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Heritage Language Literacy: A Study of US Biliterates

Lucy Tse

*Charter College of Education, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151
State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8142, USA*

This paper reports on a study involving a group of ten US-raised adults who have managed to attain relatively high levels of heritage language (HL) literacy (in Spanish, Cantonese and Japanese), defying the typical pattern of intergenerational language shift. In-depth retrospective interviews were used to explore the types of access to HL print and the HL literacy experiences of this diverse group. The participants had the greatest access to HL print in their home and in the HL community, and primarily through participating in religious worship and leisure activities. The participants also had (1) the assistance of more literate people, who acted as literacy conduits and literacy models; (2) contact with community institutions, namely religious organisations, which used and provided access to HL print and literacy experiences beyond the home; (3) the access to 'light' reading materials which helped foster an interest in recreational reading and; (4) the opportunity to act as literacy mediators for parents and family which supplied an authentic and important purpose for developing the heritage language. The implications of these findings are discussed and the role of school programmes in promoting HL literacy is considered.

Native or 'heritage' language (HL) development is receiving increased attention as researchers and educators seek ways to foster bilingualism and biliteracy among language minority (LM) students. The number of US students who begin school speaking a language other than English continues to increase dramatically (MacArthur, 1993). This growing population is a logical focus for encouraging biliteracy – the ability to use literacy in two languages – since this goal can be achieved if the home language is developed while English is learned. Unfortunately, an extensive literature confirms that heritage language literacy is typically lost as the children and grandchildren of immigrants enter school, and English becomes their dominant language (Portes & Hao, 1998). Without literacy ability in the HL, native bilinguals are unable to benefit from the documented economic and academic advantages available to those with dual language proficiency (Krashen, 1996).

Literacy is developed through meaningful experiences with text. To have such experiences, learners must have access to literacy materials in their environment that are relevant and appropriate. First-language literacy researchers deem having such access as critical to fostering reading and writing ability, since it is a prerequisite to reading independently or with others (McQuillan, 1998; Neuman, 1999). However, the issue of access has been little studied in other areas of language acquisition, including in the field of HL acquisition.

Considering the importance of print access for fostering literacy and the rapid disappearance of heritage languages across generations, the purpose of this study was to discover the types of literacy access and experiences conducive to HL literacy development. Through in-depth interviews, this investigation docu-

mented the print access and literacy experiences of ten highly literate native bilinguals raised in the US. The findings of this study may contribute to our understanding of how HL literacy can be fostered, thereby providing insight into how language shift in the US may be stemmed.

Previous Research

First- and second-language literacy research have long established the relationship between the amount of reading an individual engages in and how well one reads (Anderson *et al.*, 1988; Krashen, 1993; Smith, 1988). Studies examining the amount of reading done and reading ability demonstrate that recreational reading benefits literacy development in major areas, including reading comprehension, vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, reading attitudes, and writing ability (e.g. Elley, 1991; 1992; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Morrow *et al.*, 1990; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Tse, 1996a).

More recently, researchers have called attention to the critical role played by print access in determining how much reading is done, and ultimately, how well one reads. In analyses of 1992 US National Assessment of Educational Progress student reading scores, McQuillan (1998) found a strong relationship between how much access to print a state had available in homes, communities, and schools, and students' standardised test scores in each state. Similar findings were reported in a study of SAT scores in which McQuillan concluded that 'the school library quality and public library use were the most reliable predictors of reading achievement at the high school level in the United States' (McQuillan, 1996a, p. 68). Other studies also show the importance of access when interventions are introduced in schools (Dorrell & Carroll, 1981; Neuman, 1999; Rucker, 1982). Neuman (1999) found that by substantially increasing the number of available books in child-care centres with 'economically disadvantaged children', that those children developed higher levels of early literacy skills (e.g. concepts of print, letter name knowledge, narrative competence) than children without such intervention, and those effects continued into kindergarten six months later (p. 287). Even very modest interventions created to increase print access seem to have dramatic effects. Dorrell and Carroll (1981) found that simply by adding non-circulating comic books to the school library increased the circulation of non-comic books by an impressive 30%.

Unfortunately for HL speakers in the US, studies have also documented a lack of non-English reading materials in schools and communities. In their study of four elementary school libraries serving populations of over 90% Spanish speakers, Ulanoff and Pucci (1996) found few books available in non-English languages for student and teacher use. Librarians from 32 elementary public schools were surveyed regarding the reasons behind this paucity and they cited the difficulty of obtaining Spanish-language materials and their prohibitive cost as major barriers.

This lack of availability is compounded by the fact that language minority (LM) parents tend to use the public library – an important community resource for reading material – significantly less than non-LM parents. Constantino (1995) reported that LM parents did not have information on how to gain access to public library services, some believing that special permission or qualifications

were needed. McQuillan (1998) confirmed these findings using National Household Education Survey data, finding that parents who reported speaking a non-English first language took their children to the library significantly less often than parents whose first language was English. Another obstacle to HL access is related to LM households falling disproportionately in the lower socioeconomic levels in the US. As Di Loreto and Tse (1997) and Smith *et al.* (1997) found, wealthier communities have significantly more book and periodical offerings, library staffing, and reading promotion programmes than working-class or economically poor communities. Taken together, these studies suggest that HL print availability at home, in the community, and at school, is severely limited.

The disappearance of non-English languages in the US has been well documented by a number of researchers (e.g. Fishman, 1991; Krashen, 1996; Veltman, 1983; Wong Fillmore, 1991). This 'language shift' occurs over generations, as children and grandchildren of immigrants stop learning and using the HL, eventually preferring English for communication in all domains. Literacy appears to be the first victim of intergenerational language shift. Even among those second and later generations who are able to speak the language to some degree, relatively few are able to read and write in the HL. And even in the communities where non-English languages appear to the public to be somewhat resilient to language shift, shift is occurring as indicated by the steep decline of literacy ability over time. A survey study by Garcia and Diaz (1992), for example, found that a vast majority (75%) of the Spanish bilingual high school students in their study in Miami were able to understand English and Spanish equally well, but only 47% could write with equivalent fluency in both languages.

If, in fact, the lack of access to HL print limits literacy growth, as research strongly suggests, it is important to discover the types of print access and the kinds of literacy experiences which promote HL development. This issue can be addressed by examining the experiences of those who have managed to become highly literate in the HL. Using qualitative interview techniques, this study examined the HL histories of ten biliterate adults who have achieved high levels of HL literacy to shed light on the types of print access and experiences likely to promote biliteracy.

The Study

Participants

Ten bilingual adults were interviewed for this study, each with at least the reading ability typical of native-speaking adolescents in the HL (see Table 1). These participants were part of a larger study (Tse, in press) and were recruited using several strategies: snowball sampling, posting flyers at universities with high HL populations, and asking for referrals through direct mailings to the language teaching faculty at 31 universities and colleges in Los Angeles and Orange Counties in Southern California. All of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of the interviews and were enrolled community college or university students in the Southern California area. All but one participant – who immigrated to the US at the age of four – were US born, and none of the participants had been formally educated in a country where the HL is used for wider communication for longer than two weeks. The three men and seven

women spoke Cantonese (1), Japanese (2), and Spanish (7); the Spanish speakers were of Colombian (1), Cuban (1), or Mexican (5) descent. Their parents' level of education ranged from no formal education to holding advanced college degrees.

Table 1 Brief profiles of participants

Name	Age	Gender	Place of birth/Place raised/Age of arrival in US	Heritage language
Alicia	21	F	California	Spanish (Mexican)
Carmiña	22	F	New York/California	Spanish (Colombian)
Cindy	21	F	California	Spanish (Cuban)
Ernesto	20	M	California	Spanish (Mexican)
Helen	20	F	Hong Kong/California/4	Cantonese
John	20	M	California	Spanish (Mexican)
Juan	19	M	California	Spanish (Mexican)
Julie	18	F	New York/California	Japanese
Marina	18	F	California	Spanish (Mexican)
Meg	18	F	California	Japanese

Adapted from Tse (in press).

Procedures

Each potential participant completed a screening survey which asked for self-reported HL language and literacy ability, and basic biographical information. Those who indicated that they were able to 'read a teen novel' and who met the criteria described above were selected for participation. Each participant was interviewed twice for a total of four to six hours, and received a stipend of \$50. The interviews were held at a location of the participants' choosing, and took place at my university office, in their home, or in a meeting room at their college or university. A question guide was used at the initial meeting to guide the semi-structured interview; the second interview was centred around issues and questions that emerged from the first meeting (Patton, 1987). During the interviews, the participants were asked to take a 'tour' of their parents' home and of their communities, and to point out where HL print could be seen (Spradley, 1979). Participants were probed about each of those types of print to discover the nature of their interactions with them. The interviews were tape-recorded and copies of the transcripts were given to each participant with a request for elaboration and/or clarification.

To confirm reading ability in the HL, each participant was asked to read a passage in their HL and to write a summary of what they understood in English. This technique was adapted from Bernhardt (1983) who developed the procedure to elicit writing samples from the German foreign-language participants in her study. The reading passages of approximately 500 words each were taken from *Reader's Digest* articles or similar popular adult reading material considered accessible to adolescent readers in the native language. If the participant appeared to comprehend the selection, they were considered 'literate' for the purposes of this study.

Analysis

Qualitative coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to analyse the interview transcripts. Each transcript was coded first with conceptual labels to capture the nature of the comments made by the participants; then, those labelled segments were grouped under thematic categories. Those themes were then organised into the broader major categories of information presented in the next section.

Results

The data presented in this paper focus on access to print and the HL literacy experiences of a group of biliterate native-speaker adults, and, as noted above, is part of a larger study on HL development (Tse, in press). Access to print and the literacy experiences recounted by the participants occurred in three domains – home, community, and school.

Home

In the home, access to print came in a variety of forms as part of daily household activities and through types of entertainment the participants and their families took part in, as indicated in Tables 2 and 3. Household chores such as cooking, for example, sometimes involved the use of cookbooks in the HL. Two participants, Cindy and Marina, recalled their mother, grandmother, and/or aunt consulting cookbooks in the kitchen. As teenagers and adults, the participants used these books themselves as they aided their family in cooking tasks or cooked independently.

Religious material was another type of HL text found in several of the participants' homes. Ernesto's parents led Bible study groups and Ernesto recalled his father pouring over scriptures in preparation. Cindy's grandmother, who took care of Cindy after school for many years, was a devout Catholic who read aloud from the Bible daily, held Bible study groups in her home, and prayed several times each day. John's grandmother, who helped care for him during summers spent with his father, had prayer cards, church newsletters and notices, and other church-related correspondence around the house which John recalled trying to read. On occasion, a few of the participants recalled their parents reading Bible stories and children's storybooks to them, and singing along with song books.

The participants also recalled coming in contact with HL print when they acted as 'language brokers', or interpreters and translators, for their families. Six of the ten participants acted in this role at one time or another during childhood and/or adolescent years. One task frequently asked of them involved orally translating into the HL English-language correspondence parents received in the mail, through work, or from their children's school. In attempting to understand these letters and notices, the participants would sometimes consult English and/or HL dictionaries as well as other HL materials, first to understand the meaning of an unfamiliar term in English, and then to discover the right word or expression in the HL to convey the message. This type of linguistic negotiation was also needed when parents expressed in the HL messages they wished to send in letters and notes, which their children wrote in English on their behalf.

Leisure activities engaged in by the participants and their parents involved

Table 2 Type of HL print by location

<i>Home</i>	
Periodicals ¹	5
Reference books ²	5
Religious texts ³	4
Comic books	3
Non-fiction books	3
Popular novels	3
Storybooks/songbooks	3
Board games	2
Cookbooks	2
Poetry	2
Song lyrics	2
Television captioning	1
Textbooks	1
<i>Community</i>	
Product labels, restaurant menus, etc.	5
Store signs, posters, etc.	5
Religious texts ³	4
Popular novels	3
Song lyrics	2
<i>School</i>	
Textbooks	7
Worksheets/dialogues	6
Classic literature	5
Short stories	3
Poetry	1

1. Newspapers, magazines (e.g. fashion, celebrity, teen).

2. Dictionaries, cookbooks, computer manuals, encyclopaedia.

3. Bible, prayer cards, church/temple newsletters, chants, missals, hymn-books.

considerable use of HL literacy in the home. Several of the participants recalled seeing their parents read regularly for pleasure. Helen's father brought home a newspaper in Chinese every day to read after work, and Julie's mother read newspapers on a regular basis which she bought at the Japanese market. Alicia's mother finished a novel in Spanish about once a week, and her father was an avid reader of cowboy westerns in the HL. Meg's mother also enjoyed reading novels and did so often. Frequently, parents brought home HL magazines purchased at a local market or news stand, or borrowed them from friends who regularly traded periodicals with one another. Helen had access to her mother's celebrity magazines and occasionally read articles from her brother's car magazines in Chinese. As the participants grew older, they purchased or subscribed to magazines themselves. Meg, for example, subscribed to Japanese fashion magazines as an adult after having read Japanese teen celebrity magazines in high school.

Nearly all of the participants developed this interest in reading for pleasure,

Table 3 Type and location of HL literacy experiences

<i>Home</i>	
Read independently for pleasure	9
Participated in religious worship	8
Conducted language brokering	6
Saw adults read for pleasure	4
Were read aloud to	3
Played games	2
Were taught letters of the alphabet by parents	2
Wrote letters to relatives	2
Were taught academic topics	1
<i>Community</i>	
Participated in religious worship	8
Frequented HL businesses	6
Conducted language brokering	4
Participated in karaoke	3
Read independently for pleasure (in friends' homes)	2
<i>School</i>	
Read excerpts and passages from textbooks	7
Completed grammar worksheets	6
Read/wrote dialogues and skits	4
Did dictation	3
Read stories	3
Read poetry	1

which they credited for their advanced reading ability as adults. In addition to reading magazines, three of the participants – Meg, Helen, and Julie – also became avid readers of Japanese (Meg, Julie) and Chinese (Helen) comic books intended for children and adolescents. Meg's parents bought comic books for her to read from the local Japanese supermarket and bookstore, and Meg recalled reading them almost daily from her junior high school to high school years. Helen borrowed comic books from friends, as did Julie. Julie initially bought comic books from bookstores, but later borrowed them from her junior high friends who were in the US with their expatriate parents working for US branches of Japanese companies. These international students had relatives in Japan who regularly sent them multi-volume comic book series popular among Japanese youth. Julie recalled reading four or five volumes a day, often staying up late into the night to finish a series.

For the most part, the participants read fiction for pleasure. Carmiña, however, recounted her interest in reading non-fiction as well. Carmiña was home-schooled in Spanish by her mother until the age of 14, when she enrolled in a community college. In her home were a variety of reference materials and textbooks used to teach her maths, science, Spanish, and English, including encyclopaedias and computer manuals, as well as chemistry, philosophy, and

maths textbooks, among others. In her free time, Carmiña liked to read non-fiction books, particularly those about science topics and about animals, in addition to her occasional reading of poetry, novels, and other types of literature.

In addition to getting instruction from her mother in core school subjects, Carmiña was taught Spanish by her mother about twice a week. This instruction consisted primarily of learning how to pronounce the letters of the alphabet in Spanish and a few grammar rules as she grew older. Only one other participant, Marina, mentioned parents providing direct HL instruction. Marina recalled being taught the letters of the alphabet in Spanish when she was a young child.

Other types of HL print encountered by the participants included captioned television and video programmes in Chinese mentioned by Helen. She explained that due to a lack of mutual intelligibility among some Chinese dialects, captioning is often used. Ernesto recalled that he and his siblings often played a popular Spanish-language bingo board game with labelled pictures called *Lotería*, which gave him one of his first exposures to written words in the HL.

Community

The HL community provided additional contact with HL print. The religious practices in the home were extensions of Catholic church or Buddhist temple worship in which the HL was used. Five of the ten participants regularly attended religious services on weekends with their families where they encountered such things as the Bible, missals, hymnals, books of teachings and chants, and prayer cards. Marina, Ernesto and John all recalled reading along in the missals and hymn-books in church as the priest or another church representative read passages aloud and led the congregation in song. Ernesto vividly recalled sitting in church at the age of about eight trying to silently out-read the priest as he read passages aloud to parishioners.

Whether at church or in other parts of the community, nearly all of the participants described seeing and interacting with print in their environment through daily activities. The terms 'environmental' and 'functional' print refer to highly contextualised texts appearing in association with symbols, such as 'Nike' and its swish logo, and in familiar routines and settings, including grocery lists and telephone books (Harste *et al.*, 1982; McGee *et al.*, 1988). Half of the participants were raised in HL communities, and for them, seeing various forms of HL print in their neighbourhood was common and conducting daily transactions involving HL literacy was possible, if not typical. Helen, who was raised in Los Angeles' Chinatown and then later in a Chinese-enclave suburb, recalled frequently seeing Chinese at neighbourhood grocery stores and restaurants, encountering signs, posters, notices, product labels, and menus, which introduced her to uses of HL print outside the home. Ernesto recalled seeing similar types of print in his neighbourhood as a child. During summers spent with his father, John described the Spanish-speaking enclave in which he lived as having Spanish print 'everywhere'.

Participating in different types of entertainment provided exposure to HL print, not only in the home, but also in the community. Several participants liked singing karaoke, an activity which allows one to sing while accompanied by music and song lyrics scrolling across a video screen. As teenagers and adults,

both Helen and Meg would accompany friends to karaoke clubs, where they would see, often for the first time, written lyrics for familiar songs.

School

The third domain in which the participants encountered HL print was in school. There were two types of HL programmes the participants enrolled in: (1) community language schools which are often called 'Saturday schools' or 'afterschool schools', and (2) foreign-language courses within their regular day school. Helen, Meg and Julie attended community language schools for a number of years during childhood and/or adolescence. Types of classroom activities involving HL print included reading aloud passages from textbooks, doing dictation, completing grammar worksheets, and writing essays. For the most part, these participants had negative impressions of their experiences in HL schools, calling them 'boring' and 'a waste of time'. Helen had no fond memories of the years spent in Chinese school and could not think of any positive aspects of that education. Meg remembered how, as a child, she wanted to quit the programme so that she would not have to attend school on the weekends when her non-HL peers had free time. While Helen, Meg, and Julie all believed that HL school gave them some rudimentary familiarity with HL print, they also felt that these years of instruction did not contribute significantly to their high levels of HL literacy. All three believed that other activities, particularly recreational reading, was the true cause.

The other seven participants took foreign-language courses in junior high, high school, and/or college. Common types of classroom activities they recalled included reading short stories and/or poetry, reading and writing dialogues and skits, completing grammar and vocabulary worksheets, and reading aloud from the textbook. These participants had two primary reactions to their FL experience. Some felt positively when teachers and fellow students recognised their native-speaker ability as an asset. Steve recalled feeling good about his Spanish proficiency when his classmates vied for his help with homework and wanted to team up with him for small group work and to complete projects. Carmiña enjoyed her Spanish courses in college, finding them easy, and only felt challenged in the advanced literature courses intended for Spanish majors, classes consisting almost exclusively of native speakers.

In most cases, however, the participants felt negatively about their FL experiences as a result of teachers devaluing HL ability learned at home and in the community. Colloquialisms used in speech and writings were considered non-standard and sub-standard, and the participants' mistakes in using grammatical markers when writing, such as 'incorrectly' applying accents in Spanish, were admonished. Several participants believed that teachers were particularly hard on native speakers because they had unrealistic expectations of the abilities of native bilinguals. Cindy recalled feeling 'stupid' in her college Spanish class as a result of these unwarranted assumptions held by both teacher and non-native-speaker classmates. Ernesto felt somewhat resentful that he was not given the same opportunities to learn, because his teacher assumed that he was already highly literate. Ernesto recounted feeling ignored when his high school Spanish teacher prevented native speakers from participating in discussions or activities. Formal schooling in the HL, whether in community schools or in

foreign-language classrooms, left several of the participants unwilling to continue learning the language. Cindy, for example, eventually dropped out of the Spanish class in which she felt 'stupid' and decided against pursuing a minor in the language. (For a more thorough discussion of HL schooling experiences, see Tse, 2000a).

Discussion

In this study, the participants had the greatest access to HL print in their home and in the HL community, and the experiences these biliterates believed were most conducive to literacy development tended to occur outside of school. At home and in the community, print access was available through attending to daily matters and participating in religious worship and leisure activities; at school, HL print was encountered primarily in form-focused materials and short reading passages.

Access to print, including pleasure-reading materials, was supplied through such conduits as parents, older siblings, and peers. In these cases, literacy development was assisted by more literate members of their families and communities (Vygotsky, 1978), who apprenticed the novice reader in literacy activities and allowed him or her into the 'literacy club' (Smith, 1988, 1994). By bringing periodicals, storybooks, religious texts, novels, and non-fiction books into the home, parents made available a variety of materials. In addition, several modelled pleasure reading for their children as they engaged in reading themselves. Peers also acted as conduits by introducing pleasure reading (comic books), karaoke, and other forms of entertainment to the participants which put the participants in further contact with HL print. By observing and eventually engaging in those activities fully and independently, the participants themselves became competent and confident users of the language.

Important to note is the role played by community organisations, most notably religious organisations in HL communities, in using the language for communication and worship. Such institutions also served as sources of HL print for the home. Since access to print is so critical to encouraging literacy (McQuillan, 1998; Neuman, 1999), supplementing materials to homes with little print access may be one critical factor contributing to these participants becoming biliterate.

One of the key activities most of the participants credited for their high levels of HL literacy was reading for recreation (Krashen, 1993). Interestingly, nearly all of the types of materials self-selected for recreational reading can be characterised as 'light' reading, including magazines, novels, and comic books. Developing an interest to read regularly and independently contributed significantly to the participants' exposure to HL literacy. This is consistent with previous research on first- and second-language literacy, and with the few published HL intervention studies available. Schon and her colleagues (Schon *et al.*, 1982; Schon *et al.*, 1984; Schon *et al.*, 1985) found among Spanish-English native bilingual speakers in the US that those who did more recreational reading in the HL also had better reading ability. McQuillan (1996b) discovered among his Spanish university students who engaged in pleasure reading that students continued to

read significantly more seven months after completing the course than peers who received traditional language instruction.

A number of daily and household activities also appear to contribute to the participants' HL literacy development. The language brokering tasks performed by a majority of the participants are consistent with previous studies showing the effects of natural interpretation and translation by bilingual children and adolescents. These studies indicate that performing these bilingual, and frequently biliterate, tasks improves language proficiency in both the HL and in English (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Tse, 1995, 1996b). This is not surprising considering that these interactions involve increased contact with HL literacy materials and give brokers an authentic and important reason to use them.

The adverse reactions to formal schooling are a concern considering the growing HL research showing that validation of the HL by formal institutions – especially mainstream school – contributes significantly to positive attitudes towards knowing and learning the language (Tse, 1997; 1998). If students leave HL programmes feeling devalued rather than validated, formal schooling may actually be an obstacle, rather than a conduit, to HL proficiency.

We may speculate that HL schooling which incorporates activities described by the participants as meaningful, enjoyable, and entertaining in the HL *outside of school* may help foster HL literacy development in the classroom. In fact, McQuillan (1996b) and Schon *et al.* (Schon *et al.*, 1982; Schon *et al.*, 1985; Schon *et al.*, 1984) seem to support such modifications in the traditional language teaching curriculum. Giving students access to interesting and appropriate reading materials – including light reading books and periodicals – and unobtrusively guiding students to read for pleasure, appear to have significant effects in these studies. Replacing or supplementing form-focused activities currently dominating HL and FL classrooms (Brooks, 1988; Tse, 2000) with pleasure reading and other forms of enjoyable and meaningful activities may be a first step in changing student impressions of HL study.

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Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Lucy Tse, Charter College of Education, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8142, USA (ltse@calstatela.edu).

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