

The heritage language global think tank: collaboration across countries

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The Heritage Language Global Think Tank was formed in 2022, when a group of us realized that people in many countries are focused on and working with community-based heritage language (CBHL) schools, that we have a lot in common, and that there are many activities in which we can jointly engage to help make these schools more sustainable in all countries. We formed the group of passionate professionals from around the world involved in heritage language education (currently from 14 countries; the full list is available on the homepage), who come together regularly to generate new ideas about and seek to improve the recognition, visibility, vitality, quality, and sustainability of CBHL education programs globally. The Think Tank brings a global perspective to these goals, with a focus on global action and policy, human rights, and equity.

At the core of the work of the Think Tank participants is the ambition to ensure that multilingual students receive a high-quality language education that provides them with self-confidence, a strong sense of identity, intercultural competence, and lifelong skills that will benefit them in our increasingly globalized society. Our goals include improving the vitality of community-based heritage language programs and connecting them with mainstream education; supporting administrators and teachers in heritage language programs, who face many challenges; discovering, documenting, and sharing the most effective strategies used by heritage language program leaders; motivating students and their families to continue to use the language and develop proficiency in it; granting recognition to students for their proficiency in their heritage language; and protecting students' universal rights to study and develop high levels of proficiency in their heritage language. By sharing and comparing efforts in different regions of the world, we seek to identify activities that could be effective across many different contexts.

Pedagogical strategies in the heritage language global think tank

The Heritage Language (HL) Global Think Tank provides a platform for exchanging professional experiences, sharing information about projects, and discussing research activities related to HL education. It brings together scholars, researchers, and practitioners from around the world. It also offers targeted support for teachers, providing methodical guidance, workshops, and courses tailored to the needs of HL, foreign language, and L1 learners. The growing collaboration highlights the complexity of HL education and the importance of adapting teaching to learners' unique linguistic and cultural profiles.

One of the most common challenges in HL education is that the instructional approach must differ from mainstream teaching (Brinton et al., 2017; Montrul, 2016). HL learners occupy a unique position: they often have prior exposure to the language in home or community settings, but usually lack experience using it in formal contexts, since the HL is primarily used within the family and community. This requires providing them with specialized support in academic settings, as their language exposure differs substantially from that of learners educated exclusively through the language of instruction. In contrast, foreign language learners generally start with no prior knowledge (Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2013). As a result, standard foreign language methodologies—such as grammar drills, vocabulary

exercises, or the use of basic sociocultural phrases—do not fully meet the needs of HL learners and require careful adaptation (Kagan, Carreira and Chik, 2017; Montrul, 2016).

HL learners may have strong oral comprehension but lack formal literacy, grammatical accuracy, or domain-specific vocabulary. Proficiency levels can also vary significantly among students within the same class, even when they share a similar linguistic background. Therefore, teachers in HL schools must adopt differentiated instructional strategies. These strategies should address diverse needs, support language maintenance and development, and help students succeed in academic contexts (Cummins, 2015; Kagan, Carreira and Chik, 2017).

Specialized pedagogy for HL education also requires an understanding of cultural and linguistic identity (Brinton, Kagan and Bauckus, 2017; Valdés, 2017). Teaching materials need to reflect learners' heritage culture, enhancing motivation and engagement while reinforcing linguistic competence. According to Boccou Kestřánková and Paap (in press), teaching materials should support pedagogical strategies that consider the wide range of language proficiency levels among students within a classroom. Instruction should not focus mainly on language analysis or the expansion of peripheral vocabulary. Since HL teachers may also be volunteers without formal qualifications, it is essential to provide them with professional support and methodological guidance. With appropriate materials and continued teacher training, instruction can be better directed toward language use in contexts that HL learners commonly encounter and in which they need to use their HL. Incorporating students' cultural knowledge and linking insights between the culture of the majority education environment and the HL culture strengthens learners' identity and their relationship with the HL.

Given these factors, there is a clear need for the development of specialized pedagogical approaches, instructional strategies, and teaching materials tailored to the specific needs of HL learners. By acknowledging the unique linguistic and cultural characteristics of these learners, educational programs can more effectively support language maintenance, proficiency development, and positive identity formation (Boccou Kestřánková & Paap, in press).

Global think tank initiatives

Infographic for school leaders and parents

An infographic for school leaders and parents, 9 Myths about Heritage Language Education (Cannizaro, 2022), selected from 40 misperceptions about heritage language education, was collected from partners around the world, with responses to those misperceptions. They include:

- Multilingualism is confusing for children.

Actually, children who are properly supported can enjoy many benefits of speaking more than one language!

- Heritage language education is unnecessary. Speaking at home is enough, right?

Actually, a child who can speak fluently can still lack important skills in the heritage language.

- Heritage language education disrupts mainstream education.

Actually, children can make use of their knowledge of the heritage language to help them develop the school language.

We make an effort to ensure that all school staff and parents have access to this document, which addresses common issues that they struggle with.

International guidelines for professional practices in community-based heritage language schools

The Think Tank members have collaborated to develop and publish the *International Guidelines for Professional Practice*, with a Review Rubric that defines universal principles and good practices to guide HL programs as they seek to grow and improve. Groups of staff in a program can work together to review and evaluate all of the components of their program and make a plan for improvement.

Connecting community-based programs and public schools and universities

Although CBHL schools are a vital part of the language learning landscape, with thousands of schools teaching hundreds of languages and with students reaching high levels of proficiency in their language, they are not often recognized or valued by public schools and universities. We are seeking to change that and to create partnerships and collaborations among these sectors. One of the components of this initiative is to create a document about injustices and political pressure that some HL communities and programs are experiencing, with guidance for making improvements.

Recognizing students in community-based programs for their language proficiency

Many students in CBHLs remain in the program from a very young age (often pre-kindergarten) throughout high school and reach a level of proficiency that allows them to participate in college-level classes in the language, in their country of origin or in the United States. We are seeking ways to help programs recognize this proficiency in formal ways, including through the Global Seal of Biliteracy, in the United States the State Seals of Biliteracy, and other awards.

Developing comprehensive heritage language school networks

In the United States, the Coalition of Community-Based Heritage Language Schools seeks to identify, document, connect, support, and advocate for all CBHLs, teaching all languages. We have made significant progress and hold an annual conference for leaders of these schools. This conference is in a hybrid format and has attracted international audiences.

In Europe, FOHLC Europe has organized annual conferences between 2021-2024, with topics covering “Future-proofing heritage language education,” “Multilingual children and multilingual libraries,” “Harvesting support for HL education,” and “Rethinking incentives - how to bolster motivation”. FOHLC Europe has organized two online FOHLC Cafés a year and created a blog for sharing practical and theoretical information for CBHL schools and interested audiences. FOHLC Europe has joined forces with the Think Tank and introduced a shared Heritage Language Blog.

A global call to action for heritage language education

At the occasion of the International Mother Language Day 2024, the Think Tank created a manifesto for stakeholders, such as HL pupils, families, schools, administration, libraries, policy makers, journalists and the public. In a simple way, people can commit to supporting heritage language education and schools in small and large ways. The Global Call to Action for Heritage Language Education is accompanied by a simplified checklist that makes the message of the global call to action even more accessible.



Working Groups

During the three years of its existence, the Think Tank members have participated in several working groups established informally as a response to rich discussions and identified needs. For example, the Global Call to Action, mapping of HL schools, drawing attention to racialized discriminatory news on various media, collaborations between compulsory and HL schools, and other issues have led to rich collaborations and outputs. The Global Think Tank group meets four times a year, and we report on our progress in these and other arenas. We seek to engage, encourage, and empower each other and CBHL program leaders around the world, and are inspired and guided by our Global Call to Action for Heritage Language Education.

The work of the HL Global Think Tank addresses issues that are at the core of the *ERL Journal*, the relations of heritage languages and schools, language learning and teaching, and it advocates for heritage language education as an important part of the global language education sector.

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