Diana Scalera
Language Association Journal
Vol. 55, No. 2

The Invisible Learner: Unlocking the Heritage Language Treasure

Sometimes a treasure is right in front of our eyes but there can be insurmountable obstacles placed in our path to obscure its view. Our students' heritage language competencies are one such treasure. This article will discuss the impact of heritage languages on student success and some small steps that every teacher can take to ensure that her students' talents and abilities are recognized, honored and enriched with or without specific heritage programs.

According to Census 2000(a), 28 percent of New York State's population speaks a language other than English in their homes. Only 3,500,000 heritage speakers live in New York City. The rest, 8,500,000, are scattered across New York State. Our population averages 10 percentage points higher than the national average in number of people who speak a language other than English at home (2000[b]). In spite of the overwhelming numbers of heritage speakers residing in New York State, the phrase "heritage language" is still not well known. This lack of awareness may have an impact in our classrooms but is understandable in light of the general national antipathy toward speakers of languages other than English in the United States. Even those of us who make it our business to promote languages other than English in our schools are sometimes unaware of how deep and damaging this ignorance can be. However, with a little insight and understanding of the issues involved, the treasure locked in our classrooms, can be opened and shared.

There are many definitions of heritage language learners in the current literature. They fall into two basic categories. Some are based on a pre-existing proficiency in a language spoken in the home (Valdés 2000) and others are based on sociolinguistic criteria such as "a particular family relevance to the learner" that Fishman puts forward (2001). This article will use John Webb's vision that broadens the definition even further, at the same time, suggests a more holistic pedagogical response. He explains that a heritage language learner is "... someone who has a personal, emotional connection to a language other than English. Somewhere in their personal history there is a link to that language that is important" (2003). This definition acknowledges the power of language and culture to shape our thoughts and self-definition. It also asks educators to enter into a realm that we rarely consider—something we can neither measure or quantify—how students' personal and emotional connections to their heritage impacts on their success in school.

My own experience as a heritage learner is a good example. I cannot speak, read, write or understand Italian even though I grew up in a home where Italian was spoken by my mother and grandmother. The only time they used Italian was at 5:30 in the morning before everyone else was awake. Their main topic of discussion was matters concerning our extended family. My bedroom was off the kitchen where these conversations took place. My mother and grandmother thought that I was sleeping and couldn't understand what they were saying. During these conversations I was usually able to understand the essence of what they were saying and was always far ahead of everyone else on family gossip. One morning, for example, my mother revealed that she was pregnant with her fourth child. She said it in Italian and I understood it. I also understood that I had a certain power having access to family secrets that no one knew I had. I have no measurable functional abilities in Italian, however, some of my most powerful childhood memories occurred in that language.

The ability to understand my mother and grandmother's conversations helped me in my foreign language classes even though I never studied Italian. Foreign language was my favorite subject. I was very comfortable with my teacher speaking in the target language and I easily recognized cognates of both English and Italian. I found that I often pronounced Spanish words as if they were Italian words and, because I had no problem with vowel sounds, I easily lost a 'gringa' accent.

Many language teachers know from experience that some of their students learn foreign languages easily because of a heritage background. In my Spanish as a foreign language classes in New York City, some of my non- Spanish speaking heritage students are my most successful learners[1]. They have many of the same characteristics that I had as a language learner. Moreover, for many of them, English is their second language and they are already experienced L2 learners. For other heritage students, however, the story is not always the same.

I was asked to take over a second semester Spanish class. The teacher had had it. Most of the students were failing and she was sending as many as she could to the detention room. When I entered the room, the students weren't sure if I were the "big gun" sent in to tame them or just another teacher who would give up on them. There were serious behavior problems. Students spent most of their time "dissing" each other. When I listened to what they were saying, it

[1] My school has a program for Spanish heritage learners. spanish, Chinese, Polish, Russian and Tagalog are the most spoken languages in my school.

mostly revolved around race and ethnicity. Most students were immigrants from many different countries. I did my best to ensure that instruction happened by assigning as much work as possible. From the very beginning, however, I noticed that I could conduct the entire class in Spanish without any complaints that my instructions were not understood or that "we don't know Spanish, Miss." I was also teaching a sixth semester Spanish class at the same time in which these complaints were frequent.

On Career Day, a professor from a Vermont college who had grown up in New York City and was herself an immigrant, came to speak to the class as someone who had "made it." She made some very derogatory remarks about people who live in public housing. Most of the students in the class lived in public housing. The students joined together and let the speaker know that her comments were unwelcome. It was the first moment that the students felt like they had something in common with each other. After the speaker left, I saw an opening to start a discussion about the "dissing" that students engaged in and how it reflected that same kind of prejudice that the speaker had displayed. I asked the students to consider that they needed to begin seeing each other as allies because they had many things in common.

A few days later, when I asked students to go up to the board to write out some class work, one student took more time than the rest. He was writing his name under his class work in Chinese characters. I praised him for sharing his characters with us. Almost immediately, the rest of the class that had work on the board, got up and wrote their names in Chinese, Urdu, Arabic, Bengali, Korean, and Russian. It finally dawned on me that these students, who had mostly failed Spanish up until now, were students whose first language did not use the roman alphabet. I stopped at what each student wrote and asked them about how much they knew about their language. Most said they only knew how to write their names. One student from a Polish family asked if she could write "I love you" in Polish instead of her name because she wanted to write something that would look different from English. My Haitian student also wrote a phrase he knew in Haitian-Creole. What happened in that moment was that these students asked to be recognized for what they knew in other languages. Instead of being failing Spanish students, they emerged as children with complicated and diverse linguistic competencies.

From that point on, when I taught something in Spanish, we spent time discussing how the same concept was expressed in the languages present in the class. Some students were more expressive than others in their abilities to reflect on their own language. Only a few at a time would have something to say. Students also began expressing a desire to learn each other's languages.

I also modified instruction. The class was run mostly in Spanish, much the way entry level English as a Second Language classes are taught. We read short stories that were written in very modified Spanish and students wrote similar stories using their readings as models. I evaluated students based on their effort and completion of assigned work and did not use discrete grammar point tests. When students wrote using model paragraphs, they were quite successful not only using grammatical structures but also incorporating new vocabulary. My failing Spanish students started to use what they knew about language learning—they were already successful English language learners—to learn Spanish. By changing my approach, my students began taking an interest in their work. Unfortunately, the "dissing" continued, however, at a much reduced rate. The deeply ingrained stereotypes created behaviors that were not easily changed.

While many communities in New York State claim not to have heritage learners among their students, Fishman (2001) documents how heritage languages have been, and continue to be, a part of the social interaction in North America since European languages began migrating here over three hundred years ago. The Census 2000 statistics also support his argument. The avoidance of recognizing and honoring heritage language competencies is part of the message of invisibility that students internalize within months of entering the school system.

Foreign language teachers can have a big impact on heritage learners' academic success. This does not mean that one has to take on the school board or the principal. It simply can mean identifying who our heritage students are and tailoring our instruction to include their instructional needs.

The volume, *Teaching Heritage Language Learners: Voices from the Classroom*, was the result of a three-year collaboration of several educators, administrators and students who wanted to investigate how schools and teacher preparation programs could tailor instruction to the needs of heritage learners. This work was jointly funded by Hunter College, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FISPE) and focused on Spanish-speaking and Haitian-Creole-speaking students. The team involved in this project learned that students and teachers were some of the best resources to guide teacher training and instruction of heritage students.

Applying that volume's *A Framework for Learning about Your Students* (Webb 2000 47-54) and the concept of confidence in the learner and practitioner, the documentary film, *I Speak Arabic*, investigates the relationship of Arabic speakers in the United States to their language. The documentary also encourages parents, and community leaders to participate in the discussion. The filmmakers asked Arabic speakers, who are generally a small minority in any setting, what would have helped them to maintain and enrich their proficiency in Arabic. Their responses fell into four main categories

of recommendations. These recommendations are applicable to all heritage learners, not only Arabic speakers. The interviews quoted below appear in the film or are part of the raw footage that went into making the film.

Find Out What Languages Our Students Speak

Schools in New York State ask for and record home language information as part of their compliance with laws regulating services for immigrant children. This is the first time parents and students experience being "other" in the American school system. Parents often fear that if they report that a language other than English is spoken at home, their children will be relegated to a lifetime in ESL programs or, worse, Special Education (Farhat). These programs are helpful when they are appropriate to a student's needs but are very damaging to a student's self-esteem if the placement is based on stereotypes rather than a particular child's real needs. Majed Samarneh, president of the Arab American Council, reported that one of the services that his organization offered was to advocate with school districts on the behalf of Arab American students. In the 1970's, Arab American students were routinely placed in Special Education programs. The Arab American Council was able to educate and sensitize local school districts to the issues facing Arab immigrants and finds fewer problems today (2003).

If home language information is not available to a teacher, she can find out which students have a heritage background from the students themselves. Students, however, might not be forthcoming with this information until they understand their teacher's motives. Many heritage speakers have had very negative experiences when they reveal that they have a language or home life that isn't 100% American. Carmen Khair reports that she learned quite early that speaking Arabic was not "cool." What would have helped her was not only support for her heritage language but also some support to help her classmates understand that knowing a language other than English was desirable (2003).

Advocate for Programs that Help Heritage Speakers Enrich their Talents

Where there are small numbers of students in any particular language group a separate heritage program might be unreasonable. Heritage students in foreign language class, however, can be supported by their teacher's efforts to reflect on society's attitudes toward speakers of other languages. Most importantly, the teacher needs to show leadership in the classroom by showing appreciation for language skills and cultural knowledge that is ignored, and even disdained by many in our country. A small shift in this direction can mean that failing students may become more successful. All students will be helped by learning about, and showing respect for, the cultures they come in contact with every day, not just the sometimes "mythical" language and culture they are learning in their classes.

Special care, however, needs to be taken with heritage students who are in classes that teach their heritage language. A teacher who is unwilling to accept that her students may have some information that is equally as important as what the teacher presents will have a damaging effect on the student's self-esteem. I have interviewed many Spanish heritage speakers who report that a Spanish teacher was the worst teacher they ever had. With very little probing, tales of being told that their version of Spanish was not valid or appropriate emerge and usually are accompanied by some very strong emotions. Once again, recognizing what students know, asking for their contributions and support, helps everyone. As teachers, we can learn more about the language and culture we are teaching, other students will learn to have respect for an actual speaker of the language, and the heritage speaker will feel recognized and supported for the cultural knowledge and linguistic skills she brings to the class.

Teach a Curriculum that Reflects the Cultures of all our Students

The students in *I Speak Arabic* reported that their culture was underrepresented in their school's curriculum and daily life. Not only did this feel unfair to them because they are acutely aware of the role their culture plays in the world political arena, but also it ensured that their classmates also remained unaware of their culture's importance. Some schools limit their recognition of heritage cultures to a yearly "multicultural" festival. There are more substantial ways, however, to include a group's culture. Maher Saleh suggested that if Arabic were studied by non-Arab students it might just help people to understand each other a little bit more (2003). Amany Hajyassin recommended that community leaders or the students themselves should be allowed to present their culture, history and language from their own perspective (2003). This can be done in the foreign language class but should also be done in science, art, social studies, math and English classes. Foreign language teachers can be the catalyst for the inclusion of other cultures in a meaningful way into their school's culture.

Partner with Parents and Community Groups

If there is even a small number of students from a particular language group in a district, there will probably be an organization that will advocate for that group's needs or provide social or religious support. These organizations often

have events that are open to the public. Our schools could help advertise these events and encourage staff and students to attend. The good will created by attending even one event is immeasurable. Leaders of these organizations also can be sought out to participate in school-based management committees and other consultative bodies in a district to ensure that their culture is represented and their children are treated fairly. Non-heritage members of the community also might find their lives somewhat enriched by this contact.

Conclusion

There seems to be two conflicting messages in this article. Heritage students have an advantage in foreign language classes and heritage students are at a disadvantage in foreign language classes. While these ideas may seem to be contradictory, they are not, in fact. Both can be true at the same time. A hypothesis being put forward by this article is that a heritage student who is treated with respect for her linguistic and cultural knowledge and taught in ways that tap into her special linguistic competencies will excel in a foreign language class while a student whose heritage knowledge is ignored is less likely to be successful. One should also consider the impact of heritage languages that do not use the roman alphabet in classes that teach romance languages even when those writing systems are virtually unknown to the students. Research could possibly shed some light on these issues. In the meantime, teachers should test these ideas in their own classrooms and reflect on, and write about the results.

John Webb's definition of a heritage learner is not a neat one. It does not lend itself to a paper and pencil check-off or a standardized assessment. These are the kinds of assessments teachers and administrators are driven to devise given the little time allotted to placement assessment. His vision requires other ways of getting to know our learners that resemble more of a process rather than a goal.

The theme for the 2004 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Language was Listening to Learners. It set the stage for a discussion about how we will get to know our students in the 21st Century. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, the *Modern Languages for Communication: New York State Syllabus* and *New York State Learning Standards for Languages other than English* can be adapted so that the content of our lessons can include, on a regular basis, our students lives and their cultural information rather than the lives of the fictitious people presented in our textbooks. Foreign language teachers are in a unique position. We have the most clues on our heritage language treasure map. We can lead the way among our faculties in creating a welcoming atmosphere for all children, especially heritage learners. This can only be done by honoring what our students bring to the learning environment and validating the real cultures that are part of our communities today.

Works Cited

Census 2000(a).
Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000. Geographic Area: New York.
http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_ts=77454371468

Census 2000(b).
QT-P16 Languages Spoken at Home: 2000. Geographic Area: United States.
http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=D&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U_QTP16&-ds_name=D&-_lang=en

Farhat, Lillian. Interview. Dir. Diana Scalera. Raw Footage. 2003.

Fishman, Joshua. "300-Plus Years of Heritage Language Education in the United States."
Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource.
Eds. Joy Kreeft Peyton, Donald A. Ranard and Scott McGinnis. McHenry, IL:
Center of Applied Linguistics and Delta Publishing Systems, Co. (2001): 81-97.

Khair, Carmen. interview.
I Speak Arabic. Dir. Diana Scalera.
http://ispeakarabic.org/. Video, 2003.

Samarneh, Majed. Interview. Dir. Diana Scalera. Raw Footage. 2002.

Valdés. Guadalupe. "Introduction." In Spanish for Native Speakers.
AATSP Professional Development Series Handbook for Teachers K-16,
Volume 1. (2000): 1-20.

Webb, John B. Interview.
I Speak Arabic. Dir. Diana Scalera.
http://ispeakarabic.org/. Video 2003.

Webb. John B. and Barbara L. Miller, eds. "A Framework for Learning about your Students."
Teaching Heritage Language Learners: Voices from the Classroom.
Yonkers, NY: ACTFL. (2000): 47-54.