



Educator Brief

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Series
**IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE**

Why Heritage Language is Important for Immigrant Origin Children’s Development & Learning

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Students growing up in immigrant origin families often bring with them their heritage language, defined as a language to which children are exposed at home that is not the majority or dominant language in their societal context.¹ In the United States, heritage languages are also referred to as home languages, mother tongues, and languages other than English (LOTEs).

In this Immigration Initiative at Harvard *Educator Brief*, we outline what research suggests are the promotive and protective functions of preserving heritage languages for children’s academic outcomes, cognitive development, and social-emotional well-being. We also consider how children’s use of and skills in the heritage language are vulnerable to loss. Lastly, we provide guidelines for steps educators and schools can take to work with families and communities to nurture children’s heritage language skills.



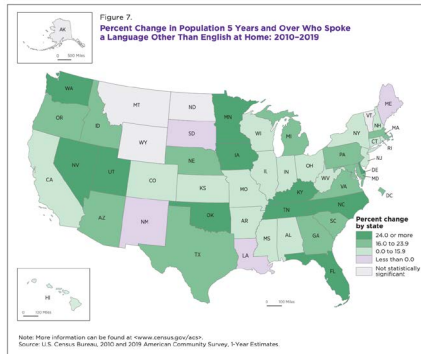
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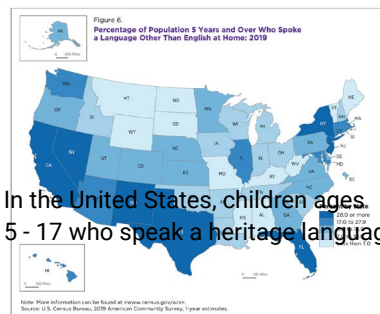


A DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF HERITAGE LANGUAGES IN THE U.S.

Heritage language speakers have become an increasingly important part of the demographic profile of the U.S. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of heritage language speakers grew by 194% between 1980 and 2019, while the U.S. population grew by approximately 47%.²



The percentage of heritage language speakers varies by region, with the lowest proportion found in the Midwest (approximately 12%) and the highest in the West (about 30%).³ The heritage languages most represented are: Spanish (61.6%), Chinese (5.2%), Tagalog (2.6%), Vietnamese (2.3%), and Arabic (1.9%).⁴ Children ages 5 - 19 years comprise almost one-fourth of Spanish and Arabic speakers. Among these top five heritage language groups, Spanish speakers have the highest proportion (55%) born in the U.S.⁵



In the United States, children ages 5 - 17 who speak a heritage language

at home now represent 22.6% of the K-12 student population, a number that has tripled from 1979 to 2019.⁶ In 2021, approximately 56% of Latine and 52% of Asian-origin children living in the U.S. spoke a heritage language at home, compared to only 7% of Black and 6% of White children.⁷ Children vary in their skills and use of their heritage language.⁸ Some children may understand and speak their heritage language, while others may understand it but not speak it.

In U.S. public schools, some children who speak and understand their heritage language may be designated as English Learners (ELs) or English Language Learners (ELLs) if it is determined – based on the results of an assessment or screener chosen by the school district – that they will need support in accessing English instruction and core curricula. However, not all children who speak their heritage language need instructional support in English. More likely than not and especially in English-only instructional settings, educators may overlook the heritage language resources these students bring from home.

To highlight these heritage language resources, which can be deployed in learning, some school districts use the

terms emergent bilinguals or multilingual learners to refer to all children who speak or are exposed to a language other than English at home.

THE VALUE OF MAINTAINING HERITAGE LANGUAGE(S)

Preserving their heritage language while acquiring the majority language (English in the U.S.) has been shown to promote children's positive development in various areas. First, it is important for children's family relationships. Children who develop skills in their heritage language tend to enjoy more harmonious relationships with their parents and extended family members compared to those who do not have the opportunity to do so.^{9,10} When children enter schools where their heritage language skills are not supported, they may begin to use only English at home. This can result in difficulties communicating with parents or caregivers who do not speak or feel comfortable speaking English; consequently, many begin using only English at home.¹¹ Parents in these circumstances feel at a loss in expressing their thoughts and feelings with their children, which can debilitate their confidence and ability to parent effectively.^{12, 13} This phenomenon can begin in early childhood and persist

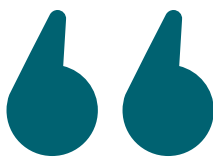


throughout adolescence, posing cumulative challenges for developing strong parent-child relationships in immigrant families.^{14, 15}

Maintaining their heritage language can also benefit children's identity development. Part of knowing who they are involves developing an ethnic-racial identity, or understanding who they are in relation to their ethnic-racial or cultural group. Having opportunities to use or learn their heritage language helps children stay connected to their ethnic-racial heritage and community, which can lead to a stronger ethnic-racial identity.^{16, 17} In turn, having a stronger ethnic-racial identity has been shown to help children have higher self-esteem and feel a greater sense of belonging and engagement in school.¹⁸ It can also help protect children from the harmful effects of ethnic-racial discrimination,¹⁹ an experience that is especially prevalent for immigrant youth of color both inside and outside of school.²⁰

Research also shows that developing their heritage language while learning the majority language can benefit children's cognitive development and academic achievement. Exposure to and maintenance of the heritage language may promote children's executive function skills, such as the ability to pay attention, that are important for learning in school and in other contexts.^{21, 22, 23} Contrary to popular belief, U.S. studies suggest that developing their heritage language does not negatively affect children's English language development.²⁴ In fact, the knowledge and skills children learn in their heritage language can support their learning in the majority language.²⁵ Children developing their heritage language and majority language skills in dual language school programs achieve comparable or higher literacy skill in the majority language and higher academic outcomes over time when compared to their peers in English-only or majority language-only school programs.^{26, 27}

All children growing up with a heritage



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language, including those diagnosed with special needs,²⁸ have the potential to be multilingual, especially when schools collaborate with families in developing this potential. As our world becomes more globalized, the need for multilingual individuals who can bridge across diverse languages and cultures, is imperative.²⁹ In response to this reality and to the recognition that fostering children's heritage languages is a benefit for society, numerous U.S. schools and districts in all 50 states are offering the Seal of Biliteracy, an award for high school students who have studied and demonstrated proficiency in two or more languages.³⁰

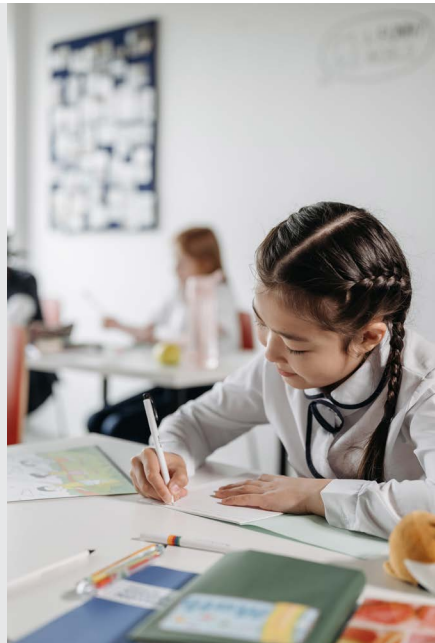
THE CHALLENGE OF MAINTAINING HERITAGE LANGUAGE(S)

Although beneficial for children's development and learning, promoting children's heritage language is difficult. This is especially the case in societies like the U.S. where monolingualism is the norm and language diversity is minimally supported in policy and

practice. In these societal contexts, which exist worldwide, heritage language speakers can be marginalized and discriminated against.³¹ These negative experiences can lead parents to doubt the importance of their heritage language in the lives of their children. This doubt may discourage children from using or learning in their heritage language. Schools, in partnership with families and communities, can play an important role in providing opportunities for immigrant-origin children and children from linguistically-minoritized groups to develop their heritage language while learning the majority language. Partnerships such as these that aim to foster children's heritage language learning will contribute to creating societies where multilingualism is the norm as well as classrooms where every child can thrive.

WHAT CAN EDUCATORS DO?

Educators can make their classrooms validating and enriching learning environments for children from families who speak a heritage language.



Assess the Linguistic Assets of Your Students, Their Families, and The Community

- Take note of any heritage languages that naturally emerge among your students when you are interacting with their peers, other teachers, and with family members.
- Survey your students' families regarding their heritage language(s) and encourage parents/caregivers to continue using it with their children.
- Observe the heritage languages used in the community and their function (e.g., at supermarkets, churches).

Affirm Linguistic and Cultural Identities to Promote Learning and a Sense of Belonging

- Provide environmental print that reflects your students' heritage languages (e.g., in word walls, classroom labels). Engage students and families in helping with this goal.
- Incorporate heritage language materials—such as print materials, videos, and songs—in your instruction.

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- In your classroom and school library, display books written in students' heritage languages year-round. Invite colleagues and family members to read these aloud in your class and join you in leading a discussion of the book.
- Have bilingual dictionaries available and teach students how to develop and use them for learning.
- Use textbooks, videos, and other instructional materials that feature people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Leverage Heritage Language Use During Class Time

- Normalize, model, and support translanguaging, which involves students using all their linguistic knowledge and skills, including that of their heritage language.
- Consider partnering or grouping students who speak the same heritage language so that they can discuss their understanding of concepts and collaborate for learning.

Take the Stance of a Lifelong Language Learner

- Demonstrate sincere interest in
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learning your students' heritage languages from them and their families, positioning them as experts and yourself as a learner.

- Learn to pronounce your students' names as spoken in their heritage language.
- Collaborate with colleagues, student family members, and community members in finding creative ways to incorporate your students' heritage languages in your classroom as well as schoolwide.
- Explicitly communicate the value of heritage languages and linguistic diversity.
- Develop relationships of trust with each of your students and their families.
- Continually reflect on your own values, perspectives, and biases related to language diversity in schools and society. Be mindful about how your instructional choices and interactions with students and families may be influenced by these.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- British Council. (2018).** [Seven reasons for teachers to welcome home languages in education.](#)
- CUNY-NYSIEB. (2021).** [Teaching Bilinguals \(Even If You're Not One\).](#)
- Eashwaran, M. (2016).** [Losing Mother Tongue.](#)
- Faulx, N. (2013).** [It Takes A Classroom To Learn The Family Language.](#) NPR.
- Martin, S. (2023).** [June Webinar Wrap-Up: Empowering Language Learners through Collaboration.](#) SEAL
- Najarro, I. (2023).** [What is translanguaging and how is it used in the classroom?](#) Education Week.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.).** [Dual Language Learners](#)
- WETA Public Broadcasting. (2023).** [Colorín Colorado: A Bilingual Site for Educators and Families of English Language Learners.](#)

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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

