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Heritage and second language learners: different perspectives on language learning

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the attitudes of heritage language learners (HLLs) and second language learners (SLLs) about their classroom language learning experiences and language learning in general, using data from high school students who participated in STARTALK summer language study programs in 2014 and 2015. Analysis of students' responses to survey questions indicate that compared to SLLs, HLLs were less motivated to study their language or other languages, and they were less likely to believe that learning a new language would help them academically and professionally. While further research is necessary to determine the precise causes of these results, it is possible that mixed classes (HLLs and SLLs together) may have contributed. Furthermore, the failure of the language instruction to meet HLLs' specific needs may have also played a role. Given the value of heritage language knowledge to the individual, it is important to gain insights into the experiences of HLLs and counteract demotivating factors in the classroom.

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Introduction

For many years, heritage language learners (HLLs) and second language learners (SLLs) were not viewed as having distinct need and motivations in language education. It was not until the past two decades that researchers and educators differentiated these two populations and identified that HLLs have specific cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical needs (Carreira 2004; Carreira and Kagan 2011; Correa 2011; Lee 2005). While there are many ways in which HLLs are defined, for the purposes of this study, HLLs are defined as 'individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language' (Valdés 2000, 375). While the number of HLLs has increased as a result of the growing immigrant population in the United States (Grieco et al. 2012), research shows that knowledge of the heritage language typically dies out within three generations (Wiley 1996), or even two (Wong Fillmore 2000). Heritage speakers' loss of their heritage language skill is a loss not only to the individual in terms of cultural heritage, professional opportunities, and the cognitive advantages of bilingualism (Bialystok 2011; Bialystok and Craik 2010), but also to the country as a whole in terms of global economic competitiveness and national security (Brecht and Ingold 2002; Callahan and Gándara 2014). Determining how to serve the needs of the HLL population in the language classroom is, therefore, of paramount importance.

A great amount of effort has been made to compare the linguistic capabilities of HLLs and SLLs. Specifically, it is widely acknowledged that, compared with their peers, HLLs perceive their listening and speaking skills to be better than their literacy skills (i.e. reading, writing, and metalinguistic

knowledge), because of their access to the heritage languages in natural settings (Carreira and Kagan 2011; Kagan 2012; Santos and Silva 2015). The question of motivation and attitudes of HLLs compared to SLLs with respect to language learning is a separate but equally important line of research (Andrews 1999; Ayres 2003; Berardi-Wiltshire 2009; Brown 1997; Carreira 2000; Carreira and Kagan 2011; Cummins 2005; Dones-Herrera 2015; He 2006; Kang and Kim 2012; Lacorte and Canabal 2003; Lee 2002; Lee and Kim 2008; Noels 2015; Oh and Nash 2014; Phinney et al. 2001; Potowski 2001; Roca and Gutiérrez 2000). The goal of the current study is to examine how the attitudes of HLLs and SLLs differ in an effort to better serve the HLL population regarding the maintenance and development of heritage language proficiency.

There are unique reasons for HLLs to study their heritage languages, and one of them is the process of identity construction. The motivations of HLLs to study the heritage language are based in the intrinsic cultural, affective, and aesthetic values of the language (Andrews 1999; Cummins 2005; He 2006). For instance, using a questionnaire, Noels (2005) compared the motivations of 99 HLLs and non-HLLs registered in German classes and found that HLLs were more likely than non-HLLs to learn German because it was an important aspect of their self-concept. Lee and Kim (2008) conducted surveys and interviews of 111 college-level Korean heritage learners and concluded that these HLLs considered knowledge of Korean to be a main signifier of their ethnic identity; their motivations to learn Korean were closely tied to an affirmation of their ethnic identity. Kang and Kim (2012) assessed 30 second-generation Korean American participants based on a questionnaire, self-assessment, and assessment of speech and writing samples. A correlational analysis demonstrated that heritage learners who had a strong Korean identity tended to have better competence in Korean.

HLLs' motivation also comes from their desire to maintain relationships with their family members and to develop relationships with other members of their heritage language community (Phinney et al. 2001). Based on a national survey involving 1732 students, Carreira and Kagan (2011) developed a general profile of HLLs across languages. They highlighted that most HLLs had positive attitudes about and experiences with their heritage language, and their purpose for learning was mainly to connect with communities of speakers in the United States and to gain insights into their own roots. In addition, family support also plays a key role in HLLs' motivation of learning their heritage language. By comparing HLLs and SLLs' learning motivations and attitudes, Oh and Nash (2014) found that HLLs reported higher levels of parental encouragement to learn the target language than SLLs, even though such support did not appear to influence their children's actual success in learning the language.

In addition to understanding HLLs' motivation for learning, it is also of great importance to investigate the factors leading to demotivation in order to address the pedagogical needs of HLLs. On top of the list is the sense of low self-efficacy in the heritage language. Lee and Kim (2008) argue that Korean HLLs reported that their motivation was negatively affected by what they felt were unreasonable expectations – they were expected to acquire native-like proficiency in the language because it is the language that represents their identity. Potowski (2001) reports similar findings for HLLs of Spanish. Expectations can also relate to the variety of the language that the HLL speaks. HLLs may feel stigmatized if the variety they speak is not the standard and/or what the teacher expects (Roca and Gutiérrez 2000). They may react negatively when corrected, especially when the mistakes relate to the use of the standard variety of the language (Lacorte and Canabal 2003). They may feel like their proficiency in the heritage language is 'broken' or not good enough (Correa 2011). Finally, they may feel stigmatized by society for speaking their heritage language at all (Ayres 2003; Brown 1997; Carreira 2000). All of these threats to self-efficacy can demotivate HLLs in the classroom.

Another demotivating factor is course objectives that do not address HLLs' needs. As Berardi-Wiltshire (2009) summarized in case studies of five Italian HLLs, a great challenge for maintaining motivation was that the ultimate objectives of the course were at odds with the specific learning goals HLLs had set for themselves. Specifically, when HLLs were informed in their first lesson that the course is 'grammarless,' they were quite disappointed because they believed that grammar is an important part of learning a language. The reason why the instructor decided not to teach grammar was

that the course was targeted at prospective tourists to Italy who would be more interested in learning a range of simple words and expressions that might be useful. The disconnection between course and student goals was also found in other studies. For instance, second-generation Korean American students also reported that the existing language courses in the community-based language schools were not meeting their needs (Lee 2002). Specifically, the majority of students mentioned that the instruction should be adapted to Korean Americans with regard to teacher selection and instructional materials. They preferred classes with American-style teaching methods and materials, compared to the Korean style that was foreign to them. In addition, like the Italian HLLs mentioned earlier, these Korean HLLs expected more formal and academic language education. To conclude, HLLs reported needing literacy skills and formalized language education. However, HLLs' needs are often mismatched with what is afforded by the pedagogical goals (Berardi-Wiltshire 2009).

A third factor that might lead to demotivation comes from peers in the classroom. In other words, the mixed classroom (both SLLs and HLLs) could exert a negative influence on language learning motivation. In Berardi-Wiltshire's (2009) study, one Italian HLL experienced separation from her peers, given that she was the only student whose motivation to learn Italian was associated with her cultural identity. The lack of a sense of belonging to the group as well as her perception of the differences in linguistic competence decreased her motivation to attain fluency. The interaction between HLLs and non-HLLs has been discussed in other studies. For instance, Dones-Herrera (2015) surveyed 44 HLLs and non-HLLs in beginning-level Spanish courses and concluded that both groups preferred to be in Spanish classes with members of their own group. Correa (2011) states that HLLs' misplacement in foreign language courses is detrimental to both HLLs and SLLs. SLLs may feel threatened by HLLs because of the latter's advanced speaking and listening skills, while HLLs may be threatened by SLLs' often more advanced knowledge of grammar and writing skills in the target language.

The current study

In the current study, we examined the attitudes of heritage learners and monolingual English-speaking students who had participated in STARTALK.¹ STARTALK is a summer language program funded by the US Government that provides free instruction in critical-need languages (Chinese, Arabic, Dari, Hindi, Korean,² Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu) to students all over the United States (Ingold and Hart 2010). The grade levels of the programs range from kindergarten to college. These are full-day, intensive language instruction programs that last approximately four weeks, simulating an immersion setting. STARTALK student programs are designed in accordance with the STARTALK principles, such that instructors strive to facilitate a learner-centered classroom in which the target language is used almost exclusively, integrate cultural content and authentic materials, and practice performance-based instruction and assessment (Ingold and Hart 2010). While there are some programs for heritage learners, they comprised only approximately 20% of all STARTALK programs in 2014 and 2015. The vast majority of STARTALK programs include both heritage learners and SLLs.

At the end of the STARTALK program, students are asked to provide feedback via a participation survey. In addition to assessing statements about their experience in the language course, students also evaluated statements about language learning in general, as an index of their motivation in the course and for language learning in general. Any differences in responses between the two groups could reflect differences in motivation and provide insights into how to better serve heritage learners in the classroom. It is important to note that the participant surveys did not include a question to ascertain what type of class so we cannot compare the attitudes of HLLs in mixed and HL-only classes.

Methods

Participants

Survey data in the current study came from high school students who had participated in STARTALK language programs in 2014 and 2015. Upon completion of the program, students were asked to

Table 1. Numbers of respondents by heritage/target language.

Language	HLL	SLL
Arabic	44	186
Chinese	102	702
Dari	4	1
Hindi	14	12
Korean	2	2
Persian	18	6
Portuguese	5	0
Russian	40	47
Swahili	2	22
Turkish	0	1
Urdu	32	7
Total	263	986

complete a survey to provide their impressions of the course. All STARTALK participants (or their parents/guardians when appropriate) signed consent forms for the use of their anonymized survey data. A total of 4225 individuals, K–16, responded to the participation survey in 2014 and 2015. In the current study, only survey respondents who indicated that they were going to start a high school grade (9th–12th) the following fall were included. Respondents who did not indicate their gender or provide language history information were also excluded.

Participants were then categorized as HLLs or monolingual English speakers (i.e. SLLs). Respondents who indicated that the language they studied in STARTALK was their native language and the native language of at least one of their parents were classified as HLLs. While this definition of heritage learners is narrow, in that it does not take into account cultural background or identity, it is consistent with the proficiency-based approach of Valdés (2000). Furthermore, this somewhat restrictive set of criteria was used in order to reduce noise and possible confounds in the data. The SLLs were those individuals who indicated that English was their native language as well as that of both of their parents. Heritage learners of languages other than the one they studied in STARTALK were excluded from the study. The final sample was 1249 (742 females). There were 263 HLLs and 986 SLLs. See Table 1 for the distribution of respondents according to the language they studied at STARTALK. In the case of the HLLs, that is the heritage language.

Materials

Upon completion of the STARTALK summer programs, students were contacted via e-mail by their program directors and were asked to complete an online participation survey. In the participation survey, students were asked to provide background information (including their gender, grade level, and language background). They were also asked to rate statements related to the program and language learning in general. For each item, participants read a statement and had to indicate whether they agreed, using a four-point scale ('strongly disagree,' 'disagree,' 'agree,' or 'strongly disagree'). Data from the subset of the items from the participation survey that best reflected general opinions about the course and language learning (see Table 2) were included in the current study.

Analysis

Given that the data in the current study is ordinal, Mann–Whitney *U* tests were run on the responses for each question as the test variable and language group as the grouping variable.

Results

As can be observed in Table 2, participants were generally happy with their STARTALK experience, with roughly 90% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with all of the course evaluation statements. Similarly, the vast majority either agreed or strongly agreed with the positive statements relating to

Table 2. Response rates for each statement by group.

No	Statement	Group	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Course evaluation						
1	The books and other written materials we used in class were helpful.	HLL	.4	3.8	46.7	49.2
		SLL	.1	2.2	41.4	56.4
2	I received feedback from my teacher that was helpful to me.	HLL	1.6	3.2	36.4	58.7
		SLL	.1	2.0	28.0	69.9
3	I received feedback from my classmates that was helpful to me.	HLL	1.6	14.9	45.0	38.6
		SLL	1.8	10.8	49.0	38.4
4	I know more about the language and culture that I was studying now than I did when I first started this summer.	HLL	2.4	6.1	34.6	56.9
		SLL	.2	1.2	18.3	80.3
5	Learning a language during the summer was a good experience.	HLL	3.2	3.6	34.8	58.4
		SLL	.6	1.4	19.9	78.1
Opinions about language learning						
1	I enjoy learning foreign languages.	HLL	.4	3.1	47.3	49.2
		SLL	.3	.4	32.3	67.0
2	I enjoy meeting and listening to people who speak other languages.	HLL	.4	3.5	45.5	50.6
		SLL	.4	1.5	32.8	65.3
3	Learning a new language will help me do better in school.	HLL	1.6	15.6	40.1	42.8
		SLL	.7	6.9	38.7	53.7
4	Learning a new language will help me get a better job in the future.	HLL	.8	3.1	26.0	70.2
		SLL	.3	1.0	20.0	78.7

language learning. The percentages indicate that SLLs tended to give higher ratings than HLLs; SLLs had higher rates of 'strongly agree,' whereas HLLs had higher rates of 'agree' and 'disagree.' This pattern can be seen in Figure 1, in which the mean percentages for all of the questions are plotted for both groups. The only item that did not fit this pattern was course evaluation statement 3 ('I received feedback from my classmates that was helpful to me.') for which both groups agreed and strongly agreed at similar rates. This item had somewhat lower 'strongly agree' rates than the other course evaluation items and higher rates of 'disagree,' suggesting an overall shift toward disagreement in the responses to this question. In the language learning items, statement 3 ('Learning a new language will help me do better in school.') stands out as having greater rates of disagreement:

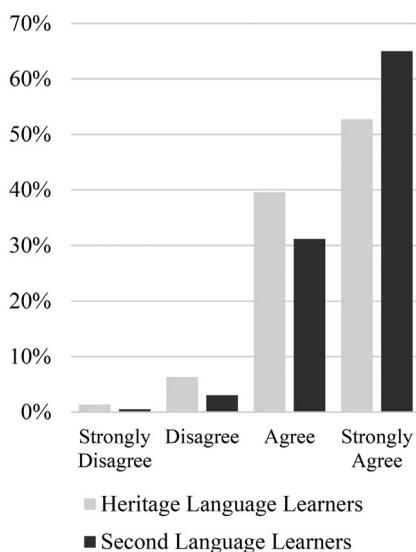
**Figure 1.** Mean percentage for each response.

Table 3. Mann–Whitney tests of group differences.

No	Statement	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i>	Z- score	Significance (two-tailed)	Effect size ($r = Z/\sqrt{N}$)
Course evaluation					
1	The books and other written materials we used in class were helpful.	10,2602	−2.16	$p < .05$	0.06
2	I received feedback from my teacher that was helpful to me.	104,209	−3.52	$p < .001$	0.10
3	I received feedback from my classmates that was helpful to me.	116,280	−0.59	NS	0.02
4	I know more about the language and culture that I was studying now than I did when I first started this summer.	88,671	−7.94	$p < .001$	0.22
5	Learning a language during the summer was a good experience.	95,362	−6.51	$p < .001$	0.18
Opinions about language learning					
1	I enjoy learning foreign languages.	103,163	−5.48	$p < .001$	0.16
2	I enjoy meeting and listening to people who speak other languages.	106,842	−4.04	$p < .001$	0.11
3	Learning a new language will help me do better in school.	107,767	−3.97	$p < .001$	0.11
4	Learning a new language will help me get a better job in the future.	115,018	−3.02	$p < .005$	0.09

17.2% of HLLs and 7.6% of SLLs either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Disagreement rates for all other items in the language learning section were under 5%.

The Mann–Whitney *U* tests (see Table 3) showed that SLLs were more likely to give higher ratings than HLLs for all statements except course evaluation statement 3. For this statement, there was no difference between the groups. The effect sizes were generally small, with the largest effects for course evaluation statements 4 and 5.

Discussion

HLLs have many strong motivations to maintain and develop their proficiency in the HLL: cultural identity, connections to family and community, not to mention the more general economic and cognitive advantages of bilingualism (Bialystok 2011; Bialystok and Craik 2010; Brecht and Ingold 2002; Callahan and Gándara 2014). The results of the current study indicate that, while respondents were generally very positive about their experience, HLLs were less motivated than SLLs. In both the course evaluation statements and the statements about language learning, SLLs were significantly more positive about all statements except statement 3 ('I received feedback from my classmates that was helpful to me.'). The findings suggest that HLLs were less motivated to study their language compared to SLLs, less motivated to learn other languages, and less likely to believe that learning a new language would help them academically and professionally.

There are several factors that could have contributed to HLLs' reduced motivation to study their heritage language. One factor that may have contributed to HLLs' reduced motivation to study their heritage language is the general feeling of low self-efficacy with respect to the heritage language (Ayres 2003; Brown 1997; Carreira 2000; Correa 2011; Lacorte and Canabal 2003; Lee and Kim 2008; Potowski 2001; Roca and Gutiérrez 2000). This could have a global effect on motivation and enthusiasm, irrespective of the instructional context. There are other factors more specific to the context that may have come into play.

The fact that the majority of STARTALK programs were mixed (with both HLLs and SLLs) could have served to demotivate HLLs in two different ways. First, the language instruction was designed for SLLs and as a result may not have addressed the needs of HLLs in terms of content and level, which research has found to be demotivating (Berardi-Wiltshire 2009; Lee 2002). Respondents' comments on what they liked least about the program suggest that this is the case. Many HLLs expressed frustration about not learning the heritage language grammar (1) and writing system (2) and not learning the culture of the heritage language community (3).

(1)

Talking about food for 3 weeks got really boring. I wish we could learn about other topics. I would have liked to expand my vocabulary on other topics and learn about Chinese grammar and reading comprehension.

The fact that we didn't actually learn anything about the language itself, but the problems of Pakistan. I intended to come here and learn actual Urdu (grammar, how to write sentences, communication, etc.).

The program is too focused on speaking and understanding the language. In my opinion, it's best to learn a language by speaking and understanding first using correct grammar. After mastering this, then learn to read and write the language. I felt I was missing out on the reading and writing part because I mostly already know speaking and understand the language. Maybe level 1 and 2 should focus more on speaking and understanding while level 3 and 4 more focus on reading and writing.

(2)

I also believe it was wrong to have us type everything in Dari because I was hoping to learn how to write and that was never done because I didn't get much in class practice for writing.

Not enough time was spent on writing (which was the only reason I came).

They did not teach me how to write in Urdu or how to connect the words.

I still don't know how to read or write.

(3)

[W]hen culture was supposedly taught. ... I feel we didn't learn as much ... at all from what heritage speakers might have already known. There were many initial approaches that seemed to give way to deeper understandings of the culture, but ultimately it fell to a superficial, skin-deep review of what any tourist site could tell us about Iran.

I didn't like the fact that we learned nothing good about India and the culture. There are many things that are great about India's culture and people but we only learned the negative.

All of these statements reflect the large effect for course evaluation statement 4 ('I know more about the language and culture that I was studying now than I did when I first started this summer.' See [Table 3](#)). The final comment in (3) also speaks to the cultural identity issue, one of the primary motivations of HLLs for studying the heritage language (Kang and Kim 2012; Lee and Kim 2008; Noels 2005). The respondent's comment indicates that HLLs may identify strongly with the culture of the target language community and instructors need to be aware of this designing course content.

Secondly, as is discussed in Correa (2011), many studies (Beaudrie 2009; Carreira 2004; Reynolds, Howard, and Deák 2009) have shown that mixed classes often do not constitute a positive language learning environment for heritage learners. Respondents' comments in (4) reflect the problems associated with mixed classes.

(4)

I didn't like how everyone in my class were at different levels with knowing Chinese.

As a native speaker who grew up in the US, my language abilities are seriously lacking all around but still far ahead of most other students in Startalk. They really should have a class specifically for native speakers because this one was incredibly inefficient and ineffective, even with my limited speaking ability.

There was no separation between the levels of Farsi known by everyone in the class. I would've learned more if I was given different instructions.

I for one have spoken Portuguese my whole life and so have many others in my class. I was put in an advanced class but there were so many others who just started speaking the language and it made it seem more like I was reviewing the language more than learning it.

The group differences in responses to the statements relating to the STARTALK program and language learning generally, together with respondents' comments, underline the conclusion that

HLLs require a distinct language teaching pedagogy from what is used for SLLs. They also may explain the large effect size associated with course evaluation statement 5 ('Learning a language during the summer was a good experience.'). In addition to this primary result, there were other interesting findings in the dataset.

With respect to the one statement for which there was no difference between HLLs and SLLs ('I received feedback from my classmates that was helpful to me. '), the mixed classroom could have contributed to the lack of useful input from classmates insofar as SLLs may not have had the proficiency to provide useful feedback to HLLs and, for the same reason, SLLs may not have been able to make use of feedback from HLLs. It is interesting to note that this statement had a larger percentage of respondents among both groups disagree compared to most of the others (16.5% of HLLs and 12.6% of SLLs either disagreed or disagreed strongly). One of the STARTALK principles is to foster a learner-centered classroom such that students interact and learn from one another (i.e. provide each other with useful feedback). This approach may be unfamiliar to students and they, therefore, are less prepared to benefit from it.

Another salient result is that respondents, especially HLLs, showed high levels of disagreement with the statement, 'Learning a new language will help me do better in school.' (17.2% of HLLs and 7.6% of SLLs either disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement). Given the lack of priority in K–12 education for world language education (Lambert 1992; O'Rourke, Zhou and Rottman, *in press*), it is not surprising that more respondents did not believe learning a language would be academically useful to them. It is, however, interesting that they did not show elevated disagreement for the statement indicating that learning a new language would help them get a better job in the future (only 3.9% of HLLs and 1.3% of SLLs either disagreed or disagreed strongly). Respondents, therefore, seemed to recognize the importance of learning a language for their future professional success but not for their immediate academic success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while additional research is required to determine the precise cause or causes of the reduced motivation in HLLs found in this study, the finding confirms that mixed classes can have a demotivating effect on HLLs and should be avoided (Correa 2011). Also, the results show that language instruction must meet HLLs' specific needs in order to be effective and maintain motivation (Berardi-Wiltshire 2009; Lee 2002). Furthermore, teacher training, especially in preparation for mixed classes, should include techniques for mitigating the lack of self-efficacy often felt by HLLs (Potowski 2001). Taking these additional measures to counteract demotivating factors is an important step in fostering heritage language knowledge in HLLs; preventing heritage language loss; and enabling HLLs to take advantage of the cultural, economic, and cognitive benefits of bilingualism.

Notes

1. STARTALK is the newest of the component programs of the National Security Language Initiative announced by former President Bush in January of 2006. STARTALK's mission is to increase the number of US citizens learning, speaking, and teaching critical need foreign languages. STARTALK offers students (K–16) and teachers of these languages creative and engaging summer experiences, free of charge, that strive to exemplify best practices in language education and in language teacher development. The National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland coordinates the implementation and administration of the program.
2. Korean was first introduced as a STARTALK language in 2015.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Polly O'Rourke, PhD, University of Arizona, is an Assistant Research Scientist at the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language. Dr. O'Rourke was the Director of Research at the National Foreign Language Center when this research was conducted.

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