

# Heritage languages: the State of the Art and National Trends

Dennie Hoopingarner, Michigan State University

*Talk given on July 14, 2004 at a workshop for LCTL heritage language teachers at the Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University*

I'm going to talk this morning about some things that are happening with foreign languages on the national stage, and then try to relate it to local community heritage language schools. This is an interesting time to be involved with heritage language. By "interesting," of course, I mean unstable, uncertain, unexpected, unclear, unpredictable, and a lot of other adjectives that make us uncomfortable. In many ways, heritage language is exactly where it has been for decades. What is different is that more people are paying attention to it now. Community language schools are in the position of being able to profit from this national attention, which makes this an exciting time to be involved in heritage language.

## The National Scene

First, let me give you a brief look at what's happening nationally with foreign language. On the national stage, the role that language skills can play in the security, well being and future prosperity of this country is recognized to a degree not seen probably since 1957.

It's not just the US government that needs people who are fluent in foreign languages. According to the "Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages," the fields of international diplomacy, foreign relations, and trade; business, marketing, media, and public relations; national security and defense; law; engineering; education; medical and health, environmental, and service professions, and community development all need professionals who are highly proficient in English and other languages. In our modern world, which is bringing people from different countries and cultures together to an extent never seen before, we need people who can communicate across language and cultures more than ever.

I mentioned 1957 a minute ago. In that year, the US was thrown into a panic because the Soviet Union launched a satellite into outer space, evidence that they were "winning" some international "race." The aftermath of that scare led to Congress allocating resources to the teaching of math, science, and engineering. The motivation was to catch up with the Russians, and eventually pass them. Interestingly, though, included among those scientific areas was also funding for the teaching of foreign languages, \$8 million per year to be allocated to universities. Michigan State University got a piece of that action, receiving money to construct Wells Hall, which is why we have housed in that building the departments of Math, Statistics, for a while Computer Science, and Linguistics in the same building. A strange combination on the surface, but it makes sense if

you realize that the funding was from the National Defense Education Act of 1958.

The big event that caused the current interest in foreign language was 9/11. I can remember watching CNN in the weeks that followed September 11, 2001. Scrolling across the bottom of the screen was a continuous message asking for people who could speak certain languages to contact the FBI's special 1-800 number. Not surprisingly, languages that were listed were Arabic, Farsi, Dari, and Pashto, languages spoken in regions of the world that we just KNEW we would be bombing in a matter of days. But included in the list were languages like Haitian Creole, Korean, and Chinese. All of these languages are what the government calls "strategic languages," meaning languages spoken in countries that they feel the need to keep an eye on. In a recent conversation that I had with a person from the FBI, she actually used the term "9/11 languages."

We have seen some new resources allocated to languages already, and more is visible on the horizon. In April of this year, the Senate started work on the "Homeland Security Education Act." The goal of this bill is to "ensure national security through increasing the quantity, diversity, and quality of the teaching and learning of subjects in the fields of science, mathematics, and foreign languages." Sounds a lot like the National Defense Education Act of 1958, doesn't it?

In 2002, the number of federally-funded Language Resource Centers increased from 9 to 14. These LRCs are hosted within large, research universities in the US, and are mandated to work toward improving the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Michigan State was one of the recipients of this funding. Interestingly, although encouraged to do so by the Department of Education, no institution put in a proposal to establish a center that specialized in Arabic language and the Mid-East region. After all the proposals were submitted, the US Department of Education actually had to allocate additional money for another center to specialize in Arabic, and issued a new call for proposals. They essentially said, here's a million dollars, please, somebody, take it and do something in Arabic. Even after that, it took a consortium of several institutions to pool their human resources and assemble a team that could actually accomplish something.

The languages that we are in need of are the languages that are learned by a very small number of students in this country as foreign languages, if they are learned at all. According to a national enrollment survey conducted in 2002, there are several languages that have no people at all studying them, and many more with national enrollments in the single digits. That's why the FBI had to make an appeal to the nation at large: there was, and still is, no centralized place where they can turn to find speakers of these exotic languages. You could literally use your two hands to count the number of people in the US who graduated with a degree in Arabic in 2001. It seemed to me that the FBI and other government

agencies were just waking up to the fact that it is important to be able to understand what people in troubled areas of the world were saying, and that they were terribly unprepared to do so on their own.

An interesting paradox exists in this country. According to the US census, 18% of Americans speak a language other than English at home. 600,000 people in this country speak Arabic. 900,000 speak Korean. 2 million speak Chinese. And yet, the US government can't seem to find professionals who speak these languages. What's going on?

The paradox can be resolved with some more information. The US census data reflects the language speaking patterns for both immigrants and their children. The immigrants of course speak their languages, and their children grew up hearing it at home, but they were educated in this country, and they consider themselves Americans, and English is their native language. They don't feel that they have the language skills that their parents do in their parents' languages, with good reason. They don't. But these heritage speakers have knowledge of the language and the culture that are the envy of students of these languages as foreign languages. They do not have the professional language skills that are needed, but they have a huge head-start over beginners.

These speakers are a great resource. There is potential in these heritage speakers to be a source of the language expertise that we do not have, and can only get through great expense and time. But before I talk about that, I have to talk about the pattern of language enrollments in high school and higher education in this country.

## Less Commonly Taught Languages

There is an old American joke: Where does an 800-pound gorilla sit? The answer is, anywhere it wants to. The joke represents the concept that something that is so much bigger than anything else has a great deal of influence. In the world of foreign language teaching in America, the 800 pound gorilla is ... Spanish.

Enrollments in foreign languages show an interesting phenomenon. The Modern Language Association conducts periodic surveys of foreign language enrollments. The most recent data is for Fall 2002. Not surprisingly, Spanish is the most commonly taught foreign language in the US, outstripping all of the other languages COMBINED. Yes, Spanish makes up more than half of all foreign language enrollments in US institutions of higher education.

The reasons that we see the enrollment patterns that we do are intriguing. This country has a peculiar attitude toward languages. Only 10% of American college students are taking a language right now. I don't believe that Americans think that it is not important to learn a language. I think we all have an appreciation for the importance of language skills. Although there are a lot of Americans who

honestly think that everyone in the world should “just learn English,” even those people understand that most people in the world aren’t going to learn English, but we still need to understand what they’re saying. I think the reason we don’t study languages is that we’re afraid and lazy. We know how hard it is to learn a foreign language, the amount of time required, and we just don’t want to make the commitment to spend all that effort to learn a language.

If we have to learn a foreign language, many choose Spanish because it is seen as an easy language. In addition, America’s large and growing Hispanic population has made Spanish a second language in this country. It is in our face, so to speak, and so it is hard to ignore the fact that not everyone speaks English.

We have a term in my field: LCTLs, which stands for Less Commonly Taught Languages. Generally speaking, it means any languages except English, French, German, and Spanish. As the name implies, it means those languages are not taught in the numbers that the other languages are. The typical high school foreign language offerings are French, German and Spanish. We see a very similar pattern in community colleges and small colleges. Some might add Japanese to the mix, usually with a part-time instructor teaching one section per semester, and rarely at a higher level than the second year.

Some LCTLs are less commonly taught than others. For example, Chinese is considered a LCTL, although with 34,000 students studying it in colleges across the country, it dwarfs languages such as Dutch, with a national enrollment of 375, Egyptian with 47, and Latvian with only 8 people in this country studying it. Still, the least taught of the most taught, German, has a national enrollment of 89,000, which is much more than Chinese. So we keep the distinction between the commonly and the less commonly taughts.

The irony is that the less commonly taughts are the most commonly spoken in the world outside the US. Hindi, for example, is the language of the country with the largest democracy in the world. India has a population of over one billion people, nearly 4 times the population of the USA. And yet only 1,430 people study Hindi in colleges and universities in this country.

LCTLs are not, generally speaking, taught in K-12 system. In Michigan, we find some Japanese programs in high schools, there are a few Chinese programs in the Detroit area, maybe a Russian or Korean program here and there, but nowhere near the enrollments for the most commonly taught languages. And the situation in higher education, as I mentioned earlier, is not much better. Even a large university like Michigan State, with an enrollment of 44,000 students, only teaches 14 LCTLs regularly: Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Ojibwe, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. And only strong enrollments in the first 2 years. The MLA tracks enrollments in only 147 languages, and no university teaches every one of these languages. Just as a point of reference, the online database “Ethnologue” tracks

1,000 languages, and indicates that there are 6,809 living languages today. Most of them are, of course, LCTLs.

Where will the country get speakers of these languages for all its various needs, business, health care, legal, social, education, community services, diplomacy, law enforcement? Not the education system. We just aren't teaching these languages there. But we are teaching these languages in other places: community heritage language schools. And, not only are they doing what the education system isn't, they have a better chance of success than the education system does. More on that in a little bit, but that leads me to an interesting hypothesis: Heritage LCTL schools, these community language schools, are the only source of the next generation of speakers who will have the ability to meet the country's language needs.

Let me support that hypothesis with what looks like bad news, but what should actually be encouraging news.

At a conference on heritage languages in Washington DC a few years ago, a person in charge of language assessment for the FBI described what she called the language deficiencies of heritage language speakers. I should point out that the FBI has a great demand for language skills. Their organization does its own training, assessment, and recruitment for speakers of many languages as translators. After 9/11, the FBI doubled the number of translators on its payroll. This official who coordinates the assessment of translators' language skills said that heritage speakers scored "only" a 2 or 2+ on a scale of 1 to 5. In her opinion, it was not worth her time to work with heritage speakers, since their language backgrounds were not standard. In her opinion, it would be troublesome to bring them up to the standards that they need.

What is interesting is that these heritage speakers who walked in off the street showed language proficiency at least as good as those with college degrees in the languages. This is with no formal language training at all. If I were in the business of finding people with advanced language skills, and I had a training budget, I sure wouldn't spend my money on teaching beginning language skills. I would spend my money on taking people with already very good language skills, and bringing them up to a proficiency level that I need.

Nearly three years after 9/11, the situation faced by government agencies in the wake of 9/11 has not changed. According to a 2002 US General Accounting Office report, there are still many vacant positions in the over 70 government agencies that require foreign language skills. In some agencies, 44% of positions in certain job categories are vacant because they simply can't find people with the required language proficiency.

The US needs high proficiency in LCTLs. More than 70 US government agencies need professionals with language expertise. And they need people who know

more than how to say “hello, how are you? Where’s the bathroom?” They need people who are “Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations,” which is a description of level 4 proficiency in the ILR scale, called “Professional Working Proficiency.” A more detailed description is as follows. Think about the language skills of your students as you read this.

Professional working proficiency is the fourth level of five in the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale of language proficiency, formerly called the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) scale. This level is sometimes referred to as S-3 or Level 3. A person at this level is described as follows:

- able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics
- can discuss particular interests and special fields of competence with reasonable ease
- has comprehension which is quite complete for a normal rate of speech
- has a general vocabulary which is broad enough that he or she rarely has to grope for a word
- has an accent which may be obviously foreign; has a good control of grammar; and whose errors virtually never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker.

Foreign language teachers in this country may think that their students graduate with these skills, but in fact, the experience of those graduates who apply for jobs that require this level of proficiency find that this is not the case. A college language program does not bring students to this level of proficiency, which by the way is in the middle, not the top, of the scale. Why don’t they? Because they don’t have enough time to do so.

### Amount of time required to reach advanced proficiency

How long does it take to get someone to the level of proficiency to really do something useful in the language? The best numbers on this scale come from the US military, which spends an awful lot of time and resources to teach foreign languages. They’ve been doing this in earnest for over 60 years, and they are doing something right, because they really do produce large numbers of speakers of the languages with high levels of proficiency.

In the 1970s, the Foreign Service Institute, the Defense Language Institute, and other governmental bodies concerned with language learning established a scale of “Expected Levels of Absolute Speaking Proficiency in Languages.” They divided all the languages taught at the institutes into four groups, based on the achievement level a student may expect after a certain period of study.

In Group I are languages that are relatively easy for native speakers of English: Afrikaans, Dutch, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swahili, for example. Students of these languages can expect to achieve Advanced proficiency after about 750 hours of study.

In Group II are slightly more difficult languages, Bulgarian, Farsi, German, Greek, Indonesian, and Hindi among them. It takes about 1320 hours of study to reach the Advanced level in these languages.

In Group III are such languages as Bengali, Czech, Hebrew, Russian, and Thai. Students may achieve Advanced skills after about 1500 hours of study.

Group IV, the most difficult languages, includes Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. These languages require as many as 2760 hours of study for Advanced level competency.

The Defense Language Institute's "Language Schools" have been teaching students for 60 years. The DLI has different lengths of programs for different languages. These programs teach the language for 6 hours a day, 5 days a week, and are designed to reach "basic proficiency." The language programs vary in length, corresponding to the language groups.

25 weeks: Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese ( $25 * 6 * 5 = 750$  hours)

34 Weeks: German ( $34 * 6 * 5 = 1020$  hours)

47 weeks: Russian, Farsi, Turkish, Hebrew, Serbian & Croatian, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Thai ( $47 * 6 * 5 = 1410$  hours)

63 weeks: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean ( $63 * 6 * 5 = 1890$  hours)

Now let's compare those numbers with the number of hours of instruction in a college foreign language curriculum. Let's be very optimistic and say that students in college foreign language programs attend class for an hour a day, 5 days a week. This is actually an unrealistically high number, though. In many programs, classes meet only 3 days per week, and the "hour" is really 50 minutes. But that just makes my point even stronger. We'll go with the high numbers for now.

Let's also assume that a student takes a language for 4 years. That, again, is overly optimistic. We see enrollments drop sharply after the second year. Why? Because that's when they fill the requirement. Many programs require two years

of language. Many students do the minimum required, then drop out. But let's look at those students who stick with it for 4 years. The math then looks like this:

5 hours a week x 15 weeks per semester x 2 semesters per year \* 4 years = 600 hours over 4 years.

The number of hours, 600 over 4 years, is less than that is required to get to advanced-level proficiency in the "easy" languages such as Spanish. No wonder we can't speak the languages! Think about how much a student would know after 600 hours of a hard language like Japanese or Korean.

These numbers make it clear to me that students can't attain high levels of proficiency in college, even in intensive programs. If the country wants speakers with advanced language skills, it will have to look elsewhere, because it isn't going to get it from colleges.

**Heritage language speakers + the education system =  
disappointment**

Unfortunately, it isn't just a simple matter of putting heritage learners in the regular language program.

Heritage speakers are often disappointed with college language programs. Higher ed just isn't prepared to handle heritage speakers. For one thing, there are almost no classes or programs for heritage speakers. They are thrown right into the classrooms with the beginners. At first, it looks like they will have an easy time with the class. They already have a great deal of knowledge of the language. However, their knowledge is imperfect. They don't know the formal language system. Their language often contains aspects of regional dialect that is not standard. Their vocabulary is limited, and they have no understanding of what is known as "language register," in other words, formal versus informal language, and different language use for specific situations. In short, heritage language learners are not native speakers of the language. They are still learners of the language, but their needs are different from those students who are just beginning learning the language. The foreign language class is not a good match for their needs.

To make matters worse, language instructors don't like them being in the class. They are seen as intimidating the absolute beginners. Many instructors look down on them, thinking that they are looking for an easy grade. If we were to ask heritage students why they want to study the language in college, they would probably not say that they wanted to get an easy grade, or that they wanted to make American students feel stupid, or that they wanted to make the instructor's job harder. They would probably say that they wanted to reconnect with their

heritage language, and that this language class, while not a perfect match, is the only option that they have.

I can give you an example of such a disaster. At MSU, we started a Korean program a few years ago. To the dismay of the instructor and the program coordinator, most of the students who enrolled were heritage learners. These were kids whose parents were immigrants. They went to Korean language schools at children, but didn't want to learn the language then. They were too busy at the time being American kids. By the time they were in college, they began to show an interest in their heritage, and when the opportunity arose to re-learn their heritage language, they jumped at it.

But this was not the student population that the university had prepared for. Instead of a classroom of white faces and absolute beginners to Korean, the instructor saw a mixed class of heritage and foreign-language learners. Some administrators became angry with these students, considering them disruptive to the class. Eventually, they saw the situation for what it was. The instructor was skilled enough to be able to teach both groups of students, and we had a happy ending. But I can tell you that this level of understanding on the part of the school does not come automatically. Colleges need to be educated about the heritage learner in the language classroom, and heritage learners need advocates to help the college adapt to, and accommodate, the heritage learner.

It may be that at least for the time being, heritage language is best taught by heritage language schools. These are the institutions that are best prepared to deal with the language needs of heritage learners.

## Heritage Language Schools

Heritage language schools have been around for at least 150 years. Generally, they exist to maintain a cultural link to the "home country" of immigrants and their children. In the case of Chinese schools, the link is primarily an ethnic and cultural one. In the case of other schools, for example Hebrew schools, the cultural goal is mainly religious. Generally, though, there are three main purposes of heritage language schools:

1. Language
2. Culture
3. Community

The importance of language in the overall program depends on the individual school. For some schools, the language goals are narrow in scope. Maybe they just want kids to be able to read religious materials or conduct worship ceremonies in the language. Maybe they just want the kids to be able to say a few phrases in the language. Or maybe the schools want to maintain the kids' language proficiency to the point where they can merge into the educational

system of the home country. That is the goal of many Japanese and Korean schools that I know about.

The cultural knowledge is another aspect of these schools. First-generation immigrants often feel very strongly that their children should have an appreciation for their cultural heritage, especially holidays and other festivals. For this reason, many schools celebrate holidays such as Chinese New Year, and include in the celebration traditional food, clothing, and the performing arts.

What is interesting about the discussion of culture is that we can distinguish two levels of culture. There is a school of thought that distinguishes Culture with a capital C from culture with a lower-case C. Capital C culture is the outwardly visible objects that we can readily see: the clothing, food, music, and art. If you go to Epcot Center in Disney World, you can see a lot of capital C culture. We sometimes call this “high culture.” It is capital-C Culture that we usually teach our kids formally. Things like dance, music, and art from the culture. This is what we perform at holiday celebrations. It’s fun, and visible, and it’s important and valuable to have an appreciation for this kind of culture.

Lower-case c culture has been labeled “ordinary,” but paradoxically it is more difficult to define, learn and teach. An example of lower-case culture is what you bring to someone’s house if you are invited to dinner. Americans bring a bottle of wine, maybe a dessert, or a small house gift. American culture places high value on equality, and we don’t want to be a burden on our hosts. In other cultures, though, this would be an insult. A Taiwanese person once told me that. His way of thinking was, “I invited you to dinner, that means I want to treat you as a guest. Bringing food to my house implies that I am too poor to feed you.”

We might look at the distinction between the two ideas of culture as the “what” versus the “why.” The “what” is what we do: we listen to this music, we eat this food, we say this phrase at this time. That’s the visible part of the culture. That’s what we teach kids. But to me, it’s more interesting to explore why we do this. Why do we use family terms in Chinese to refer to co-workers or friends? “Aunt” shopkeeper, “Big brother” older colleague. There are cultural reasons why we do these things, but it’s the culture that we don’t explicitly teach in language classrooms.

Heritage speakers have a lot of understanding of lower-case culture. This kind of knowledge has been passed down from their parents by their own behavior, and from the values that they instill in their children as they raise their kids. I saw an example of this at my son’s violin lesson one day. The teacher praised his playing, which had made a lot of improvement over the past week. His initial response was to deny that he had improved. Oh no, he said, and even included the Chinese hand gesture for “no.” The teacher, an American, was a bit confused by my son’s response, and didn’t know how to handle the situation. This was an example of cultural differences hindering communication. My son had the

Chinese cultural knowledge, and didn't even know it. It would have taken a lot of explaining to the teacher to make her understand the difference, and how to interpret my son's response. That is why I say that small-c culture is difficult to define and to teach.

This cultural knowledge on the part of heritage speakers is another factor that makes them so valuable as a national resource. They have this knowledge that is hard to come by, even if they don't know it. Most foreign-language textbooks don't teach this aspect of the language, many don't even mention it. This is why it can be so easy to have communication problems between natives and nonnatives. I think that it is important to call this kind of culture to students' attention. A meta-awareness of culture can enhance students' appreciation for their language.

Community is the third feature of heritage language programs. My kids have friends from church, friends from school, and friends from Chinese school. Some cultures have closer community ties than others, but in general, I think it's beneficial for kids to associate with members of the same cultural heritage. It can help build their feelings of self-esteem and identity. This is especially true for kids who are not white, and for mixed-race kids, like my kids. They don't fit in with the typical, white-faced American communities in which they typically live. Many studies of multicultural education point out that while we want every child to see differences as a positive, as opportunities to learn about themselves and about the world, still every child needs to feel secure with his own identity. I think it's important to have a strong feeling of self-worth. Seeing one's heritage culture as valued, as worth being a part of, is a necessary first step before being able to appreciate another culture.

There is a term in Asian American communities: banana. This refers to someone who, like a banana, is yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Bananas have rejected their Asian heritage in favor of an American identity. The unfortunate fact, though, is that it is impossible to change one's outward appearance. The fact is that Asian Americans will always be identifiable as not white, and this isn't necessarily a bad thing. We are trying to celebrate diversity in this country. There will be opportunities for Asian Americans to educate other Americans about another culture.

Another aspect of community is outreach. As soon as your kids reach school age, you start getting invited into the schools to introduce some aspect of your culture to the class. My wife has been talking about Chinese new year in our kids' schools for years, starting when they were in preschool. She's getting a little tired of talking about it! This kind of outreach is good for our kids in a number of ways. It gives them a chance to show what they know, apart from the regular school curriculum. It shows that the community values that kind of cultural heritage. And it prepares them for similar opportunities when they grow up themselves.

## Running a heritage language school

Heritage language schools are community-based. Because of that, every school will be at least a little different. But there are some common characteristics of these schools.

First, they are by the community, of the community, and for the community. They exist to serve the children and families of the heritage community. Families are willing to give their time and money to these schools because their own children attend them. A successful school will have the children's benefit as their first priority.

The schools are staffed and run by members of the community. The teachers, administrators, boards of directors, and all support staff are usually parents of the students, either past, present, or future. This is good and bad. The good is that the staff have the children's best interest at heart. They want the children to want to come to school, to have an interest in learning their heritage language. Classes and activities are prepared with that goal in mind. The bad is that the teachers are usually not trained teachers, they usually don't have a lot of experience in teaching the language. As a result, the children maybe don't learn as well as they could.

The schools are run as non-profit entities. Teachers are paid a token amount, usually between \$15 and \$25 per hour. Families pay tuition, usually between \$100 and \$150 per semester per student. Few schools have their own buildings. Most schools operate out of church basements, rented classrooms in schools or universities, or community centers. Textbooks are often provided by some branch of the government of the home country. In the case of Taiwanese Chinese schools, for example, the textbooks are donated by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission.

The schools are overseen by boards of directors, who are usually parents of students, and are elected by the parents. These boards assist in the operation of the school, and in planning events and activities.

## SWOT Analysis

In business school, they teach that you can evaluate the position of a company by performing a "SWOT Analysis." SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. By evaluating these factors, you can get an idea of how strong a company is, and what it has to do to stay strong. I thought it might be interesting to apply this tool to heritage language schools. What follows is my opinion, based on my own experiences.

## **Strengths**

1. Parent commitment: The schools exist because the parents see the importance of keeping their children in contact with their linguistic and cultural heritage. They are willing to pay money and commit their time to helping the schools, and to working with the kids at home to improve their language skills. Imagine how hard it would be to run these schools if the parents didn't care!

2. Support of the community: The community also supports the schools. They are willing to donate money and other resources to the schools. Members of the community are also willing to promote the schools and encourage students to continue studying the language.

3. Strong language base to build on: A first-year language course begins with the students knowing absolutely nothing about the language. They can't say anything, they don't know any of the cultural rules about interacting in the language, sometimes they don't even want to be learning that language! In comparison, the heritage learner comes to the classroom with a lot of language skills. Teachers can leverage those language skills to bring the kids up to a higher proficiency level. It is also easier to design classroom activities when the kids have something to work with.

4. Small = mobile and flexible: Some people think that being a small school is a disadvantage. It can be, but there are also advantages to being a small school. One is that it is easier to find a location to hold the school. I know of one Chinese school with 600 students. That school has limited options for a location to hold their school. It is also harder to manage a school of that size. A smaller school can also respond to special needs or short-term events easier. We had to cancel school one winter day because of a bad snowstorm. I made ten phone calls, and I was done. Imagine how many phone calls I would have had to make if I had 600 students!

## **Weaknesses**

Not professional: I don't mean that the administration and teachers are bad at what they do, but that they don't have a lot of training and background in running a school or a classroom. As a result, it is harder for them to do their jobs. Several times, my wife, who teaches in our Chinese school, showed me activities that she "invented," only to have me tell her that that idea was invented 30 years ago, and has been used by foreign language teachers for years. If she had had some formal training, then she would have saved a lot of time when she was making her lesson plans.

Bad materials: I should say first of all that I have been teaching for 17 years, and the only teachers that I ever met in my whole career, not just in heritage

language schools, but everywhere, who really liked the books that they used were the ones who wrote the book themselves. You will never find a textbook that is a 100% perfect fit. Every teacher wants a book that they can just take off the shelf and start using in their class. But that doesn't happen. There is no such book.

The materials that schools usually use, though, are enough of a bad fit to point it out. Sometimes, the books are textbooks from the home country. The language is not appropriate for these kids. Either the language is too difficult for them, if they use age-appropriate books, or if they use language-level appropriate books, the content isn't appropriate.

Another issue is that the goals of the textbooks aren't always appropriate. Traditional Chinese texts, in my opinion, stress written language more than spoken language. I honestly don't care if my kids' written language isn't the same as that of their counterparts in China. But I really want them to be able to talk fluently in the language. I want my textbooks to reflect that goal.

Small = few resources: Small is good, but it can also be bad. Smaller schools have less money, have fewer people in the community to draw on for support and programs, and are vulnerable to change.

## **Opportunities**

Increased recognition: As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, Heritage language is getting increasing recognition as a community resource, a national resource, a source of advanced proficiency speakers. It's still too early to tell where this is going, but I think that as researchers, universities, and government departments start to catch on to this resource, that heritage language schools can expect to be approached. My advice to you is this: if you are approached by a university or other program, and invited to enter into a partnership with them, to request something. Essentially, say, "what's in it for me? Why should my kids help you? What will you do for me?" You aren't going to get a check for a lot of money, but you might get some help, for example, in providing a location for the school, or help with photocopying expenses. Call me if you need help with this.

Source of Identity: Our children benefit from heritage language school as a source of identity for them. Like it or not, they are different from other American kids, and they need some support. Their heritage shouldn't be seen as an anchor pulling them down, or as handcuffs restricting what they can do. Rather, it should be seen as a platform from which they can reach even higher. A healthy, supportive community can provide a sense of belonging, and identity, from which our kids can grow. Their experience in the heritage language school can be, and should be, a very positive experience for the kids.

## Threats

Influence of English and American culture: I want to be perfectly clear on one point: our goal should not be to make our kids the same as their counterparts back in the home country, either linguistically or culturally. They are in this country, and we have to accept that they will consider themselves Americans to some degree or another. Their environment is dominated by the English language, especially at school. Therefore, they will always be English-dominant. They get a lot of culture, both the big and the little c kinds, from American society. I count this as a threat, though, because in my experience, it is easier to be monolingual than to be bilingual. It is easier to adopt one culture completely than to balance two cultures. It is easier to have one name than two. We are asking our kids to have one foot in each of two worlds. That isn't easy, and there will probably always be a conflict between them, and there will always be a temptation to reject one in favor of the other.

Unstable population: The schools will always see continuous change in the students and staff. This is really no different from other schools. There is 100% turnover in elementary schools every 5 years or so, and teachers come and go. But heritage language schools are more vulnerable, because of the smaller communities that make up the structure that supports the schools.

Lack of resources: Public schools can count on the tax base to keep going. Even if some families decide to send their kids to other schools, their property taxes still support the public schools. Heritage schools are different. They do not have a guaranteed source of revenue. To keep going, they will always have to count on the current parents to keep the school going.

## Key Factors for Success

Another thing that they taught us in business school was to look at something called "Key factors for success." These factors are things that businesses need to do in order to succeed. In the field of heritage language schools, I can think of these four main areas.

The first is parent involvement. We have the kids in our classrooms for two or three hours a week. Beyond that, we have to rely on the home environment to provide practice, to help the kids with their homework, and support the language learning of the children. For that, we need the parents to be involved. They have to support what the teachers are trying to do.

Teachers have the responsibility to maintain communication with the parents. It's helpful if you include a note to the parents with the weekly homework. The note can include what you're doing, why, and what you want the parents to help the students with at home.

The second factor for success is community involvement. Since schools depend on the support of the ethnic community, it is important that schools maintain relationships with the community, in one form or another.

The third factor is connections. This includes connections to the public schools that kids attend Monday through Friday. We have to build bridges between what kids do in during the week, and what they do on the weekend in language school. This will help them see the relevance of language school, and will also give them a resource to help their schoolwork.

Let me give you an example. One of the kids in our Chinese school had to give a speech in one of his high school classes. The speech was a demonstration speech. He chose to demonstrate how to make and eat a kind of Chinese rice dumpling, *zong-zi*. He was able to leverage what he had learned in Chinese school, to help his school work. That's the kind of connection that I'm talking about.

We might think that the kids will automatically be able to make this connection, but it doesn't come naturally to all kids. We can help them to learn how to see the possibilities for them to make these connections.

The fourth factor for success is a clear and realistic vision. Again, it might sound too simple to point out, but the fact is that many schools do not have a formal organization. It is important for each school to have a mission statement that clearly states the goals and purpose of the school. It could be as simple and broad as "to promote the study of the language and culture." But more details should be given somewhere. Why do we want the kids to learn the language? Are there tangible goals in mind, such as taking a proficiency test? If so, this vision can provide direction to the school as they plan the curriculum.

## Trends:

Let me take a few minutes now to talk about some national trends that heritage language schools are facing.

The first is professionalization of the schools. Chinese schools want to enter into partnerships with the public schools to provide Chinese language instruction. To this end, there is an effort to get the teachers certified as public school teachers. Becoming professional teachers can benefit the schools, because they will bring to their classrooms more current teaching methodologies.

Another trend is recognition of the schools by the formal education system. Some students are able to get high school credit for language classes taken at their heritage language schools. It is also possible to leverage language skills into

getting college credit. Students can take an AP exam, and depending on the college, can get college credit.

Let me give you an example of this potential. Right now, Michigan State University will give college credit to incoming students based on their score on the AP exams. There are AP exams for many different subjects, such as math, science, history, and foreign language. If a student takes the Spanish AP exam, and scores a 5 out of 5, MSU will give that student credit equivalent to 2 years of Spanish. That's 16 credits. Free. What's the financial implications of that for the parents? Well, at MSU, in-state freshman pay \$206.25 per credit. I don't know how fast you are at math, so I did it for you.  $\$206.25 * 16 = \$3,300$ . That's a gift that your kids can give to you by taking the Spanish AP exam.

It gets better. The college board will start giving a Chinese AP exam in 2007. So in a few years, your kids will be able to take the AP exam, and get credit for 2 years of Chinese. And 2 years of Chinese at MSU isn't 16 credits. It's 20 credits.  $\$206.25 * 20 = \$4,125$ . Four thousand dollars' worth of MSU credits for the cost of an AP exam, 80-some dollars.

So, the next time you hear kids OR parents asking why they have to go to language school, you have a reason. In my case, 4,125 reasons. This is good.

It's not all rosy, though. Schools will continue to face continued challenges. All of the weaknesses and threats that I mentioned earlier are not going away. These schools are sort of like houseplants – you have to keep watering them, repotting them when necessary, and talking to them. If you stop taking care of houseplants, they die. The same will happen to heritage language schools. They can die instantly if they are neglected.

Let me conclude with some thoughts and observations.

Heritage language schools have been around for a long time, will continue to be around, even after the current hype is over. We will never be as good as we want to be, and we will continue to face the same challenges again and again, year after year. And that's OK. We will accept the challenges and disappointments, because for us, in the end, it's all about the kids. We think it's important enough that our children keep in touch with their heritage, that we are willing to do what it takes to keep the schools going.

There is also now the potential to build new connections between heritage language schools and the needs of this country for speakers of less-commonly taught languages. We owe it to our kids to keep these schools running. Everyone, the whole country and the world, stands to benefit from our kids playing a strong role in the multi-lingual world that they will be a part of.

Thank you very much.

### **Sources of data and more information:**

U.S. Census report on language spoken at home  
[http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/census\\_2000/001406.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/census_2000/001406.html)

Helping Heritage Hares Win the Race  
<http://www.nclrc.org/caidl62.htm>

Modern Language Association "Survey of Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002."  
<http://www.mla.org/adfl/resources/enrollments.pdf>

Attaining High Levels of Proficiency: Challenges for Foreign Language Education in the United States  
<http://www.mctlc.org/newvisions/leghigh.html>

Brecht, R. D. & Ingold, C. W. (2002). Tapping a National Resource: Heritage Languages in the United States. National Foreign Language Center.  
<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0202brecht.html>

Interagency Language Roundtable website: <http://www.govtilr.org/>.

Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages  
<http://www.cal.org/heritage>

"Expected Levels of Absolute Speaking Proficiency in Languages Taught at the Foreign Service Institute" <http://www.mla.org/adfl/bulletin/V25N2/252017.htm>

Ethnologue: <http://www.ethnologue.org>

GAO report on foreign languages and staffing shortages:  
<http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-02-514T>