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BARRIERS TO ADVANCED HERITAGE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Speakers of heritage languages do not universally achieve advanced levels in the language. We present evidence that three barriers are responsible: (1) lack of access to comprehensible, interesting reading material in the heritage language. (2) The use of traditional language teaching methods in heritage language classes, and (3) the reactions of elders who scold young heritage language speakers for their "errors."

Keywords: access, heritage language, pleasure reading, scolding, traditional teaching

Introduction

Heritage languages are languages spoken at home by children of immigrant families. Typically, the children have no trouble communicating with family members when they are young, but this changes as they age. Tse (2001) describes the usual case. "Rick," was a heritage language speaker of Cantonese living in the US. "By the time he entered junior high, Rick could speak to his parents in his heritage language about typical family and household topics, but had difficulty talking about matters outside the house" (eg his school work, his plans for the future). In 12 years, "Rick has gone from being monolingual in Cantonese to being nearly monolingual in English" (Tse, 2001, p.31). We discuss how this might happen and what can prevent the loss of heritage languages.

First, a brief discussion of what is known about how we acquire language.

The input hypothesis

Evidence published over several decades supports the hypothesis that we acquire language in only one way: When we understand what we hear or read. In other words, language acquisition requires "comprehensible input." In addition to being comprehensible, the best input for language acquisition is that the input is interesting, so interesting that in a sense the acquirer "forgets" that he or she is listening to or reading another language. We refer to this kind of input as "compelling".

The input hypothesis claims that we do not acquire language by speaking or writing. Rather, the ability to speak and write gradually emerges as a result of obtaining comprehensible input. We also do not acquire by studying grammar rules,

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memorizing vocabulary, or getting our errors corrected. These are ways of consciously "learning" about language and do not result in high levels of fluency or accuracy (Krashen, 1985; 2004).

Our focus here is on one kind of input: reading. A number of studies confirm that reading is an excellent source of comprehensible input, especially self-selected pleasure reading: Those who do more interesting and comprehensible reading spell better, have larger vocabularies, better grammar, read and write better, and score higher on standardized language tests. Self-selected reading, reading books the reader genuinely wants to read, is effective for language acquisition because it is more comprehensible and far more interesting than "assigned" reading (Krashen, 2004).

Other benefits of pleasure reading

There is strong evidence that the value of self-selected pleasure reading goes beyond language acquisition and literacy development. Those who read more know more about a variety of topics, including science, social studies, current events, personal finance, health, and "daily living technology" (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993).

Self-selected pleasure reading also results in a better understanding of others. When you read fiction "You're learning to be somebody else, learning to see the world through their eyes." (Terry Gross, Fresh Air). And as Noam Chomsky pointed out, "It is quite possible—overwhelmingly probable … that we will always learn more about human life and personality from novels than from scientific psychology" (Chomsky, 1988, p. 159).

The power of pleasure reading in heritage language development

Case histories confirm that self-selected pleasure reading is a highly effective and pleasant way of developing the heritage language. Tse (2001) interviewed 10 heritage language speakers, ages 18 to 24, who had native-level competence in their heritage language. Nine of the ten were born in the US and none had lived in the country where the HL was spoken or took classes there. But … "nearly all the participants developed (an) interest in reading for pleasure."

As described by Tse, these HL speakers had access to interesting reading material in their heritage language, including "light literature": "Several of the participants recalled seeing their parents read regularly for pleasure. Helen's father brought home a newspaper in Chinese every day to read after work, and Julie's mother read newspapers on a regular basis … Meg's mother also enjoyed reading novels and did so often. Frequently, parents brought home HL magazines purchased at a local market or newsstand or borrowed them from friends who regularly traded periodicals with one another. Helen had access to her mother's celebrity magazines and occasionally read articles from her brother's car magazines in Chinese. As the participants grew older, they purchased or subscribed to magazines themselves" (p. 261). Of great interest, "For the most part, the participants read fiction for pleasure" (262). As noted earlier, fiction is a source of subject matter knowledge and contributes to our understanding of others.

Grace Cho describes her own discovery of the value of reading fiction in Cho (2020): A native speaker of Korean and a bilingual education teacher, Cho attended a social gathering in her neighborhood, and many of the guests were Korean-

American. Cho was surprised at how well some of them spoke Korean. She arranged interviews with several of the guests and the results were published in Cho (2020). They told Prof. Cho that they had been in the US for about 34 years, and arrived in the US between the ages of 12 and 16. They rated themselves as 5 out of 5 on speaking and listening in Korean (which agreed with Cho's personal assessment), 4.7 on reading, and 4.3 on writing. Five out of the seven confirmed that they were dedicated readers of Korean and gave reading credit for their Korean competence.

Here are details of two of the cases:

Howard became a high school math teacher. He stated, "I read every day. When I was hooked on Chinese novels (translated into Korean), especially historical novels, I read for three to four hours a day, and spent many hours trying to finish a novel in one sitting." Among other novels, Howard read the popular "Three Kingdom" series.

Tony, a California state-certified professional Korean translator, in agreement with the discussion (below) of language classes, said that "Korean language classes didn't help much… I think I maintained Korean from simply reading books, magazines, and newspapers and from watching Korean dramas and talking about them with church friends and teachers afterward."

The Three Barriers

We hypothesize that there are three powerful barriers to the development of the heritage language beyond the elementary level:

Barrier 1: Lack of access to comprehensible, interesting reading material

Ashtari (2020a) investigated two possible sources of books in the heritage language with discouraging results: Books in the Farsi language in bookstores and libraries in a neighborhood in Los Angeles with many Farsi-speaking families from Iran. Ashtari visited four Farsi bookstores (Ashtari, 2020a) but found only classics and textbooks, noting that many of the classics would have been challenging for native speakers.

Public libraries were also unsatisfactory. Ashtari examined the holdings in 72 Los Angeles public libraries but found a total of only 300 books in Farsi listed for the entire city. At the time she did her investigation, only 12 of these books were checked out. Ashtari and Krashen (2020) inspected one public library in detail. They examined books on the shelves and looked for evidence that the book had been handled and read, and signs of "wear and tear": They noted the last page on which any of the following were found: Separation of pages on the binding, fingerprints or smudges on the pages or the corners, worn or wrinkled corners likely caused by page-turning.

Only six books in the library were found that had any connection to Farsi – all were self-study books to help readers acquire (really "learn") the language. All six were traditional, grammar-oriented textbooks and assumed that the path to competence was through hard study and conscious learning of grammar and vocabulary. And all six were nearly completely unread, unblemished by evidence of reading and page-turning: For all six, only 5% of the pages showed any sign of wear and tear.

Even in schools with large numbers of children speaking a heritage language, there are few books for recreational reading in that language. Pucci (1994) reported the holdings in nine school libraries in Los Angeles. These libraries were the main source of books for recreational reading for children at these schools. Ninety percent of the students in these schools spoke Spanish as their primary language, but only 15% of the books were in Spanish. Pucci reported that most of the books in Spanish were taken out by children in the early grades.

Barrier 2: Heritage language classes

According to the evidence presented in the previous section, it appears that developing the heritage language is a straightforward, simple matter and that doing it is pleasant. Sadly, methods of teaching heritage language have taken the opposite approach, the route of traditional language teaching, focusing on the study of grammar and vocabulary, rather than comprehensible input and language acquisition. To our knowledge, reading has never been tried in heritage language classes.

Ashtari (2020b) interviewed 12 former heritage language class students: "None found the heritage language classes to be helpful." Classwork was "daunting … "impossible." (e.g. students were forced to master the Farsi alphabet immediately), and to make matters worse, the classes met on Friday evenings and weekends. This student's reaction (Ashtari, 2020b) was typical: "I spent about less than six months in one [HL class] and I hated it. And it actually pushed me away from learning Farsi." (p. 6).

Barrier 3. Scolding

Although heritage language speakers are members of families that speak the heritage language at a native-speaker level, they sometimes make "mistakes" on late-acquired aspects of grammar when speaking the language, which results in correction, and even ridicule: "I began to realize as I spoke Spanish to my relatives, they would constantly correct my grammar or pronunciation … My relatives would say, you would never know that you are the daughter of an Argentine.' Comments like these … shut me off to Spanish…" (Krashen, 1998, p. 42). Another heritage language speaker agreed: "It's like a tug of war … I feel like my parents want me to speak Persian (Farsi), but then they turn around and criticize me when I am not perfect … and then you go to a Persian mehmooni [party] and then the older generation, they kind of look down on you and it feels horrible" (Ashtari, 2020a, p. 6).

The predictable result of this shaming is a reluctance to speak the heritage language and, as a consequence, less comprehensible input, and less chance to improve. The successful acquirers we met in the previous section developed their heritage language competence through pleasure reading. Those quoted in this section, we assume, did not have that chance.

A Plan

If we focus on Barrier 1, lack of access to reading material, we will do a great deal toward reducing the strength of barriers 2 and 3. When heritage language speakers have access to comprehensible and highly interesting (compelling) reading material, and they take advantage of this access, their HL competence will improve,

and scolding will diminish, and it is possible that some of these books might find their way into school and classroom libraries and pleasure reading might become part of HL courses in the form of literature discussion (see footnote 1 above), and free reading time.

Post-script: Sometimes one book can stimulate a reading habit.

Daniel, described in Lao and Krashen (2008) was a 12-year-old boy who came to the US from China when he was eight years old. As is typical, his Mandarin started to decline after he arrived in the US, and a Saturday heritage language class did not increase his proficiency or his interest in Mandarin.

The change came during a summer heritage language program; Daniel was not particularly interested in the program or in the reading selections, but things changed when the program director gave him a few books to take home. One was "The Stories of A Fan Ti" (English translation). Daniel had little interest in other books but became very interested in A Fan Ti. He liked the stories so much that he persuaded his mother to read the stories to him while he helped with chores, such as washing dishes. Daniel's Mandarin started to improve, but Daniel was not aware of this: His interest was only in the stories.

Lao and Krashen (2008) suggest that "the answer to encouraging heritage language development is not to exhort the children to study the language, not to send them to dull classes, but simply to find some interesting stories. Their focus will be on the stories and heritage language development will be the incidental result" (p.18).

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