The Advanced Speaker: An Overview of the Issues in Heritage Language Teaching

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The purpose of this position paper is to further our understanding of the linguistic needs of heritage language learners (HLLs) who desire to reach advanced level proficiency. These students are represented in most Flagship programs and may present a challenge because of their linguistic range and the differences between them and L2 learners.\(^1\) Assessment and administrative and pedagogical challenges associated with this population will also be explored.

The current paper follows on the heels of a previous position paper that was the outcome of annual research institutes convened by the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC) between 2007 and 2010. This publication, *White Paper: Prolegomena to Heritage Linguistics* (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2010), presents an overview of the linguistic system characteristic of heritage speakers, i.e. speakers who acquire their first language in a home where a language other than that of the country of residence is spoken. For these speakers, the acquisition process becomes interrupted as the language of the country is encountered and then becomes dominant, resulting in an incompletely acquired first language. In examining the

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\(^1\) The Language Flagship is a national project that was established in 2002 by the National Security Education Program at the U.S. Department of Defense with the goal of increasing the number of Americans who complete a bachelor's or master's degree with high proficiency in a critical language. The Flagship offers rigorous domestic and international language study at select colleges and universities. Twenty six Flagship programs operate at 22 colleges and universities in the U.S., and at 10 Overseas Flagship Centers, in Arabic, Chinese, Hindi Urdu, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, and Turkish (The Language Flagship, 2013).
resulting linguistic system, Benmamoun et al. detail and analyze six areas: phonology, lexical knowledge, morphology, syntax, case marking, and code-switching. This position paper, while also touching on linguistic elements, will begin to take us in the direction of pedagogy associated with the teaching of HLLs, in which this incomplete system is addressed in a classroom setting.

The papers that underlie this position paper, which can be found in Volume 10 (2) of the Heritage Language Journal, were presented at the Sixth Heritage Language Research Institute, entitled *From Overhearers to High Proficiency Speakers: Advancing Heritage Learners' Skills*, which was convened at UCLA in June 2012. As the institute took place, a high school graduation in Newton, a small town in California’s Central Valley, served as a reminder of the far-reaching implications of the work of the institute. What sets this graduation apart from countless others is that its valedictorian, Saul Tello, addressed his audience in Spanish. Widely reported in the news, this action was seen as a political statement in countless discussions that ensued. On the one hand, there were those who found it to be disrespectful of English speakers and this country and emblematic of the perils of immigration. At the same time, others hailed it as a courageous act of defiance against an oppressive status quo.

The actual reasons behind Tello’s choice of language speak to a far more nuanced and complex reality. Seldom addressed in public discussions, this is the reality lived by some 20% of this nation’s school children who speak a language other than English at home. In Tello’s school, half of the student body speaks Spanish at home, which explains why the valedictorian originally sought to give two speeches, one in English and the other in Spanish. However, concerned with time limitations, the school pressed him to choose from one of the two speeches. Giving careful consideration to the needs of his audience, parents, and the Latino community, Tello settled on the Spanish speech. Regarding his audience, he reasoned that with other speakers slated to address them in English, his would be the only speech accessible to a significant number of
Latino parents that did not speak English. To best honor his own parents and acknowledge their role in his success, he chose to address them in Spanish, the code of intimacy of his home. Mindful of his place in the Latino community, he consulted with friends and neighbors on the choices and consequences he faced (Austin, 2011).

This story serves as a reminder that heritage languages are much more than a political hot potato (as often portrayed by the media) or a testing ground for theories of language (as sometimes regarded in linguistic circles). They are an integral part of the lives of 12 million language minority children in this country. Confident, resourceful, and with a sense of self, Tello attests to what these children can achieve under the right conditions.

His story also speaks to the theme of the 2012 institute, namely the advanced proficiency speaker or, more specifically, the conditions that correlate with attainment of this level of proficiency among heritage language speakers. Research underscores the importance of abundant and varied input, including formal instruction, along with social conditions that favor the widespread use of the language (Benmamoun et al., 2010). In Tello’s case, a supportive home and community of speakers, along with the school’s linguistic tolerance and willingness to accommodate his wishes, emerge as particularly significant.

The papers out of which this position paper grows seek to shed light on the role that these and other factors play in the development of heritage languages and the achievement of high level proficiency by HLLs. Addressing three general areas of inquiry: (1) the linguistic knowledge and needs of advanced heritage language speakers, (2) assessment, and (3) instruction and curriculum and program design, these papers alert us to the complexity of the issues surrounding the development of advanced proficiency and orient us to key considerations in the design of effective instructional practices, including those in Flagship programs.
(1) The linguistic knowledge of advanced heritage speakers

In How “Native” are Heritage Speakers? Silvina Montrul describes a series of studies that compare advanced heritage and non-heritage speakers with respect to their knowledge of Spanish gender agreement. Acquired early in life, gender is a grammatical feature that is mastered with nearly 100% accuracy by native speakers. In contrast, L2 learners, and to a significantly lesser extent, heritage speakers, are prone to making mistakes with this feature.

In Montrul’s study, accuracy rates for both types of learners varied significantly by task. In oral production tasks, many heritage speakers scored within the native-speaker range and were more accurate than L2 learners. In written tasks, on the other hand, the L2 learners were more target-like than the heritage speakers. The type of nouns involved also matter. Accuracy rates in tasks involving canonical ending nouns were higher than in those involving non-canonical ones. This was true for heritage as well as non-heritage speakers. Overall, however, the heritage language speakers described by Montrul showed a much higher incidence of native-like ability than their L2 counterparts, indicating that gender agreement is a difficult area of the grammar to acquire at native-speaker level if learning begins after puberty and that linguistic exposure in the home environment contributes to more native-like ability.

Summing up the significance of these studies, Montrul writes, “early language experience and the type of input received confer some advantages to heritage speakers over L2 learners with early-acquired aspects of language, especially in oral production” (p. 31). But does early exposure, resulting in more native-like oral production, confer an advantage in language classes?

There’s reason to doubt that it does, at least as far as the advanced levels of instruction are concerned. With their heavy emphasis on writing and grammatical analysis, such classes will likely favor L2 learners, as they tend to perform better on both of these tasks. On the other hand,
it is possible that in the lower levels of instruction, more native-like competence in oral production may indeed represent an advantage for HLLs, especially if the emphasis is on communicative competence. Crucially, this alerts us to the fact that the notion of “advantage,” as it pertains to language, is context dependent.

Oksana Laleko and Masha Polinsky’s paper, *Marking Topic or Marking Case: A Comparative Investigation of Heritage Japanese and Heritage Korean*, sheds further light on this important issue. Cross-linguistic research indicates that lower proficiency HLLs have deficits in the areas of inflectional morphology and complex syntactic structures. This study shows that higher proficiency learners struggle with semantic and discourse-pragmatic computation. Laleko and Polinsky posit that phenomena at the syntax-pragmatics interface are more difficult for language learners because they involve integrating knowledge across clausal, sentential, and contextual domains as well as the simultaneous processing of linguistic and non-linguistic material.

It is important to keep in mind that the advanced heritage learners in this study outperformed their non-heritage counterparts. Thus, it is only relative to native speakers – but not to L2 learners – where it makes sense to speak of deficits in the ability of advanced heritage language speakers to engage in semantic and discourse-pragmatic computation.

What does this mean for language teaching at the higher levels of instruction? Typically, advanced language courses involve reading and analyzing texts of considerable linguistic, cognitive, and intellectual complexity. Because these tasks require integrating knowledge across domains and processing of linguistic and non-linguistic materials, HLLs may well have an edge over their non-heritage counterparts in advanced courses. Whether or not this warrants separate classes for the two types of learners at the advanced levels is another matter.
Thus, though Montrul’s and Laleko and Polinsky’s papers converge on the superiority of advanced HLLs over L2 learners with regard to particular aspects of linguistic knowledge, they diverge with regard to their pedagogical implications. On the one hand, HLLs’ more native-like semantic and discourse-pragmatic computation abilities should give them an edge in advanced courses. On the other, their superior command of gender in oral production might not represent an advantage in such classes, for the reasons discussed earlier.

Elabbas Benmamoun raises another consideration related to the notion of what constitutes an “advantage” in the classroom context. Speaking about students whose heritage language is to some extent different from the language taught in the classroom – such as would be the case with speakers of Cantonese in classes where Mandarin is taught or speakers of various Arabic dialects in classes that focus on Standard Arabic – he posits that assessment for placement purposes in such cases should take into consideration not absolute proficiency levels, “but rather to what extent their knowledge of the heritage language makes it easier to learn the classroom (standard) language” (p. 147).

Also important to this discussion is sociolinguistic competence, or the ability to make appropriate use of language, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the individuals involved. Sociolinguistic competence is one of four competencies that comprise communicative competence, along with linguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Without sociolinguistic competence, even the most perfectly grammatical utterances can fail to convey the intended meaning of the speaker (Broersma, 2001). Research indicates that language minority children are particularly skilled at facilitating communication between mainstream society and local networks of minority language speakers (García, 2009). This ability, though highly valuable in real-life situations, may not translate into an advantage in the language classroom. There is a pressing need for research in this area, along the lines of the research on
grammatical competence by Montrul and Laleko and Polinsky.

What is evident from this discussion is that the question of whether more native-like ability confers an advantage in the classroom setting does not lend itself to a clear-cut answer, but depends on a number of particulars.

Another aspect of Laleko and Polinsky’s study deserves attention. The researchers found significant differences in proficiency between Japanese and Korean heritage language speakers, although both groups of speakers were matched for age and length of exposure to their heritage language. In particular, the Korean heritage speakers exhibited more native-like abilities than their Japanese counterparts, who patterned with the L2 learners.

Laleko and Polinsky attribute Korean HLLs’ superior performance to their patterns of language use. Relative to their Japanese counterparts, they reported higher levels of parental involvement in the heritage language, more access to schooling, and a greater desire to develop their language skills. Also, in another study cited by Lakelo and Polinsky (Carreira & Kagan, 2011), Korean HLLs exhibited very high rates of participation in community or church schools and a higher degree of involvement in community events in their heritage language than heritage speakers in other languages. Laleko and Polinsky posit that this pattern of behavior by the Korean heritage language speakers translates into greater and richer exposure to Korean, resulting in more complete acquisition.

To the point of Tello’s story, these findings underscore the critical role that families and communities play in language maintenance and development. As Laleko and Polinsky conclude:

Divergence in language maintenance scenarios at the community level, manifested in different rates and trajectories of intergenerational language loss for different immigrant
languages in the U.S., may lead to sharp contrasts in ultimate proficiency levels exhibited by adult heritage language speakers. (p. 57)

Bringing the insights of experimental psycholinguistics to bear on this issue, Irina Sekerina’s paper focuses on how the interaction of various factors impact ultimate attainment in heritage language learning.

(2) Assessment

As Irina Sekerina explains in *A Psychometric Approach to Heritage Language Studies*, there are many factors that exert an influence on language learning including genetic, physiological, cognitive, developmental, and environmental. Together, these factors help explain why some learners are able to reach an advanced level of proficiency, while others are not.

Historically, heritage language teachers have relied on a relatively small number of factors to make predictions about the language skills of their learners – typically, age of arrival in the US and quantity and quality of exposure to the heritage language (see Carreira & Kagan, 2011). The two-fold assumption with regard to these factors has been that HLLs with similar profiles (1) will have roughly similar proficiency levels at the onset of instruction and (2) can reach the same level of proficiency, provided the proper conditions are present (e.g. effective instruction, the right motivation, etc.). Sekerina’s paper alerts us to the fact that this may not be so. Cognitive factors such as memory, sound perception, and aptitude may play a determinative role in ultimate attainment. She further argues that the field of HL studies needs to move to an understanding of how the interaction of multiple factors determines ultimate attainment.

Weighing in on learner variation – one of the most pressing challenges in heritage language teaching – she proposes that the field “should follow the current popular trend in adult
experimental psycholinguistics, namely that of individual differences, the aim being to modulate average group findings by factoring in natural human variability” (p. 67).

Though not discussed by Sekerina, it is important to remember that academic factors also bear on ultimate attainment. Students with solid literacy skills in English, for example, will likely develop their reading and writing skills in their heritage language at a faster pace than those who do not possess such skills. Similarly, students who are exposed to an educated register of the heritage language at home will likely progress faster than those who are not (Valdés, 1997; Wong-Fillmore, 2000). These points relate to the concept of “threshold of bilingualism,” which is the idea that in order to reap the full cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism, language minority children have to be able to “engage in complex language and literacy practices in two languages” (García, 2009, p.106). Valdés (2001) lays out some of the challenges in heritage language teaching with regard to this issue:

In the case of the teaching of heritage languages as academic subjects to students with some proficiency in the language, challenges include determining the range of proficiencies that these students have already developed in the language and understanding the ways to strengthen these proficiencies. (p. 3)

Determining proficiency is a topic addressed by Cynthia Martin, Elvira Swender and Mildred Rivera-Martinez in Assessing the Oral Proficiency of Heritage Speaker According to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012 - Speaking. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) measures speaking ability via an oral proficiency interview (OPI) which distinguishes four broad ranges of functional proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. Focusing on the latter two, Martin et al. examine what prevents heritage speakers of Russian and Spanish from reaching those ranges of proficiency. To answer this question, in a collaborative project with NHLRC they administered computer-delivered OPI
(OPIc) tests to Spanish and Russian heritage language speakers, who self-assessed as Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior. They also collected autobiographical information to understand how different life experiences correlate with the OPI ratings. Such ratings are based on the test taker’s ability to perform certain general functions in particular content areas, with some measure of comprehensibility and accuracy, and demonstrated control over basic discourse structure. All speakers with a given rating can perform the functions of that level and cannot sustain performance at the next level.

What prevents intermediate-level heritage speakers from attaining Advanced level and advanced-level heritage speakers from attaining Superior level? As Martin et al. explain, though some heritage speakers sound native-like in terms of their pronunciation and general fluency, they lack essential abilities associated with the Advanced and Superior proficiency ratings. In particular, those at the Intermediate level lack the ability to sustain a conversation outside the realm of the autobiographical and familiar, the ability to communicate in paragraph-style oral discourse and to achieve textual cohesion, all of which are requirements for attaining Advanced status. For their part, those at the Advanced level make inappropriate use of autobiographical information when discussing topics at an abstract level, supporting an idea, or hypothesizing. They also struggle to communicate effectively using extended discourse and are limited by their lexical knowledge.

These findings speak to the importance of targeting higher-order skills in language classes, since without those skills heritage language speakers are confined to the Intermediate levels of proficiency in the OPI ratings. Martin et al. note:

Explicit instruction should provide them [HLLs] with the necessary tools and practice to expand their lexical base to include more content areas that go beyond the familiar and autobiographical; practice discussing a wide range of issues from an abstract, rather than
concrete, perspective; practice producing cohesive extended discourse in order to engage in extended discussions, support opinion, and hypothesize. (p. 84)

From the point of view of heritage language teaching, these skills present significant challenges that extend beyond the strictly linguistic. The National Literacy Adult Survey (NLAS) is a national assessment of English literacy used by the US Department of Education (2006) that ranks skills needed to carry out a wide range of functions such as conducting a transaction at a bank and understanding contrasting views on an issue. These skills are ranked into four levels (Proficient, Intermediate, Basic, and Below Basic), along three scales, Prose, Document, and Quantitative. Key abilities associated with the Proficient rating include synthesizing information, making complex inferences, and integrating and analyzing multiple pieces of information located in complex documents. Crucially, there is significant overlap between the kinds of higher order skills associated with the Proficiency Level in the NLAS and those of the Advanced and Superior Levels of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

Attesting to the challenges posed by these skills, only 13% of U.S. adults rank at the Proficiency Level in the Prose and Document Scales of the NLAS. Further, to Sekerina’s point about the role of cognitive factors in ultimate language attainment, Gottfredson (1997) notes that there is a correlation between intelligence and NLAS levels, with the highest sub-level of Proficient (NLAS scores of 376-500) being associated with I.Q scores of 128 and above. Notably, only 1 out of 25 (4%) adults in the U.S. population achieve this level. The fact that so few adults reach these levels in English raises questions about how many can do so in another language. Altogether, research on the NLAS underscores the complexity and wide range of issues associated with the attainment of Advanced and Superior ratings in the ACTFL proficiency ratings.
In this regard, it is also important to remember that the teaching of these competencies and, more generally, the teaching of the standard language and the academic registers to heritage speakers, must be balanced against the need to respond to their personal needs vis-à-vis their home language and communities of residence. Attesting to the importance of balancing these objectives, Carreira and Kagan (2011) found that HLLs’ primary reasons for studying their home language in college are, first and foremost, to learn about their cultural and linguistic roots (60%) and, second, to communicate better with family and friends in the United States (58%). Professional goals are also of importance to a significant number of learners (49%), with telling differences between languages. Notably, professional goals appear to be markedly more important to Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese speakers than to speakers of other languages.

Weighing in on the role that different factors play in the attainment of higher proficiency, Martin et al. note:

Not surprisingly, speakers of both languages who rated Advanced or Superior 1) had either lived in a country or spent significant time in a country where the language is spoken, and 2) reported having had formal instruction in the heritage language at the college level. There appears to be a strong connection between those who had formal, college-level instruction in the heritage language and those who reached higher proficiency levels. (p. 83)

The next section focuses on the second of the above conditions, namely, the role of formal instruction in facilitating the attainment of higher proficiency levels. The papers in this section offer concrete examples of best practices in heritage language teaching and address administrative and institutional issues that bear on the teaching of heritage languages.
(3) Instruction and curriculum and program design

Looking at how instruction contributes to the acquisition of advanced to superior level skills, Dan Davidson and Maria Lekic’s paper, *Comparing Heritage and Non Heritage Learning Outcomes and Target Language Utilization in the Overseas Immersion Context: A Preliminary Study of the Russian Flagship*, examines learner outcomes for Russian heritage and non-heritage students in a year-long Flagship program. In post-program assessments, a large majority of the HLLs (70%) achieved an outcome score of 4 across the four modalities and the rest achieved a score of 3. These results compare favorably with those of the non-HLLs, who scored in the range of 3 to 3+. Reading, in particular, emerges as an area where HLLs made remarkable strides, with 70% of such participants advancing from a pre-program reading level of 2+ to a level of 4. By comparison, only thirty-eight percent of non-HLLs reached level 4 at the end of the program, with most of them advancing from 2+ to 3+.

In evaluating these findings, it is important to note that admission to the Flagship program is highly competitive. Students have to demonstrate Advanced Proficiency (ILR Level 2) in speaking and in at least one other skill. They also have to submit an application packet which includes letters of recommendation, a statement of purpose, their academic records, etc. As such, the heritage learners in this study may not be representative of HLLs at large, in terms of their proficiency in the target language as well as their aptitude for language learning, general academic skills, and motivation levels. That being said, the findings of the study surrounding participants’ language utilization behavior and post-program self-assessment provide valuable insights for all heritage-language teaching contexts.

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2 These numbers refers to proficiency levels used by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) to assess the ability to function in a given non-English language. ILR proficiency levels are assigned by modality (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as follows, from highest to lowest: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and 0, with each level including plus and minus sub-levels. The ACTFL proficiency levels, Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice, are also assigned by modality, contain the sublevels high, mid, and low, and are considered largely analogous to the ILR scale. For information about proficiency level descriptors, see American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012) and Interagency Language Roundtable (n. d.).
Regarding language utilization behavior, both categories of students were found to demonstrate the kind of discretionary behaviors consistent with the “high-gainer” profile (i.e. two-threshold gainers, e.g. moving from Level 2 to Level 4). Such behavior includes engaging in academic reading, following the press, and spending time with friends. Within the high gainers, the HLLs devoted more time to cultural events, homework, reading for pleasure, and interacting with friends, while the non-heritage leaners were more likely to spend time with their host families and following the media.

In their post-program self-assessment, HLLs singled out two components of the Flagship program as contributing most to their development: internships and field trips. For their part, non-HLLs singled out home stays and free time. The post-program self-assessment scores also show that HLLs are more critical of their language performance than their non-heritage peers. These findings corroborate those of other studies and underscore the importance of teaching critical linguistic awareness to HLLs as a way to help them deal with their linguistic insecurities (Martinez, 2003; McGregor Mendoza, 2000). Tello’s story points to another effective strategy, namely, reaching out to community members and other heritage speakers for linguistic support and guidance.

Davidson and Lekic conclude: “the acquisition of professional level language and cultural proficiency is entirely possible for the adult learner of Russian within the context of the Russian Overseas Flagship immersion model” (p. 109). Though not mentioned in the article, another conclusion would seem to be that at the advanced level mixed programs (i.e. programs with heritage and non-heritage learners) can prove highly effective. In particular, this study and Maria Luisa Parra’s (discussed next) join an emerging area of research that indicates that the key to providing effective instruction in mixed contexts lies in offering activities that are responsive
to the needs of both types of learners (Bowles, 2011a,b; Carreira, 2007a; Kagan & Kudyma, 2012; Katz, 2003; Villa, 2004).

In Expanding Language and Cultural Competence in Advanced Heritage- and Foreign-Language Learners through Community Engagement and Work with the Arts, Maria Luisa Parra describes a mixed course that incorporates some of the exemplary practices of the Russian Flagship, as well as others. Taught at Harvard University, the class is a fourth year course designed for students with intermediate to high levels of proficiency (heritage and non-heritage alike). Though not specifically designed to create advanced-level language users, its practices are clearly in line with those of Flagship programs, such as the Russian one described above, which have a record of success in this regard.

The course meets for three hours per week and also requires four hours of volunteer work per week in organizations serving the Latino community. The focus is on the experience of Latinos in the United States, including immigration, identity, and language practices. Following a multiliteracy approach, students learn about these and other topics through a variety of genres (e.g. readings, film, music, and print art) for the purpose of advancing their language skills, translinguistic and transcultural competency, critical thinking skills, and linguistic awareness.

The topics, approach, and goals of the class are particularly apropos for a course which seeks to connect classroom learning with the practices of the community and which enrolls heritage and non-heritage learners. Chosen to provide the skills and tools to make meaningful, informed, and correct use of Spanish in the US, they are particularly important for non-HLLs, whose knowledge of Spanish typically comes from formal instruction rather than from real-life interactions. For HLLs, the topics and approach lend themselves to exploring a gamut of issues that are known to bear on heritage language maintenance and development – from language
prejudice to linguistic variation and inter-generational differences with regard to hybrid identities (Martinez, 2003; Potowski, 2005).

Community ties – so important in Tello’s story - are cultivated in this course primarily by way of the service component. Students are placed in organizations that match their interests (e.g. adult literacy in Spanish, ESL, GED, legal services, women’s health, unemployment, and civic engagement). As Parra explains: “Such experience not only complements the classroom’s theoretical work but brings students to a different level of understanding about the community and facilitates the advancement of transcultural knowledge” (p. 121). Like the internship component of the Flagship program, the service component offers students the opportunity to put their linguistic skills to use in formal and semi-formal real-world contexts.

The Spanish class also has a fieldtrip and a guided visit to the university museum, where students focus on three works that speak to the immigrant experience from the perspective of Latin American and Latino artists. A critical component of the course, this fieldtrip informs the final project, which includes the production of an art object, a written essay, and a class presentation. As is the case with the Russian Flagship discussed by Davidson and Lekic, it is not unreasonable to wonder to what extent the remarkable final projects described by Parra stem from the quality of her students - highly motivated and experienced language learners at Harvard. Students in Flagship programs display similar experience and motivation, so the Harvard curriculum may be highly relevant.

In all, the Spanish class offers two activities akin to those singled out by the heritage speakers in the Russian Flagship as being particularly valuable to their development, namely the service component and the field trip. It also offers a number of “high-gain” activities for each type of learner: cultural events, homework, and extensive reading for HLLs, and for non-HLLs,
media use and opportunities to interact with community members, by way of the service component and visits with guests speakers.

Both programs showcase the promise of well-crafted instructional options and speak to the importance of understanding the institutional conditions that make such options possible. Using a question and answer format, Elabbas Benmamoun and Olga Kagan address some of the most pressing administrative issues surrounding heritage language teaching in their paper, *Administration of Heritage Language Programs: Challenges and Opportunities*. Chief among these is the question of whether to have separate tracks for heritage and non-heritage students.

Among practitioners there is a sense that HLLs are different enough from second language learners to warrant specialized courses. This assessment is believed to be particularly valid as it concerns the lower levels of instruction where, the reasoning goes, HLLs’ linguistic abilities, no matter how limited, are likely to exceed those of non-HLLs. However, Benmamoun points out that this rationale may not always hold. For example, heritage Arabic speakers with no knowledge of the standard language and no literacy skills may not necessarily have an edge over their non-heritage peers in classes where these topics constitute the focus of instruction. On the other hand, if the focus is on developing basic communicative and cultural competence, the rationale for separate sections may hold. Kagan argues that in either scenario HLLs and non-HLLs should ideally be separated because they are best served by very different curricula and teaching approaches. Another important consideration is that HLLs are able to advance to higher levels of proficiency faster than non-HLLs, with the right instruction.

Be that as it may, for many language programs the question of whether to offer specialized or mixed courses is moot. With limited resources and a lack of trained instructors,

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3 The same situation holds for languages such as Chinese, Hindi-Urdu, and Haitian.
many programs simply cannot support separate instruction for HLLs. The critical question facing these programs is how to optimize learning for HLLs and non-HLLs in mixed classes.

Emerging research indicates that mixed classes may be more the norm than the exception in language programs with a heritage language population. In Spanish, which by virtue of its favorable demographics may be in the best position to offer specialized heritage language courses, only 40% of post-secondary programs offer such courses (Beaudrie, 2011). Roughly similar results appear to hold across languages. An ongoing survey by the NHLRC covering a wide range of languages, including Spanish, indicates that fewer than half of post-secondary language programs (46%) with HLLs have specialized courses for these learners. In some languages these numbers are significantly lower (e.g. Arabic 7%, Hindi-Urdu 27%). At the advanced levels of instruction, specialized heritage language courses are even more rare (<5%), raising serious concerns about the prospects of developing the kinds of advanced competencies described by Martin et al.

It is important to note that these results likely overstate the availability of courses that actually offer specialized instruction for HLLs. A close look at some of the courses labeled as “heritage language courses” in the survey may actually reveal that these are no different from their L2 counterparts in terms of content and materials. Thus, some programs which ostensibly have two tracks, one for heritage speakers and another for non-heritage speakers, may actually have separate but equal instruction for both types of learners – not specialized instruction for HLLs.

At the advanced levels of instruction, the common wisdom is that the differences between HLLs and non-HLLs pose fewer teaching and curricular challenges, for the reasons put forth by Benmamoun:
Higher levels usually focus on complex texts and writing where knowledge of the heritage variety may not confer a particular edge or where the differences between heritage and non-heritage students may not be significant, but again the instructor should be aware of the specific needs of heritage and non-heritage students and adjust and target the instructional materials accordingly. (p. 148)

To attend to such needs and target instruction accordingly, language teachers must be well versed in the methods of Differentiation and Learner-centered Instruction. Predicated on the notion that teaching should be responsive to student differences and reach out to learners at their own level of readiness (Tomlinson, 1999), these approaches fall under the umbrella of “teaching in multilevel classrooms,” a term that covers many different teaching situations, all of which involve learners that differ from each other in pedagogically significant ways (for an overview of this topic see Berry & Williams, 1992, and Hess, 2001). The NHLRC and STARTALK have developed a free-access, online workshop for teachers that offers an introduction to the principles of Learner-centered Instruction and Differentiation, along with other best practices of heritage language teaching (National Heritage Language Resource Center & STARTALK., n. d.). This project seeks to address the critical need for training in heritage language instruction among foreign language teachers

The need to differentiate is also present at the institutional level, for as Kagan notes “all educational decisions are local” and bound by a number of factors, including the financial health of the institution where teaching takes place, the size of the heritage language population, and faculty interests and initiative (p. 146). The challenge for educators is to tap into the possibilities that present themselves for optimizing teaching and learning within their own institutions. Innovation, as Benmamoun underscores, is key “for sustaining heritage language programs and
making them significant players in the teaching, research, and service missions of their universities” (p. 153).

**Conclusions**

As the papers discussed above illustrate, the attainment of advanced or superior status does not happen spontaneously, but requires the right combination of linguistic, environmental, and institutional factors. Montrul’s and Laleko and Polinsky’s studies show that heritage speakers are particularly well situated to reach the higher levels of proficiency by virtue of their more-native-like knowledge of particular aspects of language that result from early exposure in the home environment. But home exposure alone does not suffice. To attain such levels and reap the full social and cognitive benefits of bilingualism, instruction must target the higher order skills discussed by Martin et al.

From the point of view of teaching and program design, this position paper strives to offer new perspectives on two of the most commonly asked questions by practitioners: (1) are HLLs better/more native-like than L2 learners?, and (2) Is separate instruction for HLLs to be preferred over mixed classes?

The research discussed suggests that in place of (1), practitioners might be better served by asking how well matched the skills of particular learners are to the requirements and objectives of particular courses or assessment tools. In light of the administrative restrictions discussed by Benmamoun and Kagan, a more productive question than (2) might be to ask how to optimize learning for HLLs and non-HLLs within the institutional possibilities that present themselves. Parra’s and Davidson and Lekic’s contributions serve as important guideposts in this regard. Other examples of outstanding programs would further enrich our understanding of what is possible under different institutional conditions.
If there is a common thread that runs through all of the studies discussed, it is the importance of attending to learner differences. Though by no means a novel concept in heritage language teaching, it is largely novel as it pertains to the advanced levels of proficiency, where learner differences are not typically seen as a particularly serious problem to be dealt with. As Sekerina reminds us, there is much work to be done before fully understanding these differences and the factors that give rise to them.
References


Carreira, Maria. (2007b). Teaching Spanish to Native Speakers in Mixed Ability Language Classrooms.” In K. Potowski and R. Cameron (Eds.), *Spanish in contact: Policy, social and linguistic inquiries*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press (pp. 61-80).


