Heritage Language Instruction in the 21st Century

Diana C. Pérez, Institute of Technology, Syracuse City School District

Abstract

This article examines the policy, administrative, and classroom level reforms that could improve the field of Foreign Language instruction for heritage language learners in the United States. In light of the fact that the American society is increasingly more culturally and linguistically diverse, it is important for educators and policy makers to revise strategies for meeting the needs of this group of learners. This topic has implications for educators of all languages in the Foreign Language field, as well as English-as-a-Second-Language and Bilingual teachers.

Introduction

If we are to truly give every child a fair chance at a quality education, we must take the time to recognize and nurture the assets they bring to the learning experience. Some students have strong artistic abilities, others have athletic prowess, and still others have been given the gift of being raised in a multilingual environment. These students, and their abilities to learn and use languages other than English, have been ignored for far too long. It is now time to honor the rich cultural experiences such students have hidden within them, not just to help our country in times of international crisis, and not just so that such students can successfully learn English, but so that these children truly can have an equal and fair education that incorporates and celebrates their heritage. We must change the soil in which these students grow. The literature backs it up, ideas from the policy level to the classroom level abound, and federal budget allocations encourage it. Now is the time to revisit foreign language instruction with an eye towards heritage language instruction.

Literature Review

In the recent past, literature concerning language learning has attempted to define heritage languages in the United States and to identify heritage language learners and their unique needs. Two publications in particular (Cho, Shin, & Krashen, 2004; Wiley, 2005) give definitions of heritage languages and heritage language learners. Others note the importance of understanding American history as part of the process of defining heritage languages (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). The discussion over what to call such languages and those who speak them, as well as how to educate such individuals, is entangled in issues of immigration, nationality, and English language preservation here in the United States. Syed and Burnett (1999) argue that our opinion must shift from one that sees speakers of such languages as having an English language deficit to one that sees their native language skills as an asset. Other researchers offer suggestions for policy makers concerning the changes that need to happen at the federal, state, and local levels in order to adequately address the needs of heritage language learners. At the local administrative level, there are also some practical suggestions for school districts to consider as they develop heritage language programs. For example, many authors (Anderson, 2008; Blake & VanSickle, 2001; Christian, 2007; Ortega, 1999; Shonle & Thompson, 1999; Wiley, 2005) highlight the importance of making meaningful community connections.

Defining Heritage Languages and Heritage Language Learners

It is worthwhile to consider the definitions of *heritage language* and *heritage language learner* as a baseline for further discussion throughout this paper. Cho, Shin and Krashen (2004) define heritage languages as “languages spoken by the children of immigrants or by those who immigrated to a country when young” (p. 23). Wiley (2005) expanded this definition by adding

"refugee, and indigenous languages, as well as former colonial languages" (p. 595). I will refer to such languages as heritage languages or, alternately, HL throughout this paper. Other terminology frequently referenced in the literature includes "minority languages" and "community languages." However, I have chosen to use heritage language because of its frequent use in the literature, and because it reminds us that language is part of a person's familial heritage and should not be forgotten, just as we do not forget our predecessors. Individuals who speak such languages will, therefore, be referred to as heritage language learners. In our local communities in the United States, these are the adults and children who speak a language other than English in the home, and who enjoy conversation, literature, news, movies, religious and cultural celebrations, and music in any number of languages besides English. They may or may not speak, read, or write the language of their home country fluently.

The term *heritage language* has only recently begun to be used (Cummins, 2005; Wiley, 2005), despite the fact that issues of language and language acquisition have long existed in our country. This is likely due to: historical and political factors, the fact that language learning covers various academic fields, each of which have their own jargon (foreign language instruction, cognition, linguistics), and the fact that speakers of such languages may identify themselves using different terms than do academics (Wiley, 2005).

It is clear that speakers of heritage languages are not a homogeneous group. Some are immigrants born abroad; others are the first or second generation born in the United States. Some become proficient in reading, writing, and speaking the heritage language during childhood. Others, while ethnically tied to a certain heritage language community, may have little to no proficiency in the language. These are the students that Cho, Shin, and Krashen (2004) refer to when they state that "by the time second generation HL speakers reach high school, they are dominant in the majority language" (p. 24), not their heritage language. Finally, an individual who speaks a heritage language may have varying degrees of proficiency in said language throughout his or her lifetime. Studies suggest that, unfortunately, "HL competence declines with age" (p. 24).

Heritage Language as Resource

Although individuals who speak heritage languages are difficult to define, there is no doubt that this country's mindset regarding heritage languages is in desperate need of change if we are to live up to our democratic ideals and continue to compete on a global level. For example, according to Robinson, Rivers, and Brecht (2006),

> Research on the LOE [Languages other than English] readiness of the national security community, as well as on the overall LOE capacity of the United States, has revealed significant deficits in LOE skills, as well as clear needs for more professionals with increased levels of proficiency in more languages. (p. 458)

As educators, we must begin to view heritage language students as assets in our classroom. In a broader sense, we must understand that heritage language speakers contribute to our neighborhoods, enrich our way of life, and strengthen our country. Recognizing the assets that heritage language learners bring to our classrooms will help us reach our goals.

Unfortunately, heritage language maintenance is currently intertwined with the often-heated debate over immigration reform. This affects heritage language learners across the board, no matter what language they speak. According to Cummins (2005), "a major reason for the lack of coherent policy in relation to heritage languages is that the issue has been submerged within the volatile debates about bilingual education and the frequently xenophobic discourse about immigration and linguistic diversity generally" (p. 586). Foreign language teachers, particularly

teachers of Spanish and of Hispanic students, must understand this. It is no longer acceptable for a foreign language teacher not to understand the political realities in which her students are growing up.

Jasso-Aguilar (1999) points to the issue of bilingual education as evidence of one such political reality when she states that,

> In the United States bilingual education has been likely to be accepted in areas where language minority-groups had influence, and to be rejected where they had none…[furthermore] official acceptance or rejection of bilingualism in American schools has been dependent upon whether the group involved is considered politically and socially acceptable. (p. 7)

Unfortunately, in such instances where the group is not highly regarded, their language is likely to be either passively ignored or actively driven out. With the exception of certain dual language programs, the U.S. as a country conducts bilingual education in a way that reflects an underlying theory about heritage language students. Such "deficiency theories essentially claim that something is wrong with language minority students and that they need to be 'fixed' through compensatory types of programs" (Syed & Burnett, 1999, p. 52).

These and other political considerations affect both teachers and students. Teachers of Hispanic students are already faced with providing meaningful Spanish language instruction in the U.S. amidst misconceptions about the immigrant population. In the future, political considerations that involve China and speakers of Chinese are likely to increase, given the growth of China's economy. Those who speak Arabic have faced increased scrutiny in the United States since September 11th, yet our country needs more Arabic speaking citizens These factors affect teachers and students, as well as our country as a whole. In short, the United States, can no longer expect people from other countries to master English while holding fast to a monolingual, ethnocentric way of life on our shores.

This, of course, has implications for teachers in the classroom. When school districts, for example, ignore the need to provide classes for heritage language learners, and instead put them in regular foreign language classrooms, what they are saying to students, in effect, is "your language needs are irrelevant." When they fail to train teachers in teaching languages for heritage language learners, they convey the message that teaching such students is the same as teaching students enrolled in traditional foreign language classes. Unfortunately, "without an explicit understanding of context and the politics of teaching languages, teachers are left without tools to resist hegemonic practices in language education that discriminate against minority language students" (Ortega, 1999, p. 23). Teachers themselves are guilty when they do not make time to differentiate instruction (although in fairness most have not been trained in specific strategies) or when they insist on the use of standard versions of languages without regard for the versions with which students most associate (Wiley, 2005). It is important for foreign language, bilingual, and English-as-a-Second-Language teachers to be trained in as well as to practice strategies for recognizing and valuing heritage languages in the classroom. Otherwise, students can lose their native language in the process of learning English. Such strategies, which view heritage language students as an asset rather than a detriment to instruction, are discussed further in the Practical Suggestions section of this paper.

Policy Changes

Perhaps the first set of changes that need to occur in order for heritage languages and HL learners to be seen as an asset in this country are at the national level. The United States' lack of a national language policy has been well documented (Bretch, 2007; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003;

Wiley, 2007). This lack of cohesion has led to various problems within the language learning community. For example, English has never been designated as the official language of the United States. Therefore, each time that bilingual education or language rights are brought up on a national level, debates about immigration and "losing the English language identity" flare up. Wiley (2007) points out, for example, that "opponents of immigration…contend that increased language diversity among immigrants threatens the hegemony of English although the size of recent immigration as a percentage of the total U.S. population is less today than at many other times in our history" (p. 252).

Bretch (2007) suggests that, "in order to transform the language competence of its citizens, it will be necessary for the United States to launch an explicit, long-term, and pragmatic national language education effort" (p. 264). Such an effort would likely include a review of everything from the existing language courses offered to the pre-service training that teachers get before entering the classroom. Roca (2003) suggests that the effort include "a professionally organized and well-coordinated public relations and lobbying campaign that aims to educate the general public, legislators, and other governmental representatives about the societal value of all language learning" (p. 588). Van Deusen-Scholl (2003) suggests that

> Rather than merely reacting to the specific demands of the current crisis, we build a solid foundation of foreign language skills across the population that can serve the future needs of the nation. This would entail promoting both foreign language learning by speakers of English and heritage language maintenance and development by speakers of other languages. (p. 225)

Several authors (Brecht, 2007; Christian, Pufahi, & Rhodes, 2000) have suggested more specific reform. Brecht (2007) proposes a national policy that works toward three goals:

> (a) an educated citizenry aware of the role of language and culture in the world and in human cognition, (b) a broad base of school graduates with functional foreign language skills, and (c) a cadre of advanced language specialists capable of the highest level of linguistic and cultural performance. (p. 264)

For this to be successful, the federal government would need to establish a national commitment to early instruction of languages other than English (LOTE). Christian et al. (2000) suggest the "Federal government can take a leadership role in developing long-term policies for teacher training, can create incentives for school districts to develop elementary LOTE instruction, and can fund a detailed research agenda" (p. 2).

Locally, teachers can begin to have conversations with administrators about the possibility of modifying courses to meet students' needs. Also, teachers can get involved with professional associations (e.g., American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), letter writing campaigns, or other activities which bring the importance of the issue to light for politicians and strengthen the field through mutual support.

Educators can also do a better job of reaching out to opponents of bilingualism. Unfortunately, issues such as immigration get entangled with foreign language instruction or bilingual education, and the real value of learning another language is lost. As Jasso-Aguilar (1999) points out, "when linguistic pluralism is regarded as a problem, there are broader issues at stake than just language differences" (p. 7). Some think we will lose our identity as Americans if we continue to allow classes to be taught in languages other than English. Yet, early in our nation's history, "not only was it [multilingualism] accepted as a fact of life, but the Continental Congress accommodated significant groups of non-English speakers, publishing money and

official documents in German and French, including the Articles of the Confederation" (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999, p. 5).

Foreign language teachers are in a unique position of being able to teach cultural sensitivity to students while also educating other adults about the true effects (both positive and challenging) of embracing multiple languages in the United States. Again, this may mean stepping out of the role of teacher and becoming policy advocates at the local, state, and federal levels (Ortega, 1999) because

> the lack of political awareness among FL [foreign language] professionals not only fails the needs of multiculturalism and multilingualism among minority students, but it also harms the FL profession itself, in that the linguistic and cultural resources that minority students bring to educational settings remain untapped in most FL programs. (p. 21)

We must think of new ways we can and should help our students. While it is outside of the traditional role of the teacher, in many ways, it is equally, if not more important in the 21st century. What's more, if as educators we are asking our students to take risks in language learning, we should be willing to do the same in the political arena.

Practical Suggestions

On the practical side, there are several suggestions for improving language instruction for heritage language learners that school districts and teachers might consider. The first set of recommendations fall under the category of "administrative practices" that could be implemented at the school district level. The second group, which I am referring to as "classroom practices", represents strategies teachers can implement in their own classrooms. Overall, districts "need to stop viewing language minority students as deficient or academically unmotivated, and recognize that language minority students are a language resource that can contribute to American education, diplomacy, and international business" (Syed & Burnett, 1999, p. 57).

For example, the events of September 11, 2001 brought to light this country's lack of trained professionals who speak languages such as Arabic. Suddenly, the government was scrambling to find U.S. citizens who spoke such languages. As recently as October 2009, however, Savage reported that "the F.B.I.'s collection of wiretapped phone calls and intercepted e-mail has been soaring in recent years, but the bureau is failing to review 'significant amounts' of such material partly for lack of translators" (www.nytimes.com). It is clear that if we are to equip future generations in a global economy, we must recognize our own country's linguistic deficits and revise our language instruction accordingly. A paradigm shift starting at the policy level and accompanied by visible administrative and classroom level changes needs to occur since "foreign language education can no longer confine itself to serving majority English speakers, but needs to be responsible to the language education needs of (circumstantial) bilingual students, in order to respond to the alleged market demands of the U.S." (Ortega, 1999, p. 24). It would appear that the Obama administration is headed in this direction. Included in the recently released budget is $800 million for English Learning Education. Among the goals of this initiative is the encouragement of "bi-literacy to strengthen our global competitiveness" (http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/02/02032010.html).

Administrative practices. Several strategies may help school districts meet the needs of HL students while simultaneously preparing students for a global economy. First, school districts might determine what languages are spoken in their communities and what percentage such language communities make up in comparison to the population as a whole. This is changing on a regular basis in many communities and is worth revisiting often. It is also worthwhile to

consider which students are recent immigrants and which were born and raised in the United States. Equipped with such information, school districts can then tailor their LOTE instruction based on student need. For example, Pufahi, Rhodes, and Christian (2001) point out that schools may need to step out of the box and start grouping students based on language ability rather than grade.

It seems that establishing new courses is another promising way in which districts can take advantage of the rich socio-linguistic context of multi-lingual communities by creating appropriate language classes for heritage language learners or developing creative programming such as that found in dual language schools. Simply limiting heritage language learners to classes with the traditional American student, however, is no longer adequate pedagogy. Courses that focus on grammar and writing styles for heritage language learners such as Latin American literature or Chinese for business (medical/legal terminology) could challenge students to improve their HL skills.

An additional component of understanding the local culture is conducting an analysis of the nuanced language needs of students. In other words, districts should conduct a needs analysis. For example, it is no longer enough to ask a parent on an intake form, "Do you speak a language other than English at home?" This is because the fact that a parent speaks a language to a child does not necessarily mean that the child is proficient in the language. Students living in the United States who are of Hispanic descent, for example, can have a wide range of Spanish language proficiency. Some have excellent listening comprehension skills (probably because their parents speak to them in Spanish), but they cannot produce the language fluidly on their own in either verbal or written form. Also, there are differences between the needs and interests of recently arrived immigrant students as compared to first or second generation students. When possible, therefore, school districts should find out the true language needs, including the literacy levels of students in their heritage languages. They can do this by administering a test that includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks or by requesting sample work from the native country, if possible.

Schools can then design assessment tools to monitor and track the progress of student language learning in their heritage language as well as in English. As Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana (2010), United States Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, recently put it,

> We want our schools to have the tools to recognize the diversity of their EL [English Learner] populations and better differentiate their support of these students. We want our assessments and performance requirements to bring ELs into the mainstream accountability system—ensuring that their progress, needs and achievements are explicitly measured. (http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/02/02032010.html)

Districts may be able to hire a designated staff person, such as a teacher on special assignment to work directly with HL families to conduct initial assessments of a student's literacy level in their native language as well as in English. It seems logical that this assessment could occur as part of the English-as-a-Second-Language intake process. Making such changes will undoubtedly have an effect on school districts' bottom lines. In particular, budget allocations and staffing will need to be rearranged and in some districts, increased. Therefore, school district administrators need to be sensitive to the importance of improved foreign language instruction and must be willing to make tough decisions about budget allocations for such instruction.

Once districts understand the language community and its specific needs, they can begin to re-think language instruction. As school districts tackle curriculum revisions, they will likely

be challenged when trying to decide what specific courses to add to the curriculum. Wiley (2005) rightly identifies a question many districts are faced with, and that teachers have undoubtedly asked themselves: "How do languages get added to the K-12 curriculum, and who advocates for them?" (p. 599). Although there is no "one size fits all" answer to this question, the more that teachers and school districts can work on answering this question, the stronger language instruction will become and the better we will meet HL learners' needs.

One suggestion is to offer specific learning tracks or diplomas for successful second language acquisition (Christian, 2007). This would not only motivate English speaking students to achieve high levels of foreign language proficiency, but would also legitimize heritage language mastery for HL learners and motivate them to further expand their skills. In a broader sense, having a specialty diploma in language recognizes bilingualism as something worthwhile that should be supported and reinforced. The impact would be even greater if there were national policies to encourage colleges to recognize specialty diplomas. It seems likely that, given the disproportionate number of Hispanics that drop out of high school, such a change could lure some of them back into the classroom through a sense of pride in their culture and a desire to maintain ties through language. The International Baccalaureate's Diploma Program for 16-19 year olds is an example of one such specialty diploma that could be implemented in more school districts.

Christian (2007) offers several other suggestions for districts to consider. Such suggestions include, "opportunities to learn additional languages early…availability of immersion or other intensive language programs…building on heritage language skills by providing pathways for speakers of heritage languages that foster maintenance and development of those skills in our schools; and use of technology" (p. 272). To provide early opportunities for learning, school districts can start teaching foreign language in elementary schools using strategies that lead to proficiency in the language, rather than just exposure. Elementary schools could adopt the International Baccalaureate's Primary Years Programme, for example, to provide such opportunities. This program seems in line with Christian's suggestion to "encourage high-quality, well-articulated K-12 school-based programs that teach heritage languages for native speakers and second languages for all students" (p. 273).

Lastly, school districts and university schools of education need to reconsider the type of training that foreign language teachers receive. Anderson (2008) identified "…the importance of pre- and in-service professional development in equipping teachers of community languages with the theoretical understandings and practical skills they need to carry out their role effectively" (p. 295). Current training at most colleges offers little more than a mention of the fact that teachers will have heritage language learners in their classes. However, teachers need information about heritage language communities, strategies for teaching heritage language learners (including help in lesson planning), HL specific curricula, classroom resources, and ongoing feedback once they are in the classroom. Additionally, teachers should have significant cultural experience/exposure, outside of traditional college study abroad programs. On a positive note, textbook publishers have begun printing materials for heritage language learners. Finally, foreign language teachers would also benefit from working with bilingual and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers. While there are instructional differences inherent in each, there are opportunities for mutual benefit through dialogue. According to Assistant Secretary Meléndez (2010),

> In order to build teacher and principal leadership in regard to English language learners, we must focus on capacity-building and professional development. Teachers and school

> leaders need assistance with the assessments and instructional models that work best for such learners, and they need to understand the diversity within the English language learner population so that they can truly tailor instruction to specific needs and strengths. (http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/02/02032010.html)

Teachers and administrators need to understand, for example, that Chinese-born and American-born Chinese students have different language needs. Accommodating such needs can get messy when trying to fit heritage language classes into the current foreign language paradigm in most school districts, but it is important work. Therefore, everyone must be willing to work together and think creatively.

Classroom practices. District level changes provide the foundation and direction for what teachers need to do in their classrooms to adequately address heritage language learners' needs. At the same time, it is valuable for teachers of languages other than English to take a closer look at how they are teaching. If they have HL learners in their classes, they might ask themselves a series of questions such as: Do my HL learners say they are bored? Do they tell me that what I'm teaching is not "real" Spanish, French, etc.? Do they finish work quickly and then spend a significant amount of time socializing or doing something else? Are my HL learners frequently helping other students or serving as the translator/interpreter? Such questions may reveal the fact that we are not addressing the language needs of heritage language learners. As educators, we must be critical of our own instruction in order to truly teach and care for such students.

There are a few classroom strategies teachers could incorporate to address this problem; however, this is an area that has yet to be fully explored. One strategy is the use of literature to both engage HL learners and teach them the structures of their first language (Cho, Shin & Krashen, 2004; Salim Sehlaoui, 2008). Literature has an advantage over traditional textbook-driven foreign language methods in that it can involve student choice. Also, books that incorporate culture can increase self-pride among HL students. Salim Sehlaoui notes that literacy, specifically storytelling in the heritage language, "is a powerful tool in the hands of parents and educators" (p. 288).

Cummins (2005) suggests strategies that disregard the "monolingual instructional assumptions" (p. 587) that currently drive ESL, bilingual, and second language immersion programs. Such strategies advocate utilizing the heritage language *in conjunction* with English and could include:

> (a) Systematic attention to cognate relationships across languages; (b) creation of student-authored dual language books by means of translation from the initial language of writing to the L2; other multimedia and multilingual projects can also be implemented (e.g., creation of iMovies, PowerPoint presentations, etc.); (c) sister class projects where students from different language backgrounds collaborate using two or more languages. (p. 588)

The use of electronic media in teaching foreign languages has shown promising increases and is worth considering further, especially since "computer-based instructional materials are now used by over half of the secondary schools with foreign language programs" (Branaman & Rhodes, 1998, p. 6). Schools can continue to allocate resources for technology purchases, and teachers can take advantage of technology-based professional development in blogging, podcasting, SmartBoard use, etc. In the absence of well developed HL curricula, technology serves as a powerful tool in differentiating instruction for students who find that traditional foreign language classes do not challenge them or meet their needs. Christian, Pufahi, and

Rhodes (2000) note the comprehensive use of technology as one of the elements of foreign language instruction that works well in other countries stating, "innovative technologies and media are frequently cited as a way to increase access to information and entertainment in a foreign language, provide interaction with speakers of other languages, and improve foreign language teaching in the classroom" (p. 1).

A challenge often cited by foreign language teachers is that HL learners do not speak standard forms of the language they are teaching. Teachers perceive such dialects as "non-academic," while on the other hand, students feel that teachers are "not teaching real language." Blake and Van Sickle (2001) advocate teaching HL learners how to code the switch from their less traditional form of the language to more standard forms. This strategy recognizes the value of non-standard forms of language while encouraging students to become proficient in the standard form of the language. In short, it shows respect for what students bring to the classroom. Wiley (2005) suggests that teachers not insist on standard versions of languages because "teachers untrained in language variation may penalize students for attempting to transfer what they know, when the students' knowledge does not conform to the standard language conventions of the school-taught variety" (p. 597). After all, both forms of the language are useful for communication. Being proficient in the standard form of a language helps individuals interact on a global scale, which increases their marketability in the working world. At the same time, proficiency in non-standard versions of a given language is useful in day-to-day interactions at a more local or familial level.

Finally, Blake and Van Sickle (2001) suggest one-on-one coaching for students. In their study, such coaching included teachers meeting with students for "very brief mini-lessons addressing mechanics, descriptions, and lead-in paragraphs, dialogue about the status of ongoing work, actual writing, and sharing what was written" (p. 470). Another example of one-on-one coaching involves an innovative program conducted at a high school in Hawaii where Filipino HL high school students were recruited and trained to be tutors for foreign language university students (Shonle & Thompson, 1999). The program provided extensive one-on-one exposure for the foreign language student and increased the HL learner's sense of pride in themselves. Such a program would require significant resources and planning, but is an excellent example of how one district tapped into the language resources of HL learners for the benefit of the community as a whole. The program could be replicated at the high school level by pairing HL learners with traditional foreign language students. Specific classroom practices that could be incorporated include: "listening to, translating, and/or singing songs, watching and discussing movies, and reading and discussing magazines, comics, and serial novels…[and] communicative language activities such as *Spot the Difference* and *Picture Story Sequences*" (p. 91).

Community Connections

Underpinning any strategy used in the classroom is the recommendation that teachers of HL learners make connections with the heritage language community (Christian, 2007; Wiley, 2005; Blake & VanSickle, 2001; Shonle & Thompson, 1999; Anderson, 2008; Ortega, 1999). This is particularly important because as Ortega (1999) points out, current scholarship is overly concerned with methods and not concerned enough with societal issues and community connections. As someone who worked in the Hispanic community prior to becoming a Spanish teacher, I was surprised at the lack of coursework or professional development that described the local Spanish-speaking community or provided opportunities for teachers to engage with it. I have also witnessed colleagues who have struggled with HL learners because the students criticized the teacher's "formal" Spanish, while the teacher complained that she could not

understand the students' "street" Spanish. Therefore, since "dialect diversity and community culture are closely related…future teachers need to be exposed to many different cultures and dialects" (Blake & VanSickle, 2001, 471). Wiley (2005) argues that "educators need to gain some understanding of the different roles that various languages play in the community and different attitudes towards them" (p. 597).

One way that districts can encourage community connections is by requiring "effective articulation between community-based programs and schools, and partnerships where possible, including official recognition of the achievements of students" (Christian, 2007, p. 273). Communities that have weekend or evening language schools, for example, can work to connect school districts with such programs to develop ways to include non-traditional instruction in the traditional curricula. In New York State, current foreign language requirements require refugee students to successfully complete three years of foreign language instruction in order to receive a Regents diploma. This requirement disregards both whether or not that student is proficient in his/her native language and his/her level of English proficiency. Therefore, a teenage refugee student from Iraq, for example, who has been in the country a short while could be faced with having to learn English and Spanish simultaneously in order to obtain a Regents diploma, with no regard for his/her existing Arabic language skills. A community-based language program could validate students' skills in their heritage language and work with districts to allow students to earn credit. This may require existing programs, such as Chinese Saturday school, and local school districts to collaborate and share ideas.

Shonle and Thompson's (1999) review of The Foreign Language Partnership Project, in which Filipino high school HL students tutored university foreign language students, offers several examples of ways in which schools and communities can collaborate. One such example is having "tutors and tutees [meet] in Filipino or Samoan homes or community establishments such as restaurants" (p. 90). This gives foreign language students an opportunity to connect with heritage language learners, and is in line with National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, which state that "students use the language both within and beyond the school setting" (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2009, Communities section, para. 2). Even if establishing a formal tutoring program is not possible, teachers can arrange for heritage language speakers to visit their classrooms to have conversations with students. Teachers can also learn more about local cultural events that include dancing, food, or holidays, and create lesson plans or field trips incorporating such events. Cultural events also represent excellent opportunities to involve HL learners and their parents in classroom planning (Anderson, 2008).

Importantly, while there are several cultural ideas and a few classroom practices that have the potential to be powerful tools in teaching heritage language learners, little attention is paid to differentiating instruction in classrooms that have a mixture of heritage language learners and traditional English-speaking foreign language students. Given the increasing diversity of society in the United States, due in large part to significant immigration from Spanish speaking countries, it seems prudent for school districts and colleges of education to begin developing classroom strategies and curricula to adequately meet the needs of this population. Armed with such resources, teachers can then be adequately trained, heritage language learners can be empowered, and the country as a whole can benefit from the assets that heritage language learners bring to the table.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to outline policy, administrative, and classroom level suggestions for teaching heritage language learners. This article also explains how the elements

necessary for effective and meaningful foreign language instruction in the 21st century are available to educators in the United States. It underscores how important it is for the United States to reform the foreign language field. Such reform has implications for both the field of education (K-16) as a whole, and for communities across the country.

I have written this article based on my research and experiences teaching Spanish and working in the Hispanic community in Central New York and beyond. I am sure, though, that my challenges and concerns are not unique. Other teachers throughout the U.S. and in other countries where foreign language instruction has not caught up with population growth and diversification must have experienced similar situations. The challenge, therefore, is that given the many ways in which we could improve foreign language instruction, we have not yet had a full scale overhaul of the field. What we are left to deduce is that something is still holding us back from reforming foreign language education in this country. It would seem that what we need is the following:

More Qualified Professionals

Educators need to be better prepared to teach heritage language learners at all levels. Colleges of education should consider enhancing their curricula to include strategies for working with heritage language learners, information about local heritage language communities, and classroom experience with heritage language learners. Also, teachers need to be proactive in educating themselves about the heritage language community they serve and its strengths/challenges, as well as the broader political issues that affect certain ethnic groups. Foreign language educators will need to participate in broader discussions about culture and language as they affect the lives of students. As educators, it is our duty to strive to understand what impacts our students' learning by asking ourselves questions such as: Why are Latinos more likely to drop out of high school than other minority groups? Could changing the way we teach Spanish contribute to solving this problem? If so, how? Why are Chinese-born and American-born Chinese students painted with the same broad brush? Are there differences between these groups of students that need addressing in our Foreign Language curriculum from K-16? How can colleges meet the needs of students who arrive with extensive exposure to Chinese through community programs? How do we view speakers of Arabic and teaching Arabic in light of the past ten years of war in the Middle East? What does that say about how we feel about this group of learners? Are our students prepared for the global job market?

A Change in the Way We Think about Dialect Variations

The foreign language field can be said to have distinguished itself from the average person's dialect by claiming that it was teaching "proper" language. However, the reality in most of our lives is that we are familiar with and even use various dialects to communicate. The field as a whole should embrace this fact and recognize that students come to the classroom with rich experiences, no matter what dialect they use to describe such experiences. Instead of chastising students for using such dialects, we should build upon what students already know and learn from each other. Teachers themselves must embrace linguistic diversity. Additionally, we must realize that heritage language learners are not a homogenous group. Considerations must be taken for particular individuals and immigrant groups. We must adequately asses our students' heritage language abilities. For some communities, this may mean seeking out tools and personnel to administer language tests. Dialect variations and strategies for teaching students from diverse backgrounds must be included in teacher training. Change, therefore, will need to take on a distinctly local flavor. Heritage language instruction in an Upstate New York county, such as Onondaga County, would be distinctly different from New York City, given the fact that

the population is only 3 percent Hispanic and only 2.5 percent Asian in Onondaga County while it is nearly 28 percent Hispanic and 12 percent Asian in New York City (www.census.gov).

More Funding

Funding is needed on three fronts. First, teachers must be better trained and at least part of this training will fall on school districts. Current teachers who lack the skills necessary to teach heritage language students must be retrained. Also, programming should be expanded to allow for early introduction of languages other than English. This will mean hiring additional teachers and creating curricula. Finally, funding is needed to purchase relevant materials for teaching heritage learners. Unfortunately, with so much funding going toward standards-based education in the past decade, such considerations were largely ignored.

Political Will

While it would seem that political will is headed in the right direction at the national level, there is still much that educators could do at the local level to be ambassadors for the students they teach and the cultures they represent. As educators we can get involved in helping to create the environments that best foster meaningful learning for all students. The implication for us all is that we must step out of our traditional classroom roles and work to create fertile soil in which our students can learn and grow. We will be the ones to create solutions to solve underlying problems or misconceptions. We can encourage administrators to consider curriculum changes and then step up to do the legwork. We can try new strategies in our classes and reflect upon how effective they are. We can encourage colleagues, students, friends, and family to begin seeing heritage languages and heritage language learners as resources. We can make connections with communities and people who are different from ourselves. Finally, we can embrace the richness heritage language learners bring to the classroom by recognizing that when planted in the right soil, they will grow and flourish.

References

Anderson, J. (2008). Pre- and in-service professional development of teachers of community/heritage languages in the UK: Insider perspectives. *Language and Education*, *22*(4), 283-297. doi:10.2167/le769.0

Blake, M. & Van Sickle, M. (2001). Helping linguistically diverse students share what they know. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *44*(5), 468-475.

Branaman, L., & Rhodes, N. (1998) Foreign Language Instruction in Elementary and Secondary Schools. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Brecht, R. (2007). National language educational policy in the nation's interest: Why? How? Who is responsible for what? *The Modern Language Journal*, *91*(2), 264-265.

Burnett, A. & Syed, Z. (1999). Acculturation, identity, and language: Implications for language minority education. *Foreign language teaching and language minority education*. (Technical Report No. 19).

Cho, G., Krashen, K., & Shin, F. (2004). What do we know about heritage languages? What do we need to know about them? *Multicultural Education, 11*(4), 23-26.

Christian, D. (2007). Charting a path to bilingualism: Policy and practice support. *The Modern Language Journal*, *91*(2), 271-273.

Christian, D., Pufahi, I., & Rhodes, N.C. (2000). *Foreign Language Teaching: What the United States Can Learn from Other Countries* (Report No. EDO-FL-01-06). Washington D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Center for Applied Linguistics.

Cummins, J. (2005). A proposal for action: Strategies for recognizing heritage language

competence as a learning resource within the mainstream classroom. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*(4), 585-592.

Fry, R. (2003). *High School Dropout Rates for Latino Youth*. Retrieved from www.eric.ed.gov

Jasso-Aguilar, R. (1999). Language planning and policy in the U.S.: Honoring language rights and building on language resources. *Foreign language teaching and language minority education.* (Technical Report No. 19).

Meléndez de Santa Ana, T. (2010). *Remarks of Dr. Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana to the National Association for Bilingual Education* [Speech]. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2010/02/02032010.html

Mucherah, W. (2008). Immigrants' perceptions of their native language: Challenges to actual use and maintenance. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education 7*, 188-205. doi:10.1080/15348450802237806

Ortega, L. (1999). Rethinking foreign language education: Political dimensions of the profession. *Foreign language teaching and language minority education.* (Technical Report No. 19).

Resnick, L. B. (Ed.). (2006). Foreign language instruction: Implementing the best teaching methods. *Research Points Spring 2006, Volume 4, Issue 1*. Washington D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Salim Sehlaoui, A. (2008). Language learning, heritage and literacy in the USA: The case of Arabic. *Language, Culture and Curriculum 21*(3), 280-291. doi: 10.1080/07908310802385949

Savage, C. (2009, October 27). F.B.I. is slow to translate intelligence, report says. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://nytimes.com

Shonle, A., & Thompson Rolland, M. (1999). The foreign language partnership project. *Foreign language teaching and language minority education.* (Technical Report No. 19).

Syed, Z. (1999). Learning with others: Collaboration and partnership in education. *Foreign language teaching and language minority education.* (Technical Report No. 19).

Valdés, G. (2005). Bilingualism, heritage language learners, and SLA research: Opportunities lost or seized? *The Modern Language Journal*, *89*(3), 410-426.

Van Deusen-Scholl, N. (2003). Toward a definition of heritage language: Sociopolitical and pedagogical considerations. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 2*(3), 211-230.

Wiley, T. (2005). The reemergence of heritage and community language policy in the U.S. national spotlight. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*(4), 594-601.

Wiley, T. (2007). Heritage and community languages in the national language debate. *The Modern Language Journal, 91*(2), 252-255.