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Enhancing English Language Teaching for Multilingual Learners: Leveraging Heritage Languages in the Classroom

Sovanna Huot[1] , **Chheangkhy Hok**[2]

[1] University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.

[2] Indian Institute of Technology (B.H.U.), Varanasi, India.

Abstract

This research examines how Heritage Languages (HLs) shape students' cultural identities, academic growth, and linguistic competence. Based on a multilingual pedagogical framework, the study investigates how to successfully incorporate HLs into English language training, questioning standard monolingual paradigms and advocating for inclusive, asset-based educational approaches. Through a synthesis of theoretical insights, case studies, and implementation models, the study identifies key dimensions of successful HL integration, such as culturally responsive teaching, cross-linguistic awareness, curriculum innovation, teacher professional development, and community engagement. By integrating HL materials into English language education, encouraging metalinguistic awareness, and therefore supporting translingual and intercultural abilities, the research suggests a thorough, seven-part pedagogical strategy that helps multilingual learners. Strategies include respecting students' language origins, pushing the use of HLs in content-based learning, and establishing inclusive classroom settings where all languages are appreciated form the core of this approach. Empirical results and practical approaches show how schools might change from deficit-based narratives to pedagogies that value language variety. The findings of this study have consequences for language education policy, curriculum design, teacher education, and school-community relationships. Finally, the research adds to a larger rethinking of English language instruction, one that sees multilingualism as a valuable resource for student achievement in an increasingly globalized and linguistically varied society.

Keywords: Heritage language preservation, formal education, English language instruction, linguistic diversity, cultural inclusion, language education results

INTRODUCTION

As noted by Inal et al. (2021) and Titone and Tiv (2023), the world of languages is becoming more and more influenced by individuals who speak more than one language. Dubiel and Guilfoyle (2021) and Ortega (2020) both point out that a large portion of the English-speaking population is bilingual or multilingual, with a heritage language also spoken. However, as Porto (2020) points out, despite policy-level support for legacy language education in many host countries, EFL programs seldom address the unique requirements of students with English as a heritage language. Loza and Beaudrie (2021) along with Wu and Leung (2022) note that pedagogical models often fail to show how heritage languages can enrich both English learning and subject knowledge taught in English.

This recent study builds on research in bilingual and multilingual education that advocates for leveraging students' full linguistic repertoires in the classroom. Hamman (2024) and Wong et al. (2020) propose ways EFL teachers can support heritage learners without requiring instruction in the heritage language itself. Recognizing that heritage learners differ from traditional second or foreign language learners.

Scholars such as Alshihry (2024) and Lorenz et al. (2022) advocate raising teacher knowledge of these children' language resources. Kim (2021) and Tang (2024) argue that changing sociolinguistic and economic situations make it even more crucial to use these latent talents in educational settings. Similarly, Chen (2021) and Lavrenteva and Orland (2022) argue that successful teaching tactics should be based on a greater knowledge of heritage learners' backgrounds. The number of multilingual pupils in the United States is increasing, with many entering schools with little English ability, as reported by Gándara (2022). Escamilla and colleagues (2021) contend that this increase emphasizes how urgently more thorough teacher training is needed. Flessert (2023) shows, however, that

Corresponding Author
Sovanna Huot, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
E-mail: shuot@polscience.du.ac.in

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74% of inexperienced English instructors have no coursework in linguistics and that 94% have never studied grammar, hence underprepared. Liu with his colleagues (2020) advise that advanced teacher training programs encourage methods that use students' native languages to address this difference. These covers utilizing tasks and conversations that help students consider when and how various language resources could improve their education. Viegen and Zappa (2020) demonstrate that this strategy stimulates students' current knowledge, encourages peer education, and recognizes their cultural capital or "funds of knowledge." Furthermore, emphasized by Huot et al. (2024) are the benefits of solid teacher-student relationships based on trust and caring on learning results and communication. In response to these issues, this paper explores three interconnected concerns: the increasing number of heritage students in higher education, the shortage of well-trained English teachers, and the need for more culturally responsive pedagogy.

According to Polinsky and Scontras (2020), many bilingual university students are proficient in English but may not have a formal knowledge of grammar or academic discourse. Wahyuni et al. (2023) argue that teacher preparation programs may better assist these students by increasing their metalinguistic awareness in both English and their heritage languages. At last, Rodriguez (2020) presents legacy languages as "funds of knowledge" that, when recognized and included into education, might improve the classroom for multilingual students.

Literature review

This research uses the idea of legacy languages, that is, languages people pick up in the family or community-based environments, usually during the early years of life. Sugarman and Lazarín (2020) state that legacy languages are not specifically taught in schools but are passed down via regular social interactions among families and cultural groups. Often maintained informally, these languages are fundamental indicators of cultural identity and family ties. Akram et al. (2020) underline the broad range of linguistic skill that heritage language speakers display in both their heritage language and the mainstream language of the surrounding culture. Many elements including frequency of usage, quality of input, and social attitudes toward the heritage language impact this diversity. In settings like the United States, Rhinehart et al. (2024) note that heritage language learners are frequently children of immigrant families who are concurrently negotiating the acquisition of their family's native language and English, the society language used in school and public life. This dual language development might result in imbalanced proficiency wherein someone may comprehend or speak the ancestral language well but lack literacy, or vice versa. In this discipline, one of the main divisions is between heritage and social languages. Knowing this difference helps one to better understand the special situation of heritage speakers in more general multilingual societies.

The term *multilingual*, as discussed by Choi et al. (2021) and Genesee and Lindholm (2021), encompasses a variety of learner types. On one hand, it includes children and youth from immigrant and linguistic minority backgrounds who encounter English as the dominant language in school and society. On the other hand, it also relates to people grown in heritage language communities who keep great fluency and communicative competency in their family language. According to Estrada et al. (2020) and Hoff et al. (2021), these learners often build sophisticated verbal repertoires that are enhanced by their experiences in a variety of cultural and linguistic situations.

The conceptual framework used to understand these learners is further informed by theoretical models such as those introduced by Goodrich with colleagues (2021). Among these, the *complementary model* of bilingual or multilingual instruction stands out. This model supports the use of both heritage and societal languages as media of instruction and is frequently implemented in dual-language immersion programs. Amano et al. (2023) and LaCosse et al. (2020) illustrate how this paradigm incorporates components of bilingual and bicultural education, allowing pupils to acquire cognitive and linguistic abilities in both languages. Still, this paradigm is not without controversy. Barrett et al. (2022) warn that when educational focus is put too much on the society language, such as English, it may lead to the loss of heritage language ability, particularly in circumstances where the heritage language lacks institutional backing.

Heritage language teaching has received considerable academic attention and popular interest in recent years. This increase shows a greater knowledge of the advantages of bilingualism and the need of language variety. As observed by Mokher et al. (2023), a variety of actors, including academic institutions, educational professionals, community groups, and policymakers, have become more invested in advancing heritage language programs. These efforts are driven by a growing body of research that highlights the cognitive, academic, and sociocultural advantages associated with bilingual proficiency. Sun et al. (2020) provide convincing data showing students who acquire skills in both their heritage language and English show enhanced metalinguistic awareness, better problem-solving ability, and more cultural empathy. In a similar line, Bayram et al. (2021) contend that mastery of legacy languages helps students to better examine difficult topics, create intelligent inquiries, and interact with instructional materials in more significant ways. These advantages improve not just personal learning results but also help to create more inclusive and fair educational settings. With these benefits, Schalley and Eisenchlas (2020) support an educational strategy with a major goal of maintaining and growing legacy languages. They suggest that both formal schooling and community-based education initiatives should work together to ensure that students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are not only acknowledged but also actively supported. In the context of this study, heritage language education refers to any instructional model, whether within the public school system or informal community settings, that promotes the acquisition, retention, and appreciation of heritage languages.

According to Leeman and Showstack (2022), heritage learners often have linguistic and cultural linkages to their families and communities, but their language experiences are impacted by

Table 1. Important Themes in Literary Work in Heritage Languages

No	Theme	Description
1	Definition of heritage	Language learned early childhood at home or community; varies in degree of skill
2	Students from several languages	Includes both immigrants and proficient HL speakers from various backgrounds.
3	Models of instruction	Models of complementary bilingualism used in dual-language immersion courses.
4	Linguistic loss	Dominance of society languages may lower HL maintenance
5	Advantages of HL education	Improves academics, intellect, identity, and cultural empathy
6	Advocacy and policy	Support for HL schools and initiatives both institutional and grassroots
7	HL Schools' Visibility	Usually underappreciated yet very vital for bicultural and multilingual identity

variable levels of exposure, chances for usage, and literacy. This distinguishes the educational requirements of legacy learners from those of conventional second language learners, hence calls for customized methods in pedagogy, curriculum design, and teacher preparation. Promoting legacy language education goes beyond scholarly study in many respects. Advocacy at the national, regional, and local levels has been very important in determining language policy and increasing access to resources, according Macleroy et al. (2024). Families and students that actively support understanding of the significance of their linguistic background frequently help to support these advocacy initiatives. Such community-led projects have produced heritage language schools, the revival of private ethnic educational institutions, after-school programs, and summer language immersion camps, as Anderson and Daigneault (2022) document.

In many mainstream educational discourses, heritage language schools and initiatives continue to be underestimated despite their increasing impact. Freire et al. (2022) find that these institutions often go unrecognized by the public unless purposeful outreach and public engagement raise attention to their importance. Still, their importance cannot be emphasized too much. According to Dodu and Ernu (2023), legacy language programs are important places to encourage bilingualism and biculturalism since they are based on a strong sense of cultural pride. These initiatives help students to connect more profoundly with their identities, histories, and communities in addition to preserving linguistic variety as defined in table 1.

Strategies for leveraging heritage languages

This section provides a collection of practical instructional strategies for combining legacy languages into content-based English language development and literacy education, with an emphasis on heritage students in multilingual classrooms. Reflecting on Shen and Jiang's (2021) concepts, the following offers broader recommendations for institutional transformation at both the school and district levels. Building on the theoretical foundations established in earlier sections, particularly the concept of English and heritage languages as complementary language resources, this section aims to apply theory. Gabillon (2020) stresses the significance of integrating language theory with useful concepts instructors may use in their classrooms. These strategies are intended to operationalize the theoretical concept that multilingual pupils acquire when their original languages are respected, accepted, and used as cognitive and communicative skills.

Zhang et al. (2019) contend that when educators see heritage languages as learning resources rather than cultural relics, language instruction becomes more dynamic and diverse. Polinsky and Scontras (2020) suggest that the purposeful integration of students' home languages into classroom teaching is necessary to meet the increasingly diverse and complex needs of today's multilingual learners. The primary objective is to highlight and make practical the students' linguistic talents within the context of their education. By doing so, instruction aligns more closely with the real-world linguistic repertoires of learners, particularly in content-based English language development (ELD), where the academic language demands are significant. Wei and García (2022) and McLeskey et al. (2019) contend that in a fast globalizing and linguistically varied society, seeing students via a deficit lens is not adequate. Rather, instructors should concentrate on students' strengths, including their mother languages, as the foundation for more advanced learning and participation. Good multilingual education is dependent in part on students' ability to recognize their heritage languages as legitimate tools for both academic learning and communication. Classrooms that encourage students to use their natural languages without concern for evaluation might allow them to acquire this legitimacy.

Students must have a complete awareness of the goals of the project, be autonomous in their management of their writing, and have help negotiating rhetorical or cultural variances that could develop in creating works across languages. When professors provide this kind of help, students may create cohesive, culturally relevant, and academically suitable works in both their native language and English. Comstock and Kagan (2020) have argued in the official curriculum that heritage

language development should not be seen as an extracurricular activity but rather as a fully integrated part of regular education. Petit adds depth to this perspective by proposing levels of completeness in pupils' development of their heritage language. This recognizes that children may be in various phases of their bilingual path and need varied help if they are to achieve.

Finally, giving organized opportunities for students to create meaningful written work in their heritage language, accompanied by clear instructions, teacher feedback, and curricular inclusion, may help children improve literacy skills in both their first and second languages. This approach emphasizes the notion that legacy languages are not impediments to English competence, but rather effective resources for learning, engagement, and personal development (see table 2).

Problems and remedies

For teachers, legislators, and curriculum writers, designing inclusive and fair language courses offers a variety of difficulties. Finding which languages should be taught in official education initiatives is one of the main conundrums; this process ought to be based on open, honest, and moral decision-making (Cele, 2021).

Finding clear guidelines for choosing the languages to be taught is the first main obstacle. Without a clear framework, choices run the danger of being political driven or arbitrary (Sevy et al., 2020). Closely related to this is the difficulty of description, which requires a thorough grasp of the linguistic structures, cultural importance, and functional responsibilities of each language evaluated for inclusion. Curriculum creators must be able to explain, as Smith and Li (2022) point out, how and why certain languages support both personal student growth and more general educational objectives. Evaluation, more especially, how to decide which language functions and domains should be given top priority in mainstream education, present another difficulty. Decisions must balance elements like societal value, academic relevance, and student need. McPake (2023) notes that the selecting process is by nature political. Selecting to include or remove certain languages reflects more general ideological positions and surely bears examination from many angles. Once made public, these choices typically draw both advocacy and criticism, as Wilson (2020) underlines. Decision-makers must therefore negotiate difficult political terrain with openness and responsibility. Implementation presents the last, maybe most recurring obstacle. Ensuring that all pertinent players, teachers, textbook writers, administrators, legislators, and so on, align with clear, inclusive rules is no easy task even when such policies are established. Em (2021) and Lukas and Yunus (2021) stress that policy success does not only depend on formulation but also on active engagement and consistent application across all levels of the educational system.

Conquering stigma and resistance

Although multilingualism in education is becoming more and more popular, the creation and use of HLs usually run into opposition in colleges and communities. Such opposition may result from several reasons, including sociopolitical ideas that denigrate minority languages, pressure to provide the dominant language (e.g., English), and economical elements. Teachers' generational linguistic changes and attitudes also help to explain this resistance, which results in the silence or disregard of pupils' native languages (Driver, 2024). According to Bonanno (2023), this opposition may come not just from educational institutions, but also from students, their families, or school officials who see HLs as less significant or even detrimental to academic progress.

Case studies from a variety of educational environments and promising methods provide insightful analysis of how teachers could effectively include heritage languages into the classroom. These strategies show how teaching heritage languages could improve students' academic involvement, cultural identities, and communication skills. Specifically, good HLs support teaching in the dominant language (e.g., English) as well as the HLs by using students' whole linguistic repertoires. Teachers have used creative approaches spanning several models that enable students use their HLs alongside English to do homework, develop literacy skills, and participate in

Table 2. Instructional Strategies for Leveraging Heritage Languages

No	Theme	Description
1	Theoretical Foundations	Connect multilingual theories to classroom practices using HL as a resource.
2	Inclusive Pedagogy	Treat HLs as legitimate tools for communication and academic learning.
3	Classroom Environment	Create a respectful, identity-affirming space for students to share HL experiences.
4	Writing Instruction	Assign complete writing tasks in HLs with scaffolding and revision stages.
5	Integration of Academic	Content Link HL usage to development of important academic language and subject-area content
6	Differentiated Language Support	Acknowledge different HL growth stages and provide specific help
7	Curricular Invitation	Formally include HL exercises in the curriculum to support multilingual development

meaningful cultural discourse. These strategies also help students grow in translingual and intercultural competency. Crucially, HLs aim to enhance English or other dominant school languages in ways that support deeper learning and therefore validate students' identities rather than replace them. A recurring feature in successful models is the use of dual-language instruction, in which students use both English and their HLs to engage with academic content. This does not only improve comprehension but also allows students to draw connections between their home and school experiences. Teachers often create projects that encourage students to write, speak, or reflect in their HLs, incorporating those languages into broader classroom goals. Serafini et al. (2022) and Walker and Carta (2020) caution against the misconception that using HLs in schools means treating them as ceremonial or attempting to elevate them to the level of primary instructional languages.

Rather, the idea is to promote a balanced approach that recognizes the educational, social, and emotional significance of HLs while still providing rigorous teaching in the dominant language. Teachers may assist reframe profound multilingualism as an advantage rather than a hindrance, allowing pupils to embrace and develop their full language potential.

As interest in heritage language teaching grows, a variety of implementation models have been developed to address the diverse needs of heritage language learners (HLLs) and their communities. Hornberger and Wang (2017) identify three major instructional models in HLL education: the complementary model, the enrichment model, and the developmental or maintenance model. Usually seen in schools with dual-language or language immersion programs is the complementing approach. It supports academic performance as well as language development by integrating HLs into regular education. Saturday schools and after-school programs most often include the enrichment approach. Designed especially for HLLs, it emphasizes on improving literacy and cultural awareness by means of HLL education. Public or charter schools in areas where the heritage language is extensively spoken and socially valued might use a developmental or maintenance strategy. This methodology seeks to maintain and increase pupils' bilingualism over time.

From just bolstering students' ability to read and write in HLs to completely incorporating HLs into K-12 academic programs, these approaches cover a wide spectrum of needs, as Afreen and Norton (2022) point out. These models have broadened their goals recently to include policy lobbying, teacher preparation, and community involvement. According to Feraco et al. (2023), such expansion increases institutional capacity while also better aligning schools with their students' language and cultural requirements. Unlike the other models, the enrichment one was meant just for HLLs.

On the other hand, the complementary and developmental models were originally designed for general bilingual education but have since been modified to add heritage language elements (Shen & Tufo, 2022). Regardless of the approach, a top aim is to ensure that instructors are not only fluent in their native language, but also pedagogically adept, culturally relevant, and academically grounded. Moreover, good models stress among schools, teachers, and families ongoing reflection, co-learning, and teamwork. Effective HLL teaching, according to Nakar and Trevarthen (2024), calls for teachers to see themselves not only as language learners but also as cultural mediators and champions. When schools include communities in meaningful alliances, Ezepue et al. (2023) and Lavadenz et al. (2023) highlight how sustainable systems that encourage linguistic variety and advance educational fairness for all students are created.

Conclusion

Using a multilingual approach to English language instruction not only makes sense pedagogically but also is a required reaction to the changing social and political scene of modern schools. Particularly in cosmopolitan countries like Canada, modern metropolitan K–12 public schools have a growingly varied student body with many students entering in classes already proficient in many languages. This language variety mirrors more general trends in immigration, cultural integration, and world connectedness. Recent national statistics show that around twenty percent of Canadians speak more than one language, therefore highlighting the linguistic diversity found in Canadian institutions all around. In many English-speaking regions, K–12 educational programs nonetheless still stress a monolingual approach that views English as the exclusive language of teaching. This method treats the current linguistic resources that multilingual students bring as unimportant rather than essential for academic achievement, therefore neglecting them. Incorporating students' ancestral languages and supporting multilingualism as a useful teaching tool can help to greatly enhance classroom instruction as this chapter has shown.

Throughout the study, the demographic trends, educational methods, and theoretical frameworks were examined how heritage languages might improve content-based learning and encourage greater student participation. Although the literature notes the existence of creative and well-funded English language learning programs, these projects mostly draw attention to the inventiveness of modern teachers and academics. They are not, yet, fundamental to institutional plans for raising performance among bilingual students. English is becoming more and more accepted as the lingua franca worldwide, although educational institutions still show different support for students who already speak other languages. Schools must acknowledge the obvious link between children' capacity for academic success and their mastery of their native tongue if we are to narrow this difference. One of the main findings of this paper is the need of formal teacher education programs, especially those emphasizing advanced literacy, second language acquisition, and multilingual pedagogy, to be reevaluated and redesigned inside the framework of English as an International Language (EIL).

Important lessons and future directions

Teachers have great new opportunities when English language instruction moves from a monolingual, native-speaker model to one that celebrates multilingualism. Teachers may improve learning results, raise student motivation, and better support academic success across curriculum areas by using the language and cultural tools that students already have. Six basic strategies for using students' heritage languages in the English classroom were found in this chapter: (1) fostering multiple literacies, (2) validating and affirming diverse language systems, (3) accelerating language acquisition, (4) promoting cross-linguistic awareness and biliteracy development, (5) creating inclusive classroom environments; and (6) advocating structural and institutional support.

Encouragement of cooperation among ESL (English as a Second Language), ELA (English Language Arts), and L1 (first language) instructors is one of the most exciting paths for future activity. Such collaborations may help to coordinate curricula and improve ties between the many language competencies of pupils. Teachers may provide their students additional choices for communicating ideas and grasping academic subject by using grammatical, rhetorical, and cultural instruments ingrained in their native languages. Adopting L1-ESL aligned criteria might also provide pupils better routes for language development and idea generation. Courses in indigenous language arts provide even another effective tool for encouraging multilingualism. These courses may include oral storytelling, narrative and argumentative writing, and research elements carried out in both English and students' native tongue. Such approaches may act as blueprints for creating inclusive, multilingual curricula honouring language variety and arming students with the tools required for both academic and personal success in a linked society.

In a nutshell, seeing English language instruction from a multilingual perspective is not just a forward-looking pedagogy but also an ethical need. It guarantees that every student, from all language backgrounds, is enabled to flourish, help others, and achieve both in and outside of the classroom.

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