentials of theirs to be realized, however, pedagogic support is crucial in the classroom and at the local as well as national policy levels.

In the classroom, the different amount of linguistic and cultural differences, and more significantly, the identity frame pertaining to their HL backgrounds may lead the learners to have entirely different motivational approaches to HL learning (Sugita, 2000). Demotivation or resistance to the way they are taught their "own" HL is fully understandable

when these HL learners are treated the same as other foreign language learners. In some unfortunate cases, the linguistic and cultural assets they bring to the classroom are perceived as non-standard, and hence, denied by the instructors (Helmer, 2013). In other cases, the HL learners themselves may feel a gap between what they are taught about their heritage language and culture by their parents and what they learn from their instructors at academic settings.

In Japan, where an increase of HL learners has just started, mixed classes are the norm. In such mixed class settings, it is expected that the instructor will face challenges for accommodating the different linguistic needs coming from the two learner groups—the HL and foreign language learners (Abdi, 2011; Lacorte & Canabal, 2003). Of more importance regarding the teaching of mixed learners in the same classroom is how to promote peer interactions in a way that both groups of learners benefit from each other. It is likely for them to not only possess different levels of linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge but also to position differently with different identities and motivation for the learning of the target language.

While the number of students with multicultural family backgrounds who enter higher education has increased in Japan, those HL students pursuing learning of their HLs are still small in number, often leaving their voices unrecognized. Those learners may come from different learning environments, enter the university for different reasons or different goals for their study, and be isolated from the mainstream classroom culture that is often dominated by Japanese foreign language learners. Without listening to the voices of the HL learners, there will be no way to fully educate them aside from promoting the interaction between HL and non-HL students for their mutual benefits.



As the Japanese society develops to embrace multilingual and multicultural populations, the HL learners have and will become more visible and identifiable with their linguistic and cultural richness. It is, therefore, critical to examine the current situation surrounding the HL learners, understand what difficulties they may encounter in their school life, and propose educational measures to value the languages, literacies, and cultural competencies of the youth with multiethnic backgrounds (Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2008; Li & Duff, 2018; Seals & Peyton, 2016).

## **V. RESEARCHING HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LEARNERS IN JAPAN**

Depending on the context, different aspects of HL learning could be the topic of scientific inquiry. For example, in the context where pluralism is emphasized such as the E.U., Canada, and the U.S., HL learning has long been a topic of inquiry, and with its accumulated knowledge base, it has become an established academic subject (Wright & Bayram, 2016). In others, however, it is a research area that has just emerged with interests from both researchers and educators mostly due to the social and political policy initiatives, with Japan being a typical example of the case.

In researching HL learning, a line of studies have regarded it as part of bi- or multilingualism and have researched accordingly. In others, the HL learners' linguistic characteristics and proficiency development were the subjects of inquiry approached under formal linguistics (Bayram et al., 2016; Polinsky, 2008). As we discussed earlier, another line of research has been primarily concerned with the HL learners' identity formation and changes, often in relation to their motivation. All of these different lines of research, in fact, converge into an argument that the HL learning and learners should be regarded as a unique phenomenon different from other types of bilingualism or

second/foreign language learning. Consequently, such a stance requires researchers to apply different conceptualizations, frameworks, methods, and interpretations of the findings pertaining to HL learning and learners in its own right, and not just in comparison to the other types of foreign language learning and learners. Also, the very stance underlines an argument that the traditional pedagogical practices in foreign language education in formal settings may not be of much use for and help fully support the HL learners in learning and maintaining their HLs (Wright & Bayram, 2016).

Researching the HL learners in Japan would not require many different approaches from what has been done in other parts of the world for the other types of HL learner populations. Nevertheless, as a newly-emerging research site, several issues deserve attention as to HL learning and learners in Japan, especially as a country that has traditionally not welcomed immigrants. There has not been a systematic investigation as to the demographics of HL learners especially at the level of higher education. Another research agenda concerns the social and educational factors that have an impact on the HL learners' success in learning the target language. In relation to this second research agenda are the roles that the HL learners' identities play in learning and maintaining the HLs. It is not yet clear how the HL learners position their identities in the context of Japan and how the identities change and relate to other learner characteristics such as motivation and self-efficacy. The answers to these questions will shed light on understanding the HL learners and building support systems for them and their families.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

Throughout the paper, we examined a couple of critical issues concerning the HL learners and their learning. In doing so, we attempted to identify the challenges those learners may face in their HL learning in the context of Japan. HL education has been grounded

with its firm foundation as a field of scientific inquiry clearly distinguishable from the traditional bi- and multilingualism and foreign language pedagogy. However, there are far more important research agendas that require applications of society- and country-specific inquiries. Japan, especially, in light of its ever-growing immigrant populations and foreign residents that enable the globalization of the country, has so far seen few systematic attempts to understand the HL learners' sociolinguistic characteristics and the context in which they are situated in the formal educational settings.

We, therefore, call for a concerted research effort to contextualize the issues of HL education as an area of imperative investigation in Japan. It is essential to correctly identify and understand who the HL learners are in the socio-historical, educational, and political contexts, how they perceive and interpret themselves in society, and what their needs are pertaining to their own HL learning. Such an effort will provide us with valid means to, what Cummins (2014) once called for, “fully educating them” by helping us devise effective pedagogical approaches to HL education. It will also assist stakeholders to establish an academic support system that can promote their growth as global citizens as well as national resources that can contribute to the society.

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