

Studying the Difficulties of Heritage Language Learners From a Saturday Spanish Class

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Introduction

The term *heritage language* (HL) was first being used in the Canadian context, to refer to any “language other than English and French,” and intended to reference the languages spoken by indigenous people or by immigrants (Cummins, 1991, p.601-2). Clyne (1991) modified the definition to suit the Australian context: to include any language other than English (LOTE).

While heritage language is often taken to be the language used at home or familial contexts (Campbell & Peyton, 1998), other linguists point to its broader cultural associations and significance. Kondo-Brown (2001) synthesizes Wharry’s (1993) term “ancestral language” and Fishman’s (2001) three subcategories of heritage language, and defines heritage language as any ancestral language, including those that are indigenous, colonial, and immigrant. Nakajima (2017) further explains the difference between heritage language and mother tongue: “A heritage language differs from a mother tongue in that it is the language in which the speaker’s identity fluctuates, while a mother tongue serves as the foundation for the speaker’s identity.”

In the past, immigrant children were educated to give up their HL and shift to English in order to adapt to mainstream society. (Sugita & Park, 2020). In recent years, this preconception is beginning to change, and academia started to regard the HL as an advantage rather than a deficiency based on the belief that “heritage language students’ rich linguistic and cultural resources are invaluable national assets” (He & Xiao, 2008; Kondo-Brown, 2001; Li & Duff, 2018). The experience and process of immigrant

children learning their heritage language are also regarded as a rich resource for linguistic studies.

Heritage Language Learning in Japan

In June 1990, Japan revised Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (出入国管理及び難民認定法). Under the new policy, second-generation (二世/Nisei) and third-generation (三世/Sansei) people of Japanese ancestry (日系人/Nikkeijin) grants a stay of up to three years and unlimited access to the labor market. As a result of this policy change, the yearly admission of Nikkeijin, mostly from Brazil and Peru, increased almost four times from 19,000 in 1988 to 79,000 in 1990, while the legal status and demographic profile of immigrants have diversified (Yamanaka, 1996).

While there is a large amount of research on the socioeconomic or sociocultural situations on “return migration” by Nikkei Brazilians and Peruvians (De Carvalho, 2003), not many studies have looked at the lives of the youth with ethnic roots. The “return migration” by Nikkei Brazilians and Peruvians, as they are the second and third generation, they have assimilated into Latin-America and their first language is Spanish rather than Japanese. They speak Spanish at home, but their next generation - those born and educated in Japan - speak Japanese as their first language.

Yet, the Japanese government's protection of heritage language is limited to the indigenous languages (i.e. Ainuic and Ryukyuan languages), not the immigrant languages (i.e. other languages spoken by immigrant families in Japan). The heritage language education was left to parents. However, there are some difficulties for them to learn only at home (Miyazaki, 2014). Some Japanese-Peruvian (日系ペルー人) parents are fearing that their children will lose their ability of Spanish (Shintani, 2015). How to maintain the heritage language? Shibata (2010) showed a case of a Japanese class in a US small town where ethnolinguistic vitality is low, and the next generation of Japanese immigrants do not speak much Japanese. In that study, the Saturday class has played a very

effective role in maintaining the Japanese language skills of children.

There are some studies that have examined the heritage languages spoken by the indigenous people, Ainu and Ryukyuan in Japan (Heinrich, 2008; Teeter & Okazaki, 2011). However, there is a limited number of studies that focus on the heritage language learning of Japanese Peruvians available at this time. Although it has been described by a few scholars (Miyazaki, 2014; Shintani, 2015), there is still a lack of knowledge about how heritage language teaching and learning work in practice, and what difficulties teachers and learners face. We have therefore studied a Japanese-Peruvian Saturday Spanish class in Shonandai as a prior study, to observe closely at their classroom, analyze their difficulties and offer possible solutions.

Methodology

My research partner and I contacted a Japanese-Peruvian Saturday Spanish class in Shonandai and obtained their permission to conduct a real-time observation and recording in the classroom throughout the day. We chose an observation scheme - Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) described by Nina Spada and Maria Fröhlich (1995), to record the real time observation. The following is background information on our classroom observations:

- Location: Fujisawa Shonandai Bunka Center (湘南台文化センター)
- Date and time: 11/12/2021 (Sat), 9:30-1:00
- Organizer: A group of Japanese-Peruvians (also known as Peruvian Nikkei / 日系ペルー人). They are descendants of Japanese immigrants, grew up in Peru and their mother tongue is Spanish. They are very eager and hope that Peruvian children who grow up in Japan can also speak Spanish.
- Teachers: Two Peruvian Nikkei women. They are not

teachers by profession, but their Spanish in Peruvian style (español peruano) is native.

- Class size: three to 12 students (very flexible, students join whenever they arrive)
- Student age range: 4 years old to 12 years old (approximately)
- Student nationality: Japanese, Peruvian
- Teaching materials: Hand-writing notes, copies from textbooks, copybook copies for young learners and YouTube
- Teaching style: Structure-based instructional settings, mainly Audiolingual instructions, with a few grammar rule instructions.

COLT PART A

Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme

School Fujisawa Shoin-dai Bunfa Centre Grade(s) 3-12 years-old Observer Maji Lam
 Teacher Anna San and Aya San Lesson (min.) 9:30-12:50 (3hrs 20mins) Visit No ✓
 Subject Spanish Class Date 11.12.2021 Page 1

TIME	ACTIVITIES & EPISODES	PARTICIPANT ORGANISATION			CONTENT							CONTENT CONTROL			STUDENT MODALITY					MATERIALS														
		Class	Group	Indiv.	Manag.	Language			Other topics				Teacher/text/Student	Student	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Other	Type			Source											
		T ↔ S/C	S ↔ S/C	Choral	Same tasks	Different tasks	Same tasks	Different tasks	Procedure	Discipline	Form	Function								Discourse	Strategies	Narrow	Broad	Text	Audio	Visual	L2-NMS	L2-MS	L2-NMA	Student-made				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33		
9:20	"Periquito el bandolero"	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						
10:00	copying the lyrics of ↑	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						
10:45	checking the writing + teaching Spanish verbs	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						copy-writing
11:30	"Barrito Sabanero" + "Canción Sobre Campana para"	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						
	Telling the story about X'mas.	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						
11:50	"Periquito el bandolero" again	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						
12:00	copying the lyrics of ↑	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						
12:25	checking the writing (young learners guided by verb table, one by one)	✓			✓		✓				✓				✓		✓				✓			✓		✓		✓						copy-writing
12:50	Class End.																																	

N. Spada and M. Fröhlich (1995). COLT Observation Scheme: Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Scheme, Coding Conventions and Applications, Macmillan Science and Education Australia. © 1995 by Nina Spada and Maria Fröhlich. Reproduced by permission.

Figure 1: The COLT note we used in the class

As Figure 1 shows, COLT is a very simplified table, and it is clear from the table that the teaching is heavily weighted towards structure-based instructional settings, mainly audiolingual instructions. The details of student responses, motivations, teacher-

student interactions, interactions between students, etc. cannot be shown in the table. In the following, what happened in the classroom will be described in detail.

Observation: Class Flow, Contents and What was Happening

9:20~	<p>(Repeating the song)</p> <p>The class started unwittingly. Teacher started teaching the song “Periquito el bandolero.” She wrote the lyrics on the whiteboard, explained the vocabulary in the song (e.g: sombrero, caja, paja, cajon...). She asked every student, one by one, to repeat the lyrics. At the end, she asked the students to copy the lyrics on their notebooks. But student said it was difficult to copy due to the cursive.</p>
10:15~	<p>(Copying the lyrics)</p> <p>While students were copying, one student (boy, 9-10 years old) jump in reluctantly. He prostrated on the table. Teacher and volunteer came to him, encouraged him gently. He was accompanied by a volunteer, guided him to do the copy-writing.</p>
10:45~	<p>(Teacher does the checking).</p> <p>Teacher checked their writings. The other teacher started teaching the verb in Spanish (verbos en español). Students copied the verbs again.</p>
10:55~	<p>(Moving)</p> <p>We were told to move, so all the teachers and volunteers started to tidy up the seats and tables, cleaning up, packed up all the things to move.</p>

11:15~	<p>(Moving. Kids were playing).</p> <p>We were moving to a Japanese style room, one little boy (4) and his sister (6) jump in. While we did the setting (arranging the seat cushions and tables), the students were running around and playing with cushions.</p>
11:30~	<p>(Teaching two X'mas songs and telling the X'mas story)</p> <p>Finally, we settled down and we could start the lesson again. One boy had gone with his dad, one girl had gone with a volunteer. Teacher told the story about Christmas and introduced two Christmas songs: "Burrito Sabanero" and "Campana Sobre Campana." Meanwhile the mothers brought their kids (four in total) to jump in. Age range 5-12. Teacher told the story in Spanish, and the students did not understand well, so she invited a volunteer to tell the story in Japanese three times.</p>
11:50~	<p>(Repeat the teaching on the last session)</p> <p>Because there were so many students jumping in, teacher taught the song "Periquito el bandolero" AGAIN, repeating what we had done 2 hours ago. Mothers were invited to sing together too.</p>
12:00~	<p>(Copying lyrics again)</p> <p>Mothers left the classroom and they were chatting outside. Students read and copy the lyrics on their notebook. Teacher said she had forgotten to prepare worksheets for younger learners. Finally, young learners (3-4 years old) were provided with copybook copies.</p>

12:25~	(Teachers do the checking, volunteers instruct younger learners) Teachers checked elder students writing. Young learners were writing the copybooks, volunteers would help and guide them.
12:50~	(Class end) Class ended. Students left with their mothers and fathers. Volunteers tidied up the room. Teachers talked to parents in Spanish.

Difficulties Which Heritage Language Learners Face in the Saturday Spanish Class

From the above observations, it is possible to summarise the difficulties which heritage language learners face in the Saturday Spanish class.

First of all, the classroom environment is not ideal for teaching and learning. The classroom in Fujisawa Shonandai Bunka Center needs to be booked in advance. If the organizer cannot book the same classroom, their class has to move in the mid-way of the lesson. Only simple equipment, such as chairs, tables, seat cushions and whiteboards were provided in the classroom, with no audio-visual equipment. The teacher played the audio teaching materials with her smartphone in the class. Moreover, mothers were chatting outside the classroom while they were waiting for their children. As a result, it is difficult for learners to concentrate on learning.

Secondly, that teachers are not professional teachers is also a difficulty. Teachers in the Saturday Spanish class are voluntary, and they provide opportunities to children to learn and listen to Spanish, but there is no substantial curriculum to follow. The class was not well-organized, students have difficulties organizing what

they have learned. It is difficult for learners to step up to a higher level. In addition, the teacher uses audiolingual instructions and there is no interaction between learners. As a result, learners feel bored and lose motivation to learn.

Thirdly, the Saturday Spanish class is fully voluntary and under-resourced. As the class is free and voluntary, there are no different courses provided for different ages. As a result, there is a wide range of ages within a class. Due to funding constraints, the teachers were unable to provide a better environment and more teaching materials. Most of the materials are self-produced and copied by teachers, and learners are required to return some expensive notes (i.e., the colored copies of the textbook), and they cannot bring their notes home and do revision.

All the above difficulties lead to the biggest challenge: low motivation of learners. Due to the loose organization of the teaching schedule, learners can come and leave whenever they (or their parents) like. The lack of restriction has resulted in learners being undisciplined and playing or chatting in the classroom. The learners' age range is too wide. For young learners the content is difficult but elder learners felt it too easy and were bored. Finally, all learners lost their motivation to learn in class.

It was observed that the learners' first language is Japanese and all conversations between them are in Japanese. It might not be their wish but their parents' expectation to attend the Spanish class, so they leave immediately when they are allowed to (e.g., father came to bring the boy home) or find an excuse (e.g., the girl who left with the volunteer).

Possible Solutions

Many difficulties in the Shonandai Saturday Spanish class have been analyzed above, yet if referring to how other countries help expatriates to maintain their heritage language, feasible solutions may be found. Below are some suggested solutions.

The most effective solution is to establish an officially-supported language teaching institution, modelled on the Britain (British Council) and France (Alliance Française) models.

However, this is only possible if the home country has sufficient financial support. In the Shonandai Saturday Spanish class' case, their home country Peru is not a powerful and wealthy country, so it is difficult to achieve.

It is more feasible to shift to the Japanese local government for assistance. They may ask the regional government (i.e. Fujisawa City Office) for a place that can be used as a long-term base. This gives teachers space to prepare lessons and store teaching materials. Learners will be able to attend classes in a familiar environment and increase their sense of belonging.

In terms of self-improvement, curriculum must be designed for learners of different levels and ages, stop relying on audiolingual instructions, and add more grammar plus communication exercises. To elder learners, teachers can try task-based instructions. For example, teachers may give tasks to elder learners, such as making Spanish word cards and translating a board game into Spanish. Those tasks can give learners a sense of success in learning their heritage language, and also the products from the tasks can be the teaching material for young learners. In addition, teachers can give some small assignments to students to complete at home. Rewards can be offered at the end of the term to increase their motivation.

Finally, by extending teaching beyond the classroom; learning should not be confined to Saturdays and classrooms. On the 23rd of January, 2022, my research partner met with parents who are very eager to teach their children Spanish and they talked about the necessity of class planning, or syllabus. Since there is only one class per week, it needs collaboration between Spanish class and home. Following Miyazaki's study (2014), which showed becoming multilingual learners needs to have self-making motivation, the study program should have triggered it. Going back to the role of heritage language, it connects children and parents through their communications. Based on this idea, the curriculum should focus on daily conversations so the children can practice what they do in the class and may realize the merits of talking in Spanish, seeing their parents' reactions.

Beside learning at home, teachers can provide some online materials as Figure 2 shows, so that parents can review them with children at home.



Figure 2: An Example of Online Material

Limitation and Improvement

The major limitation is limited time. My research partner and I would have liked to observe at least two weeks of Saturday Spanish classes so we could get to know the learners better for more in-depth interviews about motivations for learning the traditional language, but they have Christmas and New Year's off, so we were not able to do that. Moreover, my lack of Spanish also prevented me from observing all the details of the classroom, as the teacher spoke and gave instructions in Spanish, which I did not understand fully.

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