
New type of Learner Emerging: Understanding Learners of Chinese as a Heritage Language

Ting DING*

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ, UK

Email: td300@cam.ac.uk

Abstract:

With the recent influx of immigrants from Chinese speaking regions to all over the world, in many countries there now exist a noticeable Chinese community. Within these overseas Chinese communities there emerge great needs to maintain the Chinese language and culture among the younger generations and accordingly there emerges a new type of learner who are ethnically Chinese and have some competence in Chinese yet still needs to learn the language systematically. When these learners go to the classroom to study the Chinese language, they are often treated the same as the traditional foreign language learners of Chinese, and their unique characteristics and learning needs are often ignored. The current article aims to provide an insight into the understanding of this new type of learner of the Chinese language. Adopting the term ‘heritage language learners’ to classify this new type of learner, the article starts with a discuss of how ‘heritage language’ and ‘heritage language learners’ are defined in literature, and then elaborates the general characteristics of HL learners that have be reported by previous research on heritage learners of various other languages. Based on this background knowledge, the specific challenges existing in the learning of Chinese as a heritage language are then discussed and the characteristics of Chinese heritage learners presented. Finally some existing research gaps in the research of Chinese heritage language learners are discussed.

Key words: Chinese, Heritage Language, Heritage Language Learner

* Ting Ding is a PhD candidate in Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. This paper constitutes part of the author’s PhD research project on ‘Heritage Learners and non-heritage learners of Chinese’. This project is jointly funded by Cambridge Overseas Trust and China Scholarship Council.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of the transnational flow of population that accompanied globalization, we nowadays often find a noticeable Chinese-speaking community residing in many countries. In the USA alone there exist around 2 million people who regularly speak Chinese at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In Canada 3% of the population (about 1 million people) reported a Chinese language as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2006). With such a large Chinese population overseas, there emerges a great need of maintaining the Chinese language and culture amongst the younger generations within the overseas Chinese community, and it is common for children with Chinese origin to attend complementary Chinese schools (mainly founded and maintained by the local Chinese community) in the USA, Canada, Australia, UK etc. Also in the teaching-Chinese-as-a-second-language classrooms in mainland China, more and more students with Chinese origin sit side by side with the traditional foreign language learners of Chinese (with no Chinese origin) to learn the Chinese language, while their unique characteristics and learning needs are often ignored.

With the recent focus on heritage language and heritage learners in the international applied linguistics research community, these learners with Chinese origin (referred to as learners of Chinese as a heritage language) also start to gain more research attention. The aim of the current article therefore, is to systematically discuss the issues related to learners of Chinese as a heritage language and to provide better understandings of the unique background, characteristics and learning needs of this new type of learners.

This article starts with a discussion of how ‘heritage language’ and ‘heritage language learners’ are defined, and then presented the general findings regarding the universal characteristics of heritage language learners opposed to the traditional foreign language learners (also referred to as non-HL learners). Based on the general discussion of heritage languages and heritage language learners, the specification of Chinese as a heritage language is then introduced. Furthermore previous studies on the characteristics of HL learners of Chinese are reviewed and subsequently some existing research gaps together with implications for future research are discussed.

2 HERITAGE LANGUAGE AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS

2.1 Definition

The term “heritage language (HL)¹” was first used in educational contexts in Canada in the early 1970s (Hornberger & Wang, 2008) and has gained currency among those concerned about the maintenance, revitalization and education of non-English languages in the United States since the 1990s (Valdes, 2001). On the north American continent, heritage language has

¹ The notion of “heritage language” has existed under various names such as “home language”, “ancestral language”, “ethnic language”, “immigrant language”, “minority language” or “community language” (He, 2008), (Duff & Li, 2009). As the term “heritage language” has been gaining significant ground in recent research, this very term is used in the present article embracing other terms used in literature.

been broadly defined as any ancestral language such as indigenous, colonial and immigrant languages (Fishman, 2001). According to Fishman, indigenous languages are spoken by Native American tribes that existed before the arrival of European settlers; Colonial languages (such as French, German or Italian) have been brought into the continent by European settlers; and immigrant languages (such as Chinese, Japanese or Arabic) have come together with the more recent influxes of immigrants. Today, the term HL is used worldwide, referring to indigenous and immigrant languages that are different from the dominant language in a given context.

As to the definitions of heritage language learners (HL learners), two common perspectives exist in the literature. The first perspective emphasizes the affiliation with an ancestral language, regardless of whether that language is still used in the home (Fishman, 2001). A HL learner is defined in this perspective as an individual who has a personal connection with his/her ancestral language. The second perspective is based on learners' actual proficiency in the target language and defines a HL learner as one "who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the HL, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the HL" (Valdes, 2001, p. 38).

The types of learners covered under the label of 'HL learners' vary according to which perspective of definition is operated. For example, students who study a language in order to connect to their remote heritage and have no previous exposure to the language in the home context (such as African American students learning Swahili) are viewed as HL learners in the first perspective but ruled out of the HL learner category by the second perspective.

These two perspectives of definitions, according to Wiley (2001), are of value to different purposes: the emphasis on ethnolinguistic affiliation is important for language revitalization effort, while the definition of HL learners basing on their actual proficiency in the HL proves more useful for pedagogical purposes. In the current article, since the focus is pedagogical (i.e. to understand the characteristics and learning needs of HL learners in order to better teach these students), the term *HL learners* will be operated as those who are raised in environments where the HL is used and who are to some extent bilingual in the dominant language and the HL, excluding learners who only have some remote connection to their heritage language but have no previous exposure to and no competence in the HL.

2.2 How do heritage learners differ from non-heritage learners?

Before the term "heritage language learner" gained popularity among language teachers and researchers recently, this group of learners had been paid little attention to and was generally enrolled in foreign language classrooms together with those who brought a blank history into learning the target language. Existing literature has shown that HL learners differ from their non-HL counterparts in two essential aspects: (1) early exposure to the heritage language and (2) heritage-related identity.

Early exposure to the heritage language

Heritage language learners are generally exposed to the target language in the home context, while non-heritage learners have no such exposure. There are several factors that may influence the quality and quantity of this language input to heritage learners:

- 1) Birthplace. Whether an individual is born in his ancestral homeland and later immigrated to the host country, or whether one is a second/third-generation immigrant born in the host country would greatly influence the heritage language input he/she is exposed to (Xiao, 2008). While the language a child is exposed to in the homeland is extensive and socially active, the heritage language exposure in the host country is more limited (in terms of both quantity and the social domains in which the HL is used).
- 2) Age of immigration. For those born in the ancestral homeland and who later immigrated, the age of immigration is linked to the length of extensive HL exposure in the home country and is a predictor of their proficiency in the HL. Researchers (e.g. E.J. Kim, 2004; Luo & Wiseman, 2000) have demonstrated that HL learners who immigrated at an older age are generally more proficient in the HL and are more successful in maintaining the HL than those who immigrated at a younger age.
- 3) Parental first language. For both immigrant and locally-born HL learners, the first language(s) of their parents would impact the HL input in their home context and furthermore influence their HL proficiencies. Kondo-Brown (2004, 2005), for example, reported that HL learners of Japanese with two Japanese-speaking parents generally demonstrated higher skills than those with only one or no Japanese-speaking parents.
- 4) First language (L1) at early ages. For HL learners who were born in the host country or who immigrated in early infant period, the use of which language(s) as their mother tongue may also make a difference in their later HL development. While some may use the HL as the L1 and some use the dominant language (e.g. English for some Chinese Americans in the USA), some may report using both the HL and the dominant language as their L1s in early childhood. Those with the HL as the L1 would usually have a high HL proficiency than others at later ages (H.-S. H. Kim, 2005).
- 5) The use of HL at home. Parental use of the HL as well as the use of HL by HL learners themselves are naturally related to the quantity of HL exposure to the HL learners and are likely to influence learners' proficiency in their HL. Sohn & Merrill (2009) and E.J. Kim (2006), for example, reported that the more Korean parents used their HL at home, the higher proficiency level their children tended to achieve. Hayashi (2006) found that Japanese HL learners' speaking and writing proficiency was closely related to their own Japanese use.
- 6) HL contact. HL contact either through attending HL schools, communicating with other HL speakers or by means of media is an important source for HL exposure in the host country context where the use of HL is especially limited. Kondo-Brown (2001) demonstrated that

Japanese HL learners with more extensive Japanese language contacts generally evaluated themselves as more fluent speakers of Japanese than those with less Japanese contact.

Heritage-related identity

According to Fishman (2001), heritage learners are affiliated with their ethnolinguistic community. Since these learners have to learn the mainstream language and culture in order to survive and at the same time remain connected (whether willingly or unwillingly) in some degree to their heritage language, culture and community, these HL learners may have socio-psychological complexity in their identity formation, compared to non-heritage learners. Some aspects of HL learners' heritage-related identity are discussed below.

1) Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity refers to the identification with an ethnic group together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership of the specific group. Previous research into heritage language education has demonstrated that ethnic identity plays a crucial role in HL development. Using Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Measure of Ethnic Identity to assess Japanese HL learners' ethnic identity, Chinen & Tucker (2006) found that learners who held a stronger ethnic identity generally assessed their Japanese proficiency to be higher than those with less strong ethnic identity. They also reported that high-school students had stronger Japanese ethnic identity than younger students.

Some studies focused on the relationship between HL learners' cultural identity and their HL proficiency (E.J. Kim, 2004; E. J. Kim, 2006; Lee, 2002). Defining cultural identity as "the complex configuration of one's awareness of one's own culture and a recognition of the social group to which one belongs in practice" (Lee, 2002, p. 118), Lee found the Korean-American university students generally identified with both the Korean and the American culture. Among these students, those not born in the US tended to identify more with their Korean heritage than those born in the US, and male students displayed stronger Korean ethnic identity than females. As to the relationship between cultural identity and HL proficiency, Lee reported that the stronger the identification with the Korean culture, the higher the Korean language proficiency. The study by E.J. Kim also supported the significant relationship between culture identity and HL proficiency.

In summary, previous research generally demonstrated the role of ethnic/cultural identity in HL development, while factors such as age, gender and place of birth were also reported to influence the level of ethnic/cultural identity found in individual HL learners.

2) Attitude

HL learners' attitudes toward studying the HL as well as toward the heritage school also link to their heritage-related identity formation. Chinen and Tucker (2006), for example, investigated Japanese HL learners' attitudes toward the supplementary heritage school they were attending

and found that learners with a stronger ethnic identity generally had a more positive attitude toward the school and assessed themselves as at a higher level of proficiency.

3) Motivation

Motivation also plays an important role in the HL development. As E.J. Kim (2006) indicated, the level of motivation for learning Korean as a HL is greatly related to the achieved proficiency of learners.

Due to HL learners' affiliation and identification with the heritage language and community, a distinct motivational orientation to study the HL for these learners is to support their heritage-related identity, different from the non-heritage learners. Jo (2001) and H. Kim (2002) reported that the primary reason for a majority of Korean HL learners to take Korean language classes was to learn their ethnic language to recover their roots and identity as Korean, which was irrelevant to those non-HL learners.

2.3 Characteristics of heritage language learners

Due to the early exposure to the HL and the heritage-related identity, HL learners generally demonstrate the following characteristics when compared with their non-heritage counterparts.

Linguistic advantage

Since HL learners bring into the language classroom their previous knowledge of the HL, they are generally reported to possess higher-level listening and/or speaking proficiency than non-heritage learners (H. H. Kim, 2002). They are believed to have native-like pronunciation, 80%-90% of the HL grammatical rules, extensive HL vocabulary and sociolinguistic rules for everyday informal communication (Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000).

However, previous studies also found that HL learners are not always at an advantage. For example, despite their higher level of listening or speaking proficiency than non-heritage learners, no clear advantage was found in their literacy skills (i.e. reading and writing)(e.g. Xiao, 2006). Besides, some studies (E. J. Kim, 2003; J.-T. Kim, 2001) found no clear difference between HL learners and non-heritage learners with respect to certain aspects of grammar learning (e.g. particles and relative clauses).

High variability in heritage language ability and proficiency

Due to the different background and various amount of HL exposure, HL learners generally show greater variability in their HL ability and proficiency than non-heritage learners who start learning the target language from an absolute beginning. Kondo-Brown (2005), for example, examined the language knowledge and skills of three sub-groups of Japanese HL (JHL) learners: a) the JHL grandparent group (i.e. those with at least 1 Japanese-speaking grandparent but without a Japanese-speaking parent), b) the JHL descent group (i.e. those without either a Japanese-speaking parent or grandparent) and c) the JHL parent group (i.e. those with at least 1 Japanese-speaking parent). She reported that the JHL parent group had greater grammatical knowledge and listening/reading skills than the JHL grandparent group and JHL descent group.

As indicated by Kondo-Brown, the language abilities of individual HL learners in listening, speaking, reading and writing can lie in various points along a continuum.

3. CHINESE AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE

After the comparison of HL and non-HL learners in general and the discussion of the universal characteristics of HL learners in the previous section, the current section locates the focus to the study of Chinese as a HL (CHL). The certain characteristics of the Chinese language which impose special challenges to the study of Chinese as a heritage language are first presented, followed by existing research findings on CHL learners.

3.1 Specification of Chinese as a HL

The term “Chinese” is not a monolithic entity. Instead, it is an umbrella term for a number of dialects used by Chinese people or people with Chinese origin. Linguistically, in the context of mainland China, there are seven groups of dialects under the name of Chinese—Wu, Xiang, Gan, Min, Cantonese, Hakka, and Mandarin, many of which are “mutually incomprehensible” (He, 2008, p. 3). However, in the overseas context, major dialects that are spoken by immigrants from mainland China, Taiwan, Hongkong and Singapore alike are all taken into consideration. For example, the Candian 2006 census data broke the term “Chinese” into seven languages--Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Taiwanese, Chaochow (Teochow), Fukien and Shanghainese.

Even the term “Mandarin” is not monolithic either. Serving as a standard dialect in mainland China, the pronunciation and grammar of Mandarin are mainly “associated with the speech of Beijing and its surrounding regions, which for centuries have enjoyed political and cultural significance” (He, 2008, p.3). However, the Mandarin used in mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore varies in terms of lexis, phonetics and discourse norms and has been referred to by different names (e.g. *putonghu* in mainland China, *guoyu* in Taiwan and *huayu* in Singapore).

Under such circumstances, it is hard to define what it means to know Chinese as a heritage language. Can speakers of a dialect other than the standard variety (Mandarin) be viewed as heritage speakers of Chinese? Or even further, can speakers of a certain variety of Mandarin (e.g. *guoyu* in Taiwan or *huayu* in Singapore) be treated the same as speakers of *putonghu* of mainland China?

Another challenge with Chinese as a heritage language (CHL) lies in the two variant forms of writing systems that coexist. There is a simplified script that is officially used in mainland China and Singapore, and also a traditional script used in other Chinese-speaking areas (such as Taiwan and some overseas Chinese communities).

With the economic growth of mainland China, Mandarin spoken in the mainland context is gaining increasing importance and many learners with different dialect backgrounds are learning Mandarin as the heritage language. Considering the non-monolithic nature of Chinese

in spoken and written forms, the possibilities with learning Mandarin as a HL can be: a) Mandarin is the same or comprehensible to the learners' home dialect (e.g. Mandarin in Taiwan or Singapore) but the simplified writing script can be the same or different from the home script of the learners or b) Mandarin is unintelligible to the learners' home dialect (e.g. Cantonese, Hakka) while the simplified script taught can be either the same or different from the learners' home script. Realizing the complexity of learning Chinese as a HL, He (2008) claimed that "to learn Chinese as a heritage language appears not merely to inherit one's heritage language" but also "transform the heritage language (in terms of changes in dialect, script, accent, discourse norms, etc.)" (p.3).

3.2 Characteristics of CHL learners

Compared to other East Asian languages that are learned as heritage languages (e.g. Korean and Japanese), Chinese as a HL has not received due attention (Li & Duff, 2008). The few existing studies on CHL learners have found characteristics of these learners in their variability of Chinese proficiency, linguistic ability as well as some socio-psychological aspects.

High variability in Chinese proficiency

Similar to research findings concerning the characteristics of HL learners in general (see section 2), high variability in Chinese proficiency was also reported among CHL learners. Hendryx (2008, pp. 55-56), for example, roughly classified the CHL learners' language into five proficiency levels, including a) having very little command of Chinese with only "a few rudimentary words or phrases", b) having "a smattering of speaking and listening skills", c) having fairly developed speaking and listening skills but only marginal reading and writing abilities, d) being fluent or nearly fluent in a dialect of Chinese but having little knowledge of the standard variety in mainland China, Taiwan etc. (i.e. Mandarin) and e) having a solid command of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Linguistic ability

In terms of speaking/listening skills and grammatical knowledge, CHL learners have generally been reported to be at a higher level than their non-heritage counterparts. Xiao (2006) found that CHL learners performed significantly better than non-CHL learners in the oral, listening and grammatical tasks. Similarly, the CHL group generally outperformed the non-heritage group in grammatical tasks in Ming and Tao's study (2008).

However, concerning the reading and writing abilities, current findings show that no significant difference exists between the CHL learners and non-CHL learners. While Xiao (2006) demonstrated that CHL learners were advantageous over non-CHL learners in a series of oral, listening and grammatical tasks, no such advantage was found in the vocabulary/character writing tasks as well as reading comprehension tests. Ke (1998) found no significant difference in Chinese character recognition/production for CHL and non-CHL learners either.

Socio-psychological aspects

Existing studies have centred on the motivational orientations of CHL learners and non-CHL learners, while the attitudes of these two groups toward the Chinese language, community and culture together with CHL learners' identity have rarely been explored.

Hendryx (2008), based on his informal observations of CHL learners, claimed that CHL learners were primarily motivated by integrative orientations (i.e. to learn more about Chinese language/culture and be able to communicate with relatives/friends more easily), and that they lacked instrumental motivation compared to the non-CHL learners. Lu and Li (2008), however, found that CHL learners did not differ from their non-CHL counterparts in the integrative orientation, but were more significantly motivated by instrumental orientations (e.g. CHL learners tend to use their linguistic/cultural background to earn easy grades in Chinese classes).

Comanaru and Noels (2009) examined the differences and similarities between the motivations and engagement of CHL learners and non-CHL learners. They found that, compared to non-CHL learners, CHL learners generally felt more strongly that they were learning Chinese because it was a central part of their self-concept, and felt more pressure to learn Chinese (pressure either from others or self-imposed). The CHL learners also reported greater frequency of contact with the community as well as more use of the heritage language (i.e. Chinese) outside the classroom, than the non-CHL learners did.

4. EXISTING RESEARCH GAPS

One research gap concerns the lack of research on how some situational factors (such as class placement) would influence the learning of CHL. Shen (2003) studied the influence of placement factor on the CHL learners' proficiency and reported that CHL learners placed in a homogeneous class performed significantly better than those in the heterogeneous group (i.e. studying together with non-CHL learners) in vocabulary, grammar and reading. This study indicated the importance of the situational factor of placement on the learning of CHL. However, more studies in this direction are needed and the findings may ultimately advise policy makers as to whether to place CHL learners and non-CHL learners into the same classes or into separate tracks.

Another research gap is related to the diverse dialect/writing script background of CHL learners. It should be noted that despite the existence of the several Chinese dialects and the two different writing scripts, the influence of dialect/writing script background on the learning of CHL has rarely been examined. Of the studies on CHL learners introduced above, only Shen (2003) reported that only speakers of Mandarin were involved, while all the other studies had not differentiated participants according to their various dialect backgrounds (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Taiwanese etc.). As Wiley (2009) showed in his case study, a heritage speaker of Taiwanese and Mandarin variety in Taiwan encountered great difficulties when studying Mandarin of mainland China, due to his Taiwanese dialect background and the

discrepancy between his home writing script and the taught script. Therefore, the subgroups of CHL learners with different dialect/writing script background still await more investigation concerning their performance and needs in the CHL learning.

A third research gap is the lack of research on CHL learners' identities. While HL learners of other languages (e.g. Korean, Japanese, and Spanish) have been intensively studied regarding their ethnic identity and cultural identity, the studies on CHL learners rarely touched the identity issues. Considering the fact that CHL learners are connected to both the Chinese culture and the culture of their host society, and that these learners are ethnically Chinese while many of them have the nationality of the host country, there may exist clashes and conflicts between the different aspects of their identities. Future research addressing these issues will help us to better understand the socio-psychological complexities of these learners and to better accommodate them in their language learning.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The discussions in the chapters above reveal that HL learners are generally different from non-HL learners in their early exposure to the heritage language and their heritage-related identity. Due to these differences, HL learners generally demonstrate characteristics that are distinct from their non-HL counterparts, in that they have some advantages in speaking/listening but at the same time have high variability in their heritage language ability and proficiency. Similar to the findings with HL learners in general, HL learners of Chinese also have high variability in their Chinese language proficiency and at the same time have different motivations towards learning Chinese from their non-HL counterparts. The various dialect and writing script background of CHL learners further imposes challenges on their learning of Chinese as heritage language.

Compared to HL learners of other languages (e.g. Korean, Japanese and Spanish), CHL learners are still under-researched. Studies on the characteristics of CHL learners are just emerging, while there exist the following research gaps in this field: 1) the lack of investigation of the placement factor on CHL learners' performance, 2) the influence of dialect/writing script background on CHL learners' performance and 3) the identity issues of CHL learners that they brought into their Chinese learning arena. More studies are needed in these directions, and the potential findings will provide language teachers as well as policy makers useful advices as to how to better accommodate these HL learners in their effort to maintain the heritage language and culture.

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