

Crossroads in the Classroom: Heritage Learning

A Case Study: Native Speaker or Heritage? Managing, Meddling, or Muddling to Find the Answer: Part One: The Community

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The city of Harrisonburg is a unique place. Nestled in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley in western Virginia, it is surrounded by poultry farms, scenic mountains, and national parks. Four colleges and universities call the area home, including the 20,000-student James Madison University, two faith-based private institutions, and a strong community college. Few would suspect that Harrisonburg is home to a large population of multilingual families, not just immigrants and refugees, but first- and second-generation language minorities as well. It makes sense that the language software company Rosetta Stone was founded here.

Harrisonburg City Public Schools is a small district with only 5,150 students enrolled in its one high school, two middle schools and five elementary schools; however in recent years HCPS is consistently atop the list of Virginia school districts serving the highest percentages of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. Over 40 languages are spoken in the city schools' hallways, with over 50 different countries of origin represented. The largest immigrant groups are from Latin America, but no particular nationality dominates the population. Kurdish and Arabic speakers are on the rise while the Russian population seems to have crested and is declining. Surprising many, the majority of LEP students (64%) are American born. And the trend lines will continue for the foreseeable future: more than half of the city's elementary-age population is LEP.

So how does a small school district in a conservative rural area deal with a changing student population? Because Spanish speakers make up around 76% of the city's LEP population, the school system is working hard to make sure appropriate supports are in place. Although it is true there are many language groups in the city schools, there is unarguably a critical mass of Spanish speakers that makes it feasible - and academically desirable - to address their needs. Harrisonburg High School began offering courses for native Spanish speakers in the late 1990s when it became apparent that this booming group needed options other than our traditional Spanish 1-5 courses. Two city elementary schools offer Dual Language programs in which half the day is spent learning in Spanish and half in English with the goal of full biliteracy by the time the students graduate. Across the city's schools, home/school liaisons bridge the gap between English-speaking administrators and teachers and Spanish-speaking parents. But clearly there is still more work to be done.

Although each student comes with their own background, needs, and goals, some trends are evident among the Spanish-speaking student population. Generally speaking, there are more heritage speakers (students who are exposed to significant amounts of Spanish in their daily life, but who have never been formally educated in the language) and fewer native speakers (those who have age-appropriate literacy in their home language). While a native speaker who has recently arrived from Mexico or Cuba might be comfortably placed in an AP Spanish course, a heritage speaker is unlikely to flourish in such a course without extensive preparation beforehand. This makes sense when you consider the kinds of language inputs and outputs that characterize these two groups.

	Heritage Speakers have had the chance to...	Native Speakers have had the chance to...
Interpretive listening and reading	Understand TV and radio	Understand TV, radio, newspapers, community signs, websites, loudspeaker announcements, speeches, etc. Read age-appropriate books at school
Interpersonal tasks	Speak with family/friends Respond to social media posts	Speak with family/friends Interact with educated community helpers Respond to social media posts Speak/write in different registers depending on audience
Presentational speaking and writing	Introduce themselves State a simple need	Tell a story using paragraph-length speech or writing Write a letter or report Fill out forms

In recent years, heritage Spanish speakers have taken center stage in Harrisonburg’s language program. They’re neither native speakers nor non-speakers. Heritage speakers come with a different set of experiences, a different perception of their home language and culture, and a different set of expectations for their own language skills. In a word, they’re different! This series of articles will present Harrisonburg City Public School’s struggles to expand and enhance quality language development for heritage Spanish speakers while dealing with the current realities of public education in the twenty first century. Hopefully this “case study” will provide inspiration and ideas for others across the region and nation. While Harrisonburg’s experience is unique, it is a microcosm of the direction of American society and language instruction.