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Heritage Language Development: Expectations and Goals

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ABSTRACT

What should we expect from heritage language (HL) acquirers? We propose that given access to “optimal input,” we can eventually expect very high performance, native or near-native. But it won’t happen right away. It takes time.

Keywords: heritage language, optimal input, compelling input

WHAT IS “OPTIMAL INPUT”?

Heritage languages (HL) are usually defined as minority languages, typically spoken by children of immigrants, and acquired at home from family members (Cho, Shin, & Krashen, 2004).

Our hypothesis is that heritage languages are acquired most successfully and efficiently when the HL speaker gets optimal input (Krashen & Mason, 2020), conditions that govern language acquisition in general, including first and second, child and adult, and in both the informal and formal environments.

The optimal conditions are these: (1) the input is comprehensible, mostly due to context (verbal and visual) but not excluding occasional translation from the dominant language. (2) the input is highly interesting, or compelling, so interesting that the listener may not always be aware of what language is being spoken. The only interest is the message. (3) the input is rich, that is, it provides context that helps the acquirer understand and hence acquire unfamiliar language, and at the same time helps make the text interesting. (4) The input is abundant. Language acquisition is gradual, only a small part of new language is acquired with each exposure, Thus, input needs to be abundant, giving the acquirer sufficient exposure to new language.

THE GOAL

The general goal of heritage language development in children is NOT to attain the same level that children growing up in the country of origin attain at the same age. Heritage language acquirers, even with optimal input, will typically not acquire as quickly as those acquiring the language in the country where the language is spoken. Thus, a ten-year-old boy acquiring Mandarin in Milwaukee from conversations with his mother will not speak and understand Mandarin at the level of a ten-year-old boy in Beijing.

A more reasonable goal is to eventually attain enough competence to understand native speakers interested in communicating with him, understand and enjoy some media, such as television shows, and perhaps be able to read at least some texts. In other words, the goal for this ten-year-old boy is to attain enough competence to be able to continue to improve on his own. This is the goal of all language education; not perfection, but enough competence to understand at least some “authentic” input and continue to improve without a teacher or classroom. This is, in fact, the goal for all education: autonomy.

This is a more reasonable goal than “grade level” or parity with those growing up in the country of origin. The heritage language acquirer is rarely exposed to the same amount of optimal input as those in the country of origin, but will be proceeding along the same linguistic path, although not as rapidly. This is of no concern: with more optimal input, there will be progress. Again, the goal is to reach the stage where a great deal of input is comprehensible and the acquirer can continue to improve independently.

Speakers living in the country of origin are sometimes critical of young HL acquirers’ accomplishments. Part of the reason might be the kinds of errors the heritage language speakers make: many late-acquired grammatical items have little communicative value but are markers of social class, e.g., the third person singular in English. Errors of this kind give the impression that the speaker is poorly educated; after all, other children of that age have acquired these rules. The only solution is to keep providing optimal input and eventually these “errors” will disappear.

“R”: A STORY OF SUCCESSFUL HERITAGE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

R, a ten-year-old son of a native speaker of Mandarin, has clearly succeeded. His input in Mandarin comes nearly entirely from his mother, although R has visited relatives in China for short periods of time.

The family lives in a suburb of a major city in the mid-west of the United States and his father does not speak Mandarin. His mother has been providing optimal Mandarin input to him since he was born, and they have always had a warm, close relationship, with constant interaction and conversation; mom has read to R “for years” in Chinese and has encouraged him to watch cartoons in Chinese.

R’s mother has told us that R is very fluent in Mandarin, and his pronunciation is native-like. She notes that his vocabulary is somewhat limited, and his competence in grammar is incomplete; when he lacks the means to say what he wants to say, he fills in with English syntax, which is exactly what second language acquirers do when they want to express complex ideas within their cognitive capacity but beyond their competence in the language (Newmark, 1966). Thus, R’s Mandarin is less complete than others his age growing up in China.

R interacts easily with native speakers of Mandarin when he is in China, even with children he meets on the train, in malls, and in restaurants. When he spends time in China (he was there with other family members living in China but without his mother for a month), his mother reported that his Chinese had improved and he spoke more like a native speaker. He was, in other words, able to take advantage of the optimal input available to him.

Mom succeeded. R is competent enough in Mandarin to improve on his own.

R's slightly older cousin has visited R and his family for extended periods of time, and R has had no problem communicating with his cousin in Mandarin. These visits always result in an improvement in R's Mandarin.

R's mother told us that occasionally R responds to her in English. She did not "make a big deal about it" because she noted that "whenever there was more input, there would be more (Mandarin) output from him," an observation consistent with research in language acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

This is only one case, but it suggests that heritage language development is quite possible given optimal input, without urging the child to speak the language. Young heritage language speakers will typically not match the rate of development shown by those living in the country of origin, but they can reach the stage where they can understand and enjoy the company of native speakers and can thus continue to improve.

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