

# Japanese-American Heritage Language Learner Reflections: Key Themes for Informing Bicultural Educational Experience

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## Introduction

A heritage language is an immigrant, indigenous or ancestral language (He, 2014). A United States based definition of a heritage language learner is a “student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken by one who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (Valdes, 2001). A broader definition applicable more globally of heritage language learners is “those who have been exposed to a particular language in childhood but did not learn it to full capacity because another language became dominant” (Polinsky and Kagan, 2007, p.369). Providing extensive opportunities in K-12 and beyond for heritage language and culture education helps create a multilingual population of students with stronger self-concept and pride in their heritage(s). The development of heritage language is positively correlated with better English skills, greater self-esteem, stronger ethnic identity and creating stronger familial ties (Hashimoto and Lee, 2011). Language learning is a pathway for understanding cultures for all learners and is especially the case for learners when they study the language of their heritage (National Heritage Language Resource Center, 2016).

## OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to learn about the bicultural educational experiences of Japanese heritage and community language learners, and how they felt their heritage language learning influenced their ethnic identity development. Utilizing the power of reflective practices, current students and alumni of Japanese heritage schools were interviewed to understand their perceptions of their experiences.

From an educational leadership standpoint, data that shows the effectiveness of heritage language pipeline/articulation agreements could help fund more heritage language schools as well as provide valuable information to language program coordinators and lifetime learning programs.

The National Heritage Language Survey (Carreira and Kagan, 2011) surveyed heritage language learners across the U.S. This study suggested that the majority of higher education heritage language learners enroll in courses to learn more about their heritage, and to strengthen their career prospects.

## Research Questions

1. What are Japanese heritage school alumni and adult learners’ perceptions of how their participation in the school helped/ helps them connect, if at all, with their cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and family/community?
  - a. How do Japanese heritage school alumni connect their language journeys to their ethnic identity development?
  - b. What factors influence a heritage language learners’ ability to choose or navigate a bicultural-bilingual identity?
  - c. How has their perspective changed over the years about their heritage language learning experience?
2. What are Japanese language teachers’ perceptions of how Japanese heritage language learners connect, if at all, with their cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and family/community through taking Japanese in higher education?

## METHODS

A qualitative research design was utilized and included semi-structured narrative interviews, reflection journaling, and analysis of one thematic autobiographical essay.

- Selective and purposeful sampling utilized to identify Japanese-Americans who had engaged with Japanese language learning

Participants: 14 Learners, 6 Teachers

This study involved three groups of people.

- Group 1A: Learners who took Japanese language courses in higher education through a Japanese heritage or foreign language course at large public university in Southern California.
  - 5 currently enrolled in a large public university in Southern California, and were taking or had taken Japanese classes there.
  - 5 took university level Japanese heritage or Japanese foreign language classes and graduated within the last ten years.
  - 3 took university level Japanese heritage or Japanese foreign language classes and graduated more than ten years ago.
- Group 1B: Japanese heritage language learners in K-12 who did not take Japanese heritage language courses in higher education. (1 participant)
- Group 2: Teachers who teach Japanese language for foreign language learners and Japanese heritage language learners in K-12 and higher education, they are expert consultants.
- Data was triangulated by looking at the semi-structured interviews, analysis of reflections and autobiography, and speaking with experts. I also analyzed my results across several ethnic identity theories and reflection theories.

## Learner Demographics

*Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei, Gosei* respectively mean first, second, third, fourth and fifth generation in the U.S. *Shin-Nisei* is a second generation person of Japanese heritage whose parents moved to the U.S. within the last 30 years, and is used to differentiate between Nisei who have lived in the U.S. pre-World War II (Metoki, 2012).

- The fourteen learners ranged in age from 19 to 59
- Japanese-American Nisei (1)
- Japanese-American Shin-Nisei (3)
- Japanese-American Sansei (1)
- Japanese-American Yonsei (3)
- Half-Japanese, Half-White (3)
- Half-Japanese, Half-African-American (1)
- Half-Japanese, Half-Chinese from Indonesia (1)
- Half-Japanese, Half-Filipino (1)

## Themes

- Interviews, reflection journals and a thematic autobiography were analyzed for themes:
- **Japanese heritage language vs. foreign language learning**
- **Ethnic identity**
- **Bilingualism and Bi/Multiculturalism**
- **Family and Japanese-American community**
- **Motivation**
- **Career**
- **Intergenerational Transfer**

## RESULTS

There were eight overarching main themes that emerged.

The Japanese heritage language learners and teachers both agreed on the following points:

1. There are significant differences between how learners of Japanese as a heritage language and learners of Japanese as a foreign language, learn Japanese. These learners have very different needs.
2. Learners gain a deeper understanding of ethnic identity through attending Japanese heritage school in K-12 and during their higher education.
3. Heritage schools help students achieve bilingual status.
4. Family life impacts the motivation of heritage language learners to study Japanese.
5. Learners’ ability to balance both Japanese heritage school and U.S. local school impacts their motivation, and ability to continue in Japanese heritage school.
6. It is challenging to attain a high enough literacy and Japanese speaking ability to use Japanese in a career.
7. Intergenerational language transfer was important to the learners. All of the learners who completed written reflections felt this was a useful way for them to reflect back and process their experiences.
8. The majority of learners who completed post-interview written reflections felt that completing this exercise was a positive experience for them.

## Conclusions

- Important to be flexible: Avoid too much pressure to learn language at a young age.
- Create a supportive language learning environment.
- More curricular resources in K-12 and higher education are needed to fit the unique learning needs of heritage language learners.
- More K-12 and Higher Education articulation is needed in heritage language learning
- College-level heritage language class students connect through shared identities
- Needs to be more recognition among the mainstream, inter-ethnic community about the importance of heritage language schools.
- Large universities in metropolitan areas often have well-established heritage language programs or heritage language tracks. However, there is a need to establish heritage language programs across a diversity of schools in the U.S.
  - Use technology to provide access to less commonly taught languages across schools.
- Providing continuous heritage language learning resources helps maximize learners’ existing skills and support them in becoming bilingual enough to apply their language skills to personal and career goals.

## Selected Quotes

- “Being Japanese has been a big part of my identity, so if I lose my language ability, I feel panicked because that would be a loss of identity for me...I really don’t want to lose my Japanese, I am proud that I studied so long...I don’t want to lose the privilege that I have.”
- “I think speaking at a native speaker level, allows for a lot of nuance, which I don’t think I could have otherwise if I only studied in college.”
- “For like 40 years after they came back from the internment camps, they tried to do away with their Japanese culture, but seeing my sister and I come back with these very firm cultural values that we learned from my dad and the school, it really meant something to them. To this day I tell people that my grandparents didn't speak Japanese from 1945 - 1980's (when my parents got married) and so I think the Japanese school was really helpful to be that bridge for my grandparents to reclaim Japanese ethnic identity.”

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