

Heritage Language Instruction: Student Motivation and Curriculum

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Abstract

Heritage language learners maintain their native language for a variety of reasons. Motivation is one of the key factors in the language learning process; it should be used as one of the defining elements while constructing the curriculum in order to better address the heritage language learners' academic needs and improve the learning outcomes. If motivation and the specific features of heritage language learning are not taken into account, the students may potentially be discouraged from acquiring their target language. This paper describes a study involving Russian heritage language learners from one of the American research universities. The main goals of this research were: to explore the motivations of Russian heritage language learners to maintain their native language; to examine whether the existing curriculum satisfies their goals; and to suggest what can be done to further address their needs. The paper argues that although the current curriculum addresses a number of the students' academic needs, there are still some gaps between the way they want to learn the language and their actual learning experiences.

Keywords: heritage language, the Russian language, heritage language learner, motivation, language instruction, curriculum

Introduction

Motivation plays a very important role in developing one's language proficiency (Geislerik, 2004); therefore, it is crucial for language instructors to understand what motivates learners and to plan the curriculum accordingly. Heritage language curriculum should address the learners' needs, take into account their experience growing up bilingual and bicultural in the US and "capitalize on their global knowledge in their heritage language" (Wu & Chang, 2010, p. 24). Unfortunately, these factors are not always taken into account. Moreover, heritage language students are frequently being placed in traditional foreign language classes, which, consequently leads to the incongruities between what they want and need to learn and what they are actually being taught. Such negative experiences can make even very dedicated students lose their motivation and drive them away from learning their heritage language and culture.

It is important that the learners' motivations and academic needs are met through the curriculum, so that it can advance the students' linguistic and cultural knowledge and not frustrate or deter them from maintaining their target language. In this paper I describe a small-scale study involving an on-line survey, participant ob-

servations and interviews with Russian heritage language learners studying at a large American research university.

Significance of the Topic

According to Montrul (2010), the current trend in many postsecondary foreign language classes in the US is the increasing numbers of heritage language learners. Russian is the eighth most commonly spoken language in the US with more than 800,000 home speakers (Kagan & Dillon, 2010). The heritage language students come to the language classrooms to learn, relearn or increase the level of proficiency in their family language. Depending on the institution and the resources available, heritage language learners enroll in classes specifically designed for them or, more frequently, have to attend foreign language classes that are mostly geared towards those without any previous knowledge of the language. Montrul (2010) notes that the presence of the heritage language learners in the classroom is not novel; what is new, however, is the recognition of them as a separate student population group, which has its own unique set of challenges in language acquisition and learning. Furthermore, what is also new on a broader scale is the increasing understanding that heritage language learners represent a valuable national resource, that is basically a large number of potentially highly advanced and competent speakers of critical languages, which in its turn leads to the idea of the importance of preserving and maintaining heritage languages (Kagan & Dillon, 2010; Montrul, 2010).

Valdes (2000) defines heritage language learners as “individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and in heritage language” (p. 2). Therefore, heritage language learners cannot be considered as either native speakers of the target language (as they normally do not fully acquire the language) or as foreign language learners (as the language acquisition starts in a non-formal environment) (Kagan, 2005). Heritage language learners’ proficiency in their family language can vary dramatically from mere receptive skills to advanced oral and written skills depending on the language characteristics, language status, one’s family environment, community and sociolinguistic circumstances (Montrul, 2010). Unlike foreign/second language learners, heritage speakers growing up in bilingual and multilingual environments have the potential to develop partial or full competence in the language(s) that they are exposed to. However, because heritage language acquisition begins at home and rarely continues through formal schooling, heritage language learners often have well-developed listening and speaking skills while underdeveloped functional literacy skills, which is not the case with the foreign language learners, whose skills generally develop in a more balanced way (Valdes, 1995). Heritage language acquisition is often referred to in the literature as not uniform, not universal and unsuccessful (Montrul, 2010). Therefore, these students come to the classroom with a distinctive gap in their literacy skills that is very often not recognized. Although there are a lot of descriptive studies of heritage speakers’ profiles, there is less research on the heritage language acquisition and instruction. Valdes (2005) emphasizes the “atheoretical character of the field and its blind appropriation and adaptation of foreign language methods” (p. 300). Therefore, there is a gap in the literature in terms of heritage language acquisition and instruction. Moreover, in practice there is also a

gap between the academic needs of the heritage language learners and their actual learning experiences.

Research Questions and Methods

My interest in this topic stems from the previous interactions with heritage language learners through a number of the Russian language tutoring sessions. Certain disparities in their language learning needs were continuously emphasized by the students throughout our informal conversations. They claimed that when placed in the same class with foreign language learners they were sometimes losing interest and motivation to keep coming to class where their particular needs were not always adequately addressed. It appeared that very often instructors and students had somewhat different perceptions of whether the students' goals and needs were being entirely met through the curriculum. This realization led to the following research questions: What are the main motivations of Russian heritage language learners at a large American research university to maintain their native language? What is the existing curriculum enacted in the classroom like? Does the existing curriculum satisfy the students' academic needs, goals and aspirations?

The chosen research methods included the on-line survey, participant observations and face-to-face interviews. First, I conducted participant observations to get a better idea of how the curriculum was structured and implemented in the classroom. Furthermore, the survey was created in order to get more detailed information about the profiles of the heritage language learners at this particular university. Then, the interviews were used to explore the students' motivations and to get their views on whether the existing curriculum satisfied their learning goals and interests. Finally, I looked at the textbooks used for the language classes, as they were specifically designed by the department instructors to address the students' (both heritage and non-heritage) goals and interests. The textbooks were used to inform participant observations and interviews.

The sample consisted of Russian heritage language learners studying at one of the large American research universities. Some of the students also participated in various programs organized by the Russian language and culture center hosted by the university. Since I had access to a few of the heritage language learners through tutoring sessions, I used the snowball sampling strategy to recruit other students for the interviews, that is, I asked those "key participants" to refer me to the other potential participants who met the definition of heritage language learners (Merriam, 2009, p. 79).

The participant observation sessions served as the initial steps of my fieldwork. I found this part of my study very important for several reasons. First, I had an opportunity to observe the participants in the academic setting, where the formal heritage language learning actually occurred. Therefore, I could acquire more knowledge of the context and student behavior/reaction to what was going on in class, which in its turn provided me with certain reference points for subsequent interviews. Becker & Geer (1957) believe that participant observations can serve as "yardsticks" against which we can measure the completeness of the data collected by other methods (p. 28). Second, the data that I collected throughout observations represented "the firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a second-hand ac-

count of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Finally, according to Merriam (2009), in cases when the study participants are not willing to share their insights on the particular situations, observations can actually provide answers to the researcher’s questions. Throughout the observation sessions I was looking at the physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversations, and subtle factors such as nonverbal communication and students’ body language.

There were about forty Russian heritage speakers taking Russian classes at this university; seventeen of them participated in the survey and seven were interviewed. The anonymous on-line survey provided me with the information on the heritage language learners’ profiles - their linguistic background, language proficiency, motivation to learn or maintain the language and their academic needs. The survey contained twenty questions that were divided into four categories: personal linguistic history, self-assessment, motivations and curriculum-related questions. The purpose of the interviews was to get more detailed answers to the questions about students’ experiences and learning needs. The questions were divided into the same four categories as in the survey. The questions were mostly open-ended, which ensured that students were providing more detailed information regarding their motivation, experience and challenges in the Russian language learning.

Findings

According to the survey, almost all the participants moved to the US at a very early age (0 to 5 years old) and never went to a Russian school. Most of them spoke either predominantly Russian at home or code-switched between Russian and English. Those who had siblings, especially younger ones spoke mostly English with them. When asked to assess their language knowledge on the scale from 1 (very low level) to 5 (native speaker proficiency), the majority put themselves either at level 3 or 4, between intermediate and advanced levels. Eighty percent of the students claimed that they could understand and speak Russian fluently and about seventy percent said they could speak the language as good as their parents. As for the motivation, the students took efforts to maintain the language for various reasons, such as for their future career, sustaining connections with their cultural and linguistic roots, for traveling abroad and communicating with their families. Interestingly, all the participants appeared to be extremely career oriented and they viewed their bilingualism as beneficial on the specific job market that they were targeting, that is, the State Department, the UN, the CIA and other organizations. Given these quite ambitious goals, all the participants hoped to achieve native speaker proficiency level upon completing their program. On average, students spent from five to fifteen hours a week speaking/learning Russian. The majority of the participants admitted that they had enough exposure to the Russian language through classes, interaction with the faculty, tutoring, guest speakers, and various cultural events. Among the most useful in-class activities they named all sorts of group activities in which they could communicate with each other, as well as writing essays, and reading short stories. The list of the least useful activities was topped by the memorization of texts and poems and heavily structured discussions. The latter were emphasized by a number

of students who believed they were not learning much from a “fixed conversation scenarios, as this is not what happens in real life situations”.

The interviews confirmed that all participants belonged to 1.5 generation, had little to no exposure to Russian schooling and mostly spoke Russian or code-switched between Russian and English at home. Their self-assessment of Russian language proficiency ranged from higher intermediate to “close to native speaker proficiency”, while the goal they would like to achieve was native speaker proficiency.

My key finding is that heritage language learners’ needs should help shape the curriculum. In practice, the current curriculum satisfies a number of the students’ academic needs, however, there are still some gaps between the way they want to learn the language and their actual learning experiences. The following two tables show the most and the least useful curriculum elements from the point of view of the students, as well as contain the information on whether or not I have observed those activities in the classroom.

Table 1. Most Useful Activities/Aspects of Learning

Activity/Aspect	Mentioned in Interviews (# of interviews)	Seen during Observations (Yes/No)
More hours of language learning	7	N
More formal language (relevant to career goals)	7	Y
Community-based projects (exposure to native speakers)	6	Y/N
Using authentic materials	5	Y
Textbooks designed for heritage learners	5	Y
Exposure to various accents	4	N
Reading more modern literature	4	N
Group activities	4	N
Being with only heritage speakers in class	4	Y
Native speaker instructor	4	Y
Lectures in Russian	3	Y
Reading short stories	3	Y
Tutoring	3	Y
More spontaneous discussions	3	Y/N
More oral testing	2	N
Increasing vocabulary	2	Y
Individual approach to students	2	Y/N
More modern language	1	Y/N
Writing essays	1	Y/N
Translating	1	Y/N

Table 2. Least Useful Activities/Aspects of Learning

Activity/Aspect	Mentioned in Interviews (# times)	Seen during Observations (Yes/No)
Heavily structured discussions	5	Y/N
Memorization of texts/sentences	5	Y
Reading and memorizing poems	4	Y
Reading classical literature	3	Y
Being in the mixed classroom	1	Y
Non-native instructor	1	N

Table 1 shows that the aspects, which the majority of students indicated as particularly useful, include but are not limited to: using more formal language, exposure to native speakers, more hours of language learning, using authentic materials and textbooks specifically designed for heritage learners. Some of these and other aspects were being addressed through the curriculum, for example, the use of the specific teaching and learning materials. The students pointed out both –certain things they have already been doing in class that were very helpful (using authentic materials, having a native speaker instructor, having lectures in Russian), and something they wished they were doing (exposure to various accents, more group activities and others). Additionally, if certain elements could not be observed in class, but I was aware that they existed in practice, I would put Y there too (for example, after-class tutoring).

Some other aspects/needs appeared to be either partially met or not addressed in the classroom at all, for instance, there was limited exposure to native speakers and various accents, not enough hours of language classes, more exposure to classical literature rather than to the modern one. Furthermore, Table 2 shows that, some of the aspects that the students called less useful were being implemented in language classes (memorization of texts and poems, and heavily structured discussions). From the tables one can see that certain aspects describes the same characteristic of teaching/learning experience from both positive and negative sides, for example, “Useful” – having a native speaker instructor/ “Less Useful” – having a non-native speaker instructor. However, I created two separate tables as some students had really strong opinions and specifically emphasized that this or that aspect was or was not useful for them at all.

As indicated in the tables, there is a certain gap between what the students believe would enhance their learning experiences and what they are exposed to with the existing curriculum. The following quotes from the interviews further support this point:

Interviewer: Would you like to learn more formal or informal language?

Interviewee K: Formal, because I know too much informal language and that's what got me frustrated. This year we had a unit on telephone language in which we learned about informal language, that's the opposite of what I need. I need to know formal language cause all I speak is informal.

This interviewee stresses the importance of learning more formal language since she believes it would be more useful for her future career (this was further mentioned by her in the interview). Moreover, learning informal language is not as useful for her since this is the kind of language she learned and has been using at home. Another interviewee likewise emphasizes the importance of learning proper grammar and sentence structure in class because this may help her become more proficient and fluent in the target language.

Interviewee A: ... Like the songs, I don't think they are useful, it's not proper grammar, same thing with poetry, like I understand that in Russian you are supposed to memorize poetry but the way that we memorize them and the way that we are tested on them isn't helpful to us, because poetry isn't proper sentence structure.

This student believes that it would be more useful to learn the "proper" grammatical sentence structure as opposed to that used in songs and poems, because this is not the type of language one uses in everyday life. To better illustrate her point, here is an excerpt from the poem written by one of the famous Russian poets, A. Pushkin, whom they had to study:

Table 3: The poem

Поem "Ruslan and Lyudmilla", A.Pushkin	Translation
У лукоморья дуб зеленый, Златая цепь на дубе том: И днем и ночью кот ученый Всё ходит по цепи кругом; Идет направо — песнь заводит, Налево — сказку говорит.	There's a green oak by the bay, on the oak a chain of gold: a learned cat, night and day, walks round on that chain of old: to the right – it spins a song, to the left – a tale of wrong.

This poem was written about two centuries ago and, therefore, contains quite a few archaic words (in the Russian version) and the type of language that is not really used in real life. Thus, according to some interviewees, learning such poems would not help them much in developing useful speaking skills.

Furthermore, the study revealed that the heritage language learners' motivation for learning the language most often had instrumental orientation and/or integrative orientation. In the former orientation the learner acquires the language to achieve academic or career goals while in the latter one he/she learns it in order to integrate

in the given culture or society. In the following table the numbers next to the types of motivation represent the number of people who mentioned this or that reason for learning the language throughout the interviews.

Table 4. Motivation to learn the heritage language:

Instrumental Orientation		Integrative Orientation	
For future career (the State Department, the UN, intelligence agencies, governmental organizations, translating)	6	To be able to communicate with the family members	7
To use for travelling abroad	3	To reconnect with cultural and linguistic roots	4
For future studies (graduate school)	2	To be identified as a part of the Russian community	3

Thus, the two most important reasons for the students to learn/relearn their heritage language are: to use it for their future career (instrumental orientation) and to be able to communicate with the family members (integrative orientation). The following excerpt from one of the interviews provides an example of what a heritage language student considers to be the main reasons for maintaining the heritage language:

Interviewer: Why do you want to learn Russian?

Interviewee B: So I wanna go into terrorism and Russian-American relations. They are really important right now, and so I wanna go into security and intelligence. Russian is also important for my family just because I have four generations of my family alive right now, I really like spending time with my grandparents and great-grandparents but also in terms of what I wanna do with the government and working in terrorism and security.

Interviewer: So if I understand you correctly, there are two main reasons: one is for future work and one is for family.

Interviewee B: Yes.

This excerpt appears to be of particular importance for two reasons. First of all, it elaborates on the assumptions/conclusions suggested by the heritage language learning literature: learners' motivation for maintaining a heritage language most often has instrumental orientation and/or integrative orientation (Geislerik, 2004). They consider it important to learn their native language mostly because it is personally relevant for their immediate goals, whether they see it as essential for being a part of their family or consider it as a valuable asset for the future career (Geislerik, 2004). This excerpt provides an example supporting this conclusion: this particular

student needs Russian to talk to her family members and to utilize it for career goals. Second, the excerpt represents a recurring pattern: all the other interviewees mentioned the necessity of the language for the communication with their immediate/extended family, and six out of seven stressed its importance for further academic or career goals. While other reasons were brought up as well, these two appeared to be the most significant and the most consistent ones throughout all interviews.

Furthermore, I learned that since heritage language acquisition begins at home and rarely continues through formal schooling, various heritage learners' language skills develop differently from non-heritage learners': they have well-developed listening and speaking skills while underdeveloped functional literacy skills. The following example to a certain extent illustrates the aforementioned assertion:

Interviewer: And how do you assess your language level now?

Interviewee E: I speak fluently, so if someone asked me: "Are you a native speaker?" I would probably say yes. I think there are some Russian people who speak with more mistakes than I do, ... at the same time ... I am not at the highest level possible. My parents would say: "Russians would understand you but they would never say it this way." I believe this is where being among Russian people will help. As for writing, I have much more problems here. When I was little I never had to write in Russian, that's why. I was only speaking, listening and reading. I was reading a lot actually, so my speed of reading is quite good now. Writing is not good though...

Referring to her childhood, the interviewee mentions that she did not have the need to write in her first language, while at the same time she had an opportunity to practice her speaking and listening skills through communicating with her family, which led to the unbalanced development of various language skills. Surprisingly, she mentions that her reading is quite good, which was not the case with other interviewees who claimed that they had little to no difficulty listening and speaking their heritage language, while were struggling with both writing and reading. This difference can be explained by various attitudes towards maintaining the heritage language and culture within different families. In the interview, this student stresses that her family considered it very important to preserve the connection with their heritage culture through maintaining the language. When she was a child, her parents read to her Russian children's books and, then later, they consistently encouraged her to read books in Russian. Furthermore, the student points out that although she is basically fluent in Russian since she has been speaking it with her family all her life, she is still not at the level that she wants to be. This possibly implies that although she is comfortable with the everyday language, she may not be as proficient in formal Russian, which is the point brought up by other interviewees as well.

Finally, the study revealed that heritage language learners are different from second or foreign language learners and, therefore, should be treated as a special student population group that requires their own curriculum and teaching materials.

Interviewee L: ... so all of the students in my class are American non-Russian speakers who have only been learning the language for either two or three years.

Interviewer: So, you are the only heritage speaker?

L: Yes. It makes it hard because my needs are so different from the other students'.

Interviewer: How are your needs different?

L: I don't need to work as much on pronunciation, ... when we're learning stuff I just need to work on the word endings cause my problem is cases. So when we learn things by repeating them over and over again, it isn't helpful to me. Also this particular teacher, Russian is not her native language, so sometimes she'll get things wrong and I'll notice them and it causes me to second-guess myself. Also when we are talking with other students in class and we have to discuss a topic, it is really hard for me when I hear them saying stuff and they are wrong and it makes me second-guess myself cause I know that their grammar is generally better and their written work is better than mine but my oral work is better than theirs so I can speak better but they can write better.

The student mentions a number of differences between her as a heritage language learner and other students who are learning Russian as a foreign language. She would probably benefit from studying together with other heritage learners rather than in a mixed class. Other participants identified this aspect of language learning as useful. Furthermore, she brings up the point of having native speakers instructors as essential, since she trusts their language and cultural knowledge more than that of non-native instructors. This aspect was supported by the majority of the interviewees, with one of them even saying that he would never enroll in the language classes if the instructor was non-native, because the person who teaches the language should "speak without an accent, should not make mistakes and should possess good Russian cultural and linguistic knowledge".

The possible limitations of the study may stem from the very nature of the research: it was a small-scale study with a limited number of participants from one particular university. Additionally, the fact that most students are learning Russian with the primary goal to use it in their future career may have been attributed to the specifics of the Russian language and culture center that the majority of them belonged to. This center stresses the benefits of becoming bilingual and encourages students to learn the language in order to have better career opportunities.

Implications for Practice

Heritage language curriculum should take into account learners' main goals in acquiring and mastering the language; in other words, it should be learner-centered. The disparities in the language learning needs of the heritage language and foreign language learners were emphasized by the participants and sometimes noticed during class observations. For example, in the mixed class, quite a lot of attention was paid to the minor grammatical details that were very useful for the foreign language learners and not so much for the heritage language learners. Another example of less helpful activities would be concentrating more on speaking and listening and less on reading and writing. Some students claimed that they were losing interest and motivation to keep coming to class where their particular needs were not always adequately addressed. This may lead to the conclusion that ideally heritage language

learners should not be placed in the same classroom with the students learning Russian as a foreign language. It is important to mention though, that running separate sections for heritage language learners may not be always possible due to the limited resources or the small size of certain language programs. In such cases it becomes mostly the responsibility of language instructors to structure classes in such a way that the needs of both heritage and non-heritage learners are addressed.

Furthermore, Wu & Chang (2010) point out the importance of developing the curriculum that will specifically address the learners' needs and will take into consideration various issues surrounding heritage language learners' teaching and learning process including their language proficiency, socio-cultural experience, and identities. Macro-approach to heritage language teaching has been suggested by numerous researchers in the field (Lynch, 2003; Wu & Chang, 2010). In contrast with micro or bottom-up approach that builds language competency based on isolated language elements, macro or top-down approach uses learners' previous knowledge to advance their language proficiency (Kagan, 2005). Wu & Chang (2010) state that macro approach helps develop one's grammatical and lexical knowledge through discourse-level and genre-based activities, which is more related to heritage language learners' needs. Moreover, such approaches to heritage language teaching as micro approach (teaching from simple to complex) may appear to be quite irrelevant considering the issues surrounding heritage language acquisition. Given that heritage language learners did not receive formal language instruction in the beginning, they may later find grammatical explanations typical for bottom-up approach illogical and incomprehensible (Kagan & Dillon, 2001).

Finally, the student's needs should help shape the curriculum, but not dictate every aspect of it, since very often instructors have the knowledge of what is helpful in language learning with the students not quite realizing that. For example, learning specific expressions that some students complained about might actually be useful as they make the learners' speech more sophisticated and closer to that of the native speakers.

Conclusion

Heritage language learners in many ways are different from second or foreign language learners and, therefore, should be treated as a special student population group that requires a different approach to the curriculum and teaching materials that will address their specific needs and improve the learning outcomes. As this study reveals, although the existing curriculum at this particular university satisfies a number of the heritage language learners' needs, there are still some gaps between the way they want to learn the language and the kinds of learning experiences they are getting.

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