Quick Reference Guide:

World Language Learning for Heritage Speakers/Signers

A **heritage speaker** is commonly defined as “a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language.”[[1]](#endnote-1) While most heritage speakers demonstrate native-like pronunciation, advanced oral language skills, and a high degree of cultural competence, they often need support in developing literacy skills, metalinguistic awareness, and a more complex grammatical understanding of the language. Heritage speakers/signers may be placed in separate, heritage-specific classes or general world language classes, so it is important for all language educators to understand their distinct needs and abilities.

*Informal questionnaires are often helpful for learning about heritage speaker/signer backgrounds and goals, and assessment methods that include authentic, performance-based tasks can further support educators’ understanding of students’ needs, abilities, and proficiency profiles.*

Effective Instructional Approaches

Educators are encouraged to use student-centered instructional practices that incorporate the perspectives, interests, and needs of students and their communities to make learning as meaningful and accessible as possible. Top-down or macro-based approaches are recommended when working with heritage speakers/signers, as this type of instruction focuses on content rather than form and leverages students’ unique abilities in the language. It is important to build on and encourage the transfer of heritage speakers’ literacy skills, including those acquired from languages other than English, and educators should use low-stakes writing activities that allow students to write about familiar topics before attempting more sophisticated genre-specific writing. Differentiation is an essential component of effective heritage language teaching, and teaching strategies, materials, and supports should be adaptable to meet students’ individual needs. Heritage-specific goals may be helpful when planning for instruction, including: (1) maintenance of the heritage language; (2) acquisition of a standard language variety; (3) expansion of bilingual range (i.e., building on previous knowledge); (4) transfer of literacy skills; (5) acquisition of academic skills in the heritage language; (6) cultivation of positive attitudes toward the heritage language; and (7) acquisition or development of cultural awareness.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Addressing Various Standards

Although world language content standards are not specifically designed for heritage speakers/signers, they can be a valuable tool when working with this population in proficiency-based classrooms. Educators should consider the specific needs of their students when determining if modifications should be made to content or expected student outcomes associated with different standards. To support effective standards implementation, it may be helpful to incorporate principles and practices from various pedagogical approaches, including (1) multiliteracies, which views literacy as the process of making and interpreting meaning through diverse, multimodal communication; (2) community-based service-learning, which promotes active participation in learning experiences that connect what is being taught in the classroom with local and global communities; and (3) critical language awareness, which examines the relationship between language and larger social, political, and ideological issues. The table below summarizes how elements of these approaches apply to heritage language teaching.

*Potential Approaches to Standards Implementation with Heritage Speakers/Signers*

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| **Multiliteracies** | **Community-based service-learning** | **Critical language awareness** |
| Exposes students to multilingual and multimodal communication; analyzes diverse linguistic/cultural forms of expression; legitimizes different ways of representing and conveying meaning  | Facilitates opportunities for students to provide language-based support in academic and professional settings; helps students recognize and appreciate their role in the community | Encourages students to reflect on how language affects their lives; examines the relationship between minority and dominant language use in the U.S.; develops interdisciplinary knowledge  |

Supporting Learner Diversity

Due to the high degree of learner diversity among heritage speakers/signers, educators must develop inclusive pedagogical practices to respect, celebrate, and validate the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their learners. Heritage speakers and signers may use different language varieties, or distinctive forms of a language, dialects (varieties characteristic of a particular area or group) and/or registers (varieties determined by context) that have been learned from familial or community interactions, leading to feelings of inadequacy when there is an exclusive classroom focus on the “correctness” of standard varieties. It may be helpful to use authentic materials representing different varieties throughout instruction, and classroom discussions about the appropriateness of different forms of the language for different contexts are recommended. Learner differences may lead to further challenges when heritage speakers/signers are placed in classes with second language learners, as these two groups of students have vastly different skills, abilities, and proficiency profiles. It is important to use a positivity and assets-based approach to learning when working with mixed classes, and educators are encouraged to inform heritage speakers/signers that they are being evaluated according to different expectations than their peers. This way, students will not think they are being assessed unfairly and can understand why their learning goals may differ from those of classmates. Although there are many considerations in placing heritage speakers/signers into appropriate courses, educators are encouraged to make placement decisions based on students’ strengths, such as speaking/listening for aural languages, and scaffold instruction to best meet their needs in other areas.

Addressing Issues of Identity

Heritage speakers/signers need support in exploring, constructing, and reflecting upon their identities, a process which is strongly connected with aspects of the heritage culture and heritage-speaking/signing communities. Identity is often a major factor in heritage speakers/signers’ motivations for language learning, and educators must discuss issues of identity to effectively support students in making the cultural connections described in world language content standards. It is important to avoid linguistic, ethnic, or community stereotypes that may negatively impact heritage speakers/signers, and all types of connections to the heritage language should be valued in the classroom. By affirming a variety of identities, teachers can empower heritage speakers/signers to serve as cultural ambassadors in the community, creating a more meaningful and impactful learning experience.

Recommendations for Heritage Speakers/Signers

* Get to know heritage speakers/signers by gathering information about linguistic and cultural backgrounds
* Build upon students’ existing abilities and encourage the transfer of heritage literacy skills
* Provide opportunities to develop speakers’ oral language skills that can later support them when writing
* Individualize and personalize classroom activities, instructional approaches, and assessment methods
* Legitimize and promote diverse forms of expression through multilingual and multimodal communication
* Promote the use of digital resources, including social media, animation software, and videoconferencing
* Explore meaningful service-learning opportunities that can be accessed in and out of the classroom
* Include community interviews and oral histories from family members to explore heritage-specific issues
* Engage in critical dialogue about language’s role in students’ lives, their communities, and greater society
* Teach about different language varieties and registers rather than only focusing on standard varieties
* Encourage continual use of language varieties learned at home and new varieties learned in class
* Avoid assigning tutoring roles to more proficient heritage speakers/signers in mixed classrooms
* Recognize the importance of social, cultural, and political issues associated with the heritage language
* Engage with families of heritage speakers/signers to support learning in the classroom and at home

For more research and a full bibliography for this and other QRG topics, see

[World Language Standards Literature Review Report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/worldlanguages/leader-network/literature-review.docx).

1. Valdés, G. (2000). Teaching heritage languages: An introduction for Slavic language-teaching professionals. In O. &. Kagan, *Learning and teaching of Slavic languages and cultures: Toward the 21st century* (pp. 375-403). Bloomington: Slavica. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Martinez, G. (2016). Goals and beyond in heritage language education. In M. Fairclough, & S.M. Beaudrie*, Innovative strategies for heritage language teaching: A practical guide for the classroom* (pp. 39-55). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)