

Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource

Joy Kreeft Peyton, Donald A. Ranard and Scott McGinnis (eds). McHenry, IL: Delta Systems, 2001. Pp. xii + 327. ISBN 1-887744-63-0 (pbk): US\$20.95.

In a recent posting on the TESL K-12 listserv, an ESL teacher lamented a meeting a classroom teacher had had with the parents of an ESL student. After being told about the student's poor classroom performance the parents, who are bilingual, resigned themselves to speaking only English with their child at home, believing that the heritage language might negatively affect their child's academic success. Sadly, this is a familiar scenario amidst the waning linguistic resources in the United States (and elsewhere). *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource*, which grew out of the National Conference on Heritage Languages in America held in October 1999, portrays the foundations, issues, and directions of heritage language education with the aim of demonstrating, as the above example testifies, the urgency of supporting heritage language speakers and learners.

In 'Charting a New Course: Heritage Language Education in the United States' (Chapter 1), Peyton, Ranard, and McGinnis introduce the book and reflect on the current state of heritage language education in the US, noting that the 'movement has grown out of a deeply felt desire on the part of immigrants and indigenous peoples to preserve their languages and cultures' (p. 4) and that success depends on educators and policy makers working in concert with communities. Accordingly, the authors explain that this book is 'written for educators, community leaders, researchers, grantmakers, and policymakers' with the goals of 'explaining why those who are involved in the heritage language movement believe that it is important for the United States to preserve its non-English languages ... [and discussing] the issues that the burgeoning field of heritage language education faces as it grapples with new challenges posed by a new population of learners' (p. 5). True to these goals, the chapters that follow set forth issues surrounding theoretical foundations, programme and policy implementation, and research objectives using mostly lucid, jargon-free language accessible to the book's diverse target audience.

The first challenge facing heritage language education – determining the parameters of the field and whom it will serve – is taken up by Wiley and Valdés, respectively. Wiley, in 'On Defining Heritage Languages and their Speakers' (Chapter 2), points out that deciding who is to be served by heritage language education can be a slippery task. The author insightfully asserts that definitions are far from trivial since the needs of the learner directly influence 'the knowledge that language professionals need to consider when planning and implementing programs' (p. 34). In the end, however, 'for pedagogical purposes' Wiley places language revitalisation outside the domain of heritage language education by suggesting that some level of pre-existing language proficiency is required in order to be considered a heritage language learner. Valdés' (2000: 1) definition of the heritage language learner is offered: 'someone who has been

“raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken” and “who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (p. 35).

Valdés, in ‘Heritage Language Students: Profiles and Possibilities’ (Chapter 3), lucidly characterises the complexity behind what it means to be a heritage language learner and how educational programmes can be developed especially for them. Using Spanish in the United States as a case study, the author describes the numerous challenges faced by this emergent field including promoting language maintenance, teaching standard and non-standard varieties, and transferring literacy skills. Valdés goes on to clarify how those working to address such issues in heritage language pedagogy are informed by work that has been done on pedagogical theory and practice in first-language development, second-language acquisition, and bilingualism. She remarks that heritage language education is thus developing as a new multidisciplinary field of language teaching so ‘it is important that we keep in mind that what brings us together is our commitment to the study and teaching of non-English languages in this country to students who have a personal investment in these languages’ (pp. 67–68).

Providing the backdrop for the study and teaching of non-English languages in the US, Fishman offers a brief but thorough historical account of heritage languages in ‘300-Plus Years of Heritage Language Education in the United States’ (Chapter 4). He begins by proffering an inclusive definition of heritage languages as being languages other than English that have ‘a particular family relevance to the learners’ (p. 81). He then proceeds to characterise indigenous heritage languages, colonial heritage languages, and immigrant heritage languages, describing the restrictive and permissive sentiments of different historical periods in the US. The chapter ends on a positive note about the power of heritage language education. Fishman predicts that:

[it] will revitalise our entire approach to non-English language instruction. It will not only give us more individuals proficient in these languages, it will dignify our country’s heritage language communities...it will help us break out of the penumbras of fear and contention that English-only and anti-bilingual education policies have cast on heritage languages (p. 95).

Dovetailing nicely with Fishman’s chapter, Wiley’s ‘Policy Formation and Implementation’ (Chapter 5) reviews governmental involvement in US heritage language education ranging from a *laissez-faire* position of tolerance’ (p. 100) to an ‘endoglossic’ bilingual education policy that favours immigrant over indigenous languages (p. 103). In contrast to decontextualised top-down policies, Wiley suggests that because of the special local needs often associated with heritage language education, well-informed policies need to be created through collaboration between policy makers and community members.

As a testament to the significance of heritage language education, Carreira and Armengol’s ‘Professional Opportunities for Heritage Language Speakers’ (Chapter 6) showcases the language-as-resource orientation by presenting the prospects for individuals with linguistic skills. Professional possibilities abound in diverse settings ranging from governmental agencies, corporate organisations, news and media outlets to performing arts, healthcare, and, of course,

education. An appendix to the chapter lists annotated web sources in each of these areas.

The next five chapters turn to the matter of educational implications. These chapters complement each other splendidly, each dealing with different, though certainly related, domains of heritage language education: community schools, K-12 schools, higher education, and heritage language teacher training.

In 'Heritage Language Communities and Schools: Challenges and Recommendations' (Chapter 7) Compton highlights factors communities must consider in the establishment, development, and maintenance of heritage language schools such as the diversity of students' ages, backgrounds, and motivation; recruiting and training teachers; raising community awareness and support; establishing working relationships with parents and local institutions; and developing and refining materials. Compton concludes with a set of useful preliminary recommendations for community heritage language education while also echoing Wiley's earlier sentiments of the value of top-down/bottom-up collaboration: 'There are important ways in which state and national language education policy, leadership, and financial support could assist heritage school staff in providing effective instruction' (p. 162).

Wang and Green exemplify how theory can influence practice in 'Heritage Language Students in the K-12 Education System' (Chapter 8). First, they astutely propose combining Valdés' and Fishman's definitions of heritage language speakers, to create an inclusive three-pronged categorisation scheme: 'students who are new arrivals or migrants; foreign-born students who arrived at a young age but have been in US schools for several years; and U.S.-born students of immigrant or indigenous ancestry' (p. 170). They then proceed adeptly to join this combined definition with Cooper's (1989: 98) language planning matrix: 'what actors attempt to influence what behaviors, of which people, for what ends, under what conditions, by what means, through what decision-making process, with what effect?' (p. 168). The result is a multidimensional picture of how the diverse population of heritage language learners could be served most effectively by K-12 programmes in US schools.

Kono and McGinnis, in 'Heritage Languages and Higher Education: Challenges, Issues, and Needs' (Chapter 9), examine heritage language education beyond the secondary level, revealing that it is, by and large, woefully inadequate, with language courses primarily designed for foreign-language learners to meet university language requirements. The needs of heritage language learners are unique so, Kono and McGinnis advise, universities' orientations towards heritage language education need to change. Administrators need to be better informed, pedagogical practices in language classes need to be updated, and language teachers need training in heritage language issues so that heritage language learners are not marginalised in higher education.

In the following chapter, 'Truly Less Commonly Taught Languages and Heritage Language Learners in the United States' (Chapter 10), Gambhir expands upon the concerns brought forth by Kono and McGinnis. Emphasising the issues facing the teaching and learning of truly less commonly taught languages (TLCTLs) in particular, the author carefully details numerous concerns related to heritage language education including learner factors like motivation, background, and diversity; pedagogical considerations such as mixed-level classes,

teacher background and training, and the lack of instructional materials; and the importance of institutional, community, and political support.

Schwartz delves more deeply into the acute need for teacher training in heritage language education in 'Preparing Teachers to Work with Heritage Language Learners' (Chapter 11). Because heritage language learners' language backgrounds, motivation, and expectations are distinct from both foreign language and ESL learners, teachers must be specially prepared for heritage language teaching. The author asserts that it is imperative for teacher training programmes to respond accordingly by developing courses that offer teachers insight into how to work effectively with heritage language learners in classroom settings. This process, Schwartz writes, begins with effective research. 'We must encourage research in all areas that affect the teaching and learning of heritage languages, for it is this knowledge that informs our practice' (p. 249). The next two chapters turn to the scope of this research.

In 'Heritage Language Education: Needed Research' (Chapter 12), Campbell and Christian outline areas of inquiry. Among the ones they list are heritage language populations, communities, language policies, and teaching and learning. The authors propose a host of specific questions to guide the work of heritage language researchers. In response to Campbell and Christian's chapter, the editors include 'Heritage Language Education: Summaries of Research and Practice' (Chapter 13) which consists of abstracts, complete with researchers' e-mail addresses, of papers presented at the Heritage Languages Conference of 1999.

The final two chapters contemplate the direction of heritage language education in the US. In 'Heritage Language Maintenance and Development: An Agenda for Action' (Chapter 14), Roca champions interdisciplinary cooperation within language education as well as improved public relations for heritage language education in particular. Heritage language issues, Roca posits, must be brought to the minds of community leaders, elected representatives, educational administrators, and corporate executives for the benefit of all members of US society because 'when bilingualism is no longer perceived as a detriment and is looked upon as an asset ... we will have made progress' (p. 315).

In the last chapter, 'The Genealogy of Language Organizations and the Heritage Languages Initiative' (Chapter 15), Alatis muses about the cohesiveness of heritage language education as a field, suggesting that progress for multilingualism will only be realised through cooperation among everyone involved in language research and education because we must 'speak with one voice on the issues that matter most to us' (p. 321). Moreover, Alatis hopes that 'since heritage language education cuts across many fields and disciplines, perhaps it might turn out to be not just another separate field with its separate agenda but instead a reunifying force for the language profession as a whole' (p. 322). These are, indeed, encouraging words with which the book concludes.

Heritage Languages in America serves, as the editors intend, as a light but poignant introduction to heritage language education in the United States. It is well suited for the diverse readership that will benefit from insight into the needs, issues, and concerns of heritage language learners. One might take issue with the title, however. While the topics addressed in the book are germane to other continental contexts, the focus of the volume is clear; why not entitle it *Heritage Languages in the United States*? Semantic quarrels aside, this book is a timely consciousness-raising vehicle for, as Alatis proclaims, 'it

is time that we recognize the important resource that [heritage languages] and their speakers represent for developing a language-competent American society, cross-cultural communication, educational exchange among nations, social justice, and world peace' (p. 322). Hopefully this book will find the wide audience it deserves.

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References

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