Building a Community of Heritage Language Learners

—‘Heritage Meets Heritage’ Project—

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Abstract

Angela Lee-Smith. 2019. Building a Community of Heritage Language Learners: ‘Heritage Meets Heritage’ Project. Journal of Korean Language Education 30 English Edition: 1-44. The identity of heritage speakers has been examined in great detail, but what happens when heritage language learners (HLLs) who speak different languages meet face-to-face to discuss matters of identity and language learning? There have been increasingly more language curricula attempt to meet the diversity of the learner’s needs. Do language curricula sufficiently reflect the learners’ perspectives? What can we do to better support and foster their learning? How do HLLs perceive their language and cultural identities, language uses, and affectivity? This article explores these questions through conversations between heritage learners across languages. This action research presents a collaborative project, Heritage Meets Heritage (HMH), in which college-level Korean and Spanish heritage learners discuss issues of identity, language uses, and affectivity toward their heritage language (HL) and culture (HC). The findings from this illustrate that Korean and Spanish HLLs share many self-perception aspects of HL and cultural identity, language use, and interactions with the HL community. Furthermore, the pedagogical implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: heritage language, heritage culture, identity, affective factor, heritage language use, community of learners, learner’s perception
Identity and motivation are key to the language maintenance of heritage language learners (HLLs) (Carreira and Kagan, 2009). Studies (J. Escandell, 2011; M. Polinsky, 2014; A. Munoz, 2016; Sevinç, Y. & Dewaele, J., 2016; M. Abtahian & C. Quinn, 2017; M. Carreira & C. Chik, 2018) have shown that HLLs enter the language classroom with insecurities about their heritage language (HL) proficiency and question their level of linguistic competence. Their linguistic insecurity frequently overshadows the “I can do” mindset and inhibits performance both in the classroom and beyond. HL instructors, in general, encourage their students by underscoring the wealth of knowledge that they bring into the classroom. But is this sufficient? In order to foster a healthy HL community, rather than pointing out the more common characteristics of
HLLs in a negative light, such as through focusing on their weaknesses in grammar accuracy, spellings, and literacy skills, etc., HL educators should promote an open discussion of identity (Norton, 2000; Reitz, 2014; Leeman, 2015) and motivation (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Wen, 2011; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013) among their students, both within and across languages.

In keeping with the idea of bringing learners’ perspectives into the HL curriculum, this study reports on the Heritage Meets Heritage (HMH) project. HMH was initiated by Sybil Alexandrov in 2016 as a collaboration among HL (Spanish, Greek, Korean, and Russian) colleagues for HLLs at the intermediate level at a private university in the United States. To date, 126 students have participated in the project, and 62 guided conversation pairs of HLLs of various HL background (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hebrew, Korean, Spanish, and Russian) have been recorded. This article focuses on just a subset of the data, and focuses on two of the HLs - Korean and Spanish.

The purpose of this project is thus: (i) To help students understand what it means to be a heritage speaker both within their own language and across languages, (ii) To help language instructors understand how HLLs perceive their identity better in order to review and, if necessary, revise the curriculum, and (iii) To develop learning materials and activities to address their affective needs.

The project has the following components:

1. Students complete an anonymous online questionnaire about HLL identity and language learning.
2. Students within the same HL reflect on the responses to the questionnaire
either through class discussions or an online discussion board.

(3) Students meet in person with an assigned partner from a HL other than their own in order to engage in a guided conversation about their HL experiences.

(4) Students film the conversation and share these recordings with the class.

(5) Students reflect on their experience meeting and talking about HL with a HLL from a different language.

The project addresses a number of issues that need to be further explored. Since identity is a key element in the use of HLLs’ language and language learning (He, 2006; Hornberger & Wang, 2008), a better understanding of who they are, how they feel, and what they hope to achieve makes for a more comfortable and productive learning environment. As language instructors, one can talk at length about HLL identity as well as provide students with academic articles on the topic. However, the impact of this generally pales in comparison to interactions with peers. When the information comes from a co-equal, it is more meaningful and real.

Recognizing that there are HLLs of other languages who share similar experiences and attitudes can potentially broaden horizons. Ultimately, it is important that the HL curricula allows HLLs to articulate their needs and learning goals themselves.
2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Ten conversation pairs participated from Korean Heritage (KH) and Spanish Heritage (SH) courses during the spring of 2016, 2017, and 2018 at a private university in the U.S. These courses were second-semester heritage-track accelerated courses at an intermediate level. The participants’ HL oral proficiency ranged from intermediate through mid to high on the ACTFL proficiency scale, based on the results of informal assessments for placement purposes. There were five male and five female participants in the SH group, but as for KH group, there were 8 males and 2 female participants. This was not intentional and those were the only KH students who participated. The names of each of the participants, as shown in Table 1, are pseudonyms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish Heritage Learner (SHL)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year at time of HMH</th>
<th>Heritage Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angélica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benicio</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
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<td>Carmela</td>
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<td>Dolores</td>
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<td>Eugenia</td>
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<td>Marisol</td>
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<td>Manuel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norberto</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Cuba, Puerto Rico</td>
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<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Korean Heritage Learner (KHL)</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Year at time of HMH</td>
<td>Heritage Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
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<td>Sophomore</td>
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<td>Joshua</td>
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<td>Sam</td>
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<td>Anna</td>
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<td>Ben</td>
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### 2.2. Procedures

Each participant met with an assigned partner in person from a HL that was different from their own to engage in a guided conversation about their HL and cultural experiences. Each pair filmed their conversation by themselves and later shared them with the class.

### 2.3. Data Collection

Each HMH pair submitted their self-filmed conversation to the designated online course management site. The ten KH-SH conversations were then collected as a subset of analysis for this research.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Each conversation video averaged approximately 15 minutes and was
conducted in English. The author watched each video carefully and transcribed the entire conversation into a Microsoft Word document. Each transcribed conversation is four to six pages long. Subsequently, each transcribed conversation was sorted based on the guided conversation questions that the pair chose and discussed.

2.5. Guided conversation questions

The guided questions were given to the participants and each conversation pair was allowed to choose at least two discussion questions from each category. The rationale for the questions was to have students take a moment to reflect on and share aspects of their HLL identity and language use—self-discovery as well as a deeper understanding and appreciation of shared experiences. The questions are included in the Chapter 3.

Figure 1. HMH Guided Conversation
3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Identity

*Question 1. Do you identify with one culture more than another? Explain.*

Four out of eight students said that they identified more closely with their dominant language (DL)- English, and the common reason given for this was that they felt more comfortable with their DL. This is partially in line with Lee (2002)’s claim that HLLs tend to use their HL proficiency to culturally identify themselves: the higher the HL proficiency, the stronger the identification that one may with both the heritage culture (HC) and the majority culture -American culture.

SH: Uhm, I personally probably identify more with being American. I’m Puerto Rican, Cuban and American. My dad is Puerto Rican, my mom is Cuban. They were both born in their countries. Uhm, but I was born in Florida and grew up speaking Spanish and English but I stopped speaking Spanish... excuse me... when I was around 10 just because I had a hard time with English in middle school. Like with grammar and writing. So...totally into English, and ...uhm... I just haven’t really changed back to Spanish. I only go and visit Puerto Rico once a year just to see family. Yeah. What about you? (Norberto)

KH: So, I came from a town in Jersey where the majority of the population was Korean, so we had like a 50% mix of uhh... International Koreans, who were straight from Korea and we also had a 50% mix of Korean-Americans, so I don’t feel like uhm... I guess I sided more with the American side...they were more comfortable to talk to, with like the language barrier. Yeah. (Ben)
At the same time, some participants identified themselves with both their HC and American culture. As Brown (2003) posited the notion of “hyphenated” identity (e.g., Korean-American, Mexican-American), it is ideal to integrate the two cultures to form one unique bicultural identity, as shown in the following:

KH: I don’t identify solely as Korean, nor solely as American...
   Korean-American carries aspects of both [cultures]. It makes more sense. I identify with both cultures as a whole. One identity. (Kurk)
SH: I’m kind of confused. I think I’m Mexican-American. That’s what I am. BOTH. (Dolores)

There is no evidence in our data that shows that learners sought to deny their identity by claiming neither their heritage identity nor their American identity. However, as Lee (2002) reported, “it is difficult to be ‘completely Korean’ or ‘completely American’. They cope with this conflict by finding a balance, as a Korean-American” (p. 128).

**Question 2. Do you consider yourself bilingual? Why or why not?**

“Bilingual” generally refers to a user of two languages (Cenoz, 2013). Particularly, when referring to the HLLs, Valdés defines a HLL as a “bilingual raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language (2005, p3).” In the context of the HL education, “bilingual” means speaking two languages with different degrees of proficiency. In fact, HLLs may have some degree of bilingual proficiency in general (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003), and they are often unbalanced bilinguals (Montrul, 2012). HL instructors may need to share these definitions with their
HLLs in order to motivate and foster the HLLs’ learning because many HLLs understand that being bilingual refers to people who are fluent in two languages, as is generally defined in English dictionaries.

The HLLs in this project seem to struggle with their unique perceptions of being bilingual, as it means “can communicate enough” (Dolores) in their HL, although it is not as fluent as their L1(English). This positive self-perception of their HL proficiency encourages both themselves and their instructors.

SH: Yes, but I’m more fluent in English. I know enough of both to be able to say that I am bilingual. (Carmela)
KH: Yes, I think I can communicate enough in Korean… in that sense, I can consider myself a bilingual… but definitely stronger in English. (Dolores)
SH: I would say I have comfortable conversational skills (in Spanish), so I consider myself as bilingual. (Norberto)

Many HLLs in this project initially did not consider themselves bilinguals, the primary reason being the unbalanced status of their HL proficiency as compared to their ML (English).

KH: No. sometimes I cannot fully communicate in Korean. I am conversational, but not on any abstract topics…(Robert)
SH: Depends on context. When I speak with someone who cannot speak Spanish, Yes. But when the topics get more complex, and hard to voice, like grammatically, I am not. (Marisol)

Despite current limitations in their HL competences, the students assessed their HL learning process in a very positive manner: “I am in the process of
becoming bilingual”; “Eventually I will get there”; “not (fluent) yet”; “get back [to my HL]”. This can be a strong motivational factor to the HLLs.

KH: I guess I am in the process of becoming bilingual. I am not as fluent in Korean as I want to be, but eventually I will get there. (Ben)
SH: I think I lost fluency in my heritage language. [But] I would say I have comfortable conversational skills (in Spanish). (Norberto)
KH: No. my Korean is not fluent yet. (Anna)
SH: Yes, though my Spanish is sort of deteriorated a lot… I have to get back. (Angélica)

HL instructors are encouraged to highlight and value what the students can do rather than focus on the areas they were weaker in. As many HL researchers and educators have pointed out, HLLs already possess many of the cultural and linguistic skills that would take many hours to develop within a classroom setting. Therefore, it is important for HL instructors to help their HLLs become aware of and value what they already have in terms of language competence, regardless of whether they are balanced bilinguals or not.

**Question 3. Do you consider yourself bicultural? If so, how is this expressed?**

Many HLLs in this project identified themselves as bicultural, even though not all of them identified themselves as bilingual. Although HL proficiency may be related to the strength of bicultural identification (Lee, 2002), HC seems to have a deeper and more significant role than HL in the development of heritage identity, probably because HLLs are exposed to and maintain their HC in their respective homes and/or communities. This is in line with Brown’s (2009) finding that HL proficiency is not a sufficient condition for developing
an ethnic identity. As proposed by Lytra (2016), it is possible that ethnic identity is not always associated with language identity. This suggests that the heritage curriculum should strive to maintain and highlight heritage cultural aspects rather than abandon them to focus purely on the language, with an assumption that HLLs are already familiar with their HC and therefore no need to highlight HC in HL teaching.

KH: For me, when I was younger, I used to identify more with the American culture just because that’s what I was raised on. But I think, now that I’m older, I understand more about it. I identify equally with both cultures. (Anna)

SH: I think when I was younger, I identified more as Argentine just because I spent a lot more time growing up with all of my family there and that was a bigger part of my life. And then as I grew older, we took fewer and fewer trips, so I felt more American and less Argentine. Also, I think my language skills were a lot better when I was younger, so that sort of made it feel somehow like more legitimate to identify that way when I was younger. (Angélica)

SH: Uhm, so, Suzy do you consider yourself bicultural? (Santiago)

KH: Definitely. I consider myself bicultural. It’s hard to say or differentiate between what motivations or ideas or like habits or manners and behaviors of mine are specifically, like, American or Korean... uhm it’s... it’s really hard to distinguish because I just feel like it’s definitely an amalgamation of both. And what is it... like, I just, like, when I... for example like my house: I take off my shoes, like, that’s just like what I’ve always grown up with. I eat Korean food and when I cook, like, I crave only Korean food because that’s the best for me, like. the most comforting because I just grew up with it eating it constantly. Uhm and it’s funny because I feel like more and more like, my artistic preferences or, like, you know, in terms of art or music or literature, like, has gone towards I started exploring more, like, more Korean
literature and arts and... uhm... for example, my dissertation is on the Korean-American experience and it’s just... I’m starting to discover as I discover more about my... about the history of being Korean or diasporic Korean I feel that identity becoming even more strong even stronger. And so it’s hard to say, like, I’m not going to say that I’m, like, half and half bicultural, like 50/50, but then it’s definitely just sort of so imbricated with each other my American-ness on my Korean-ness that I can’t even say... Yeah. How about you? (Susan)

SH: Yeah. I feel like I was thinking about the whole like, when I hear bicultural part of me wants to make that a 50/50 thing and I feel like that’s something I’ve always struggled with because I, so my family’s from Puerto Rico, my dad’s family, so in some ways I am 50/50 with my dad’s family and my mom’s. Uhm, but I grew up in Washington DC and so, you know, I think in a lot of ways I feel bicultural because I, you know, I’ve known that I was Puerto Rican since I was really little. I, like, so my most immediate family has been Puerto Rican and so that has always been there. But in other ways, like, the environment that I grew up in, you know, was totally American (Santiago)

KH: yeah (Susan)

SH: and so, and especially like as regards to being a heritage speaker of language and not feeling bilingual, a lot of times, yeah, it made it harder to feel bicultural, but sort of conversely, I feel like sometimes when I don’t feel sort of sufficiently... uhm, you know, as efficient as a speaker, the culture part sort of takes over. I think: “no, well, even if you don’t really speak Spanish fluently, like, you still are Puerto Rican (Santiago)

KH: for sure (Susan)

SH: that is that its your family, like, that is, you know, like you’re saying the food... all the food that you eat... (Santiago)

KH: Yeah, absolutely! (Susan)

SH: music playing in your dad’s car... like, the places you go, like, that you know that that’s always been there since you were really little. (Santiago)
KH: totally! (Susan)
SH: so yeah, I think like “bi” but not as a 50/50 thing, just as a kind of more fluid thing. No, it definitely makes a lot of sense to me. (Santiago)

HLLs also reported shifts in identity, that is, both in their HL and HC. Such language shifts, losses, and interrupted development were found to be fairly common among HLLs (Polinsky, 1997; Montrul, 2002, 2015). Typically, when HLLs are younger they are more competent in their HL and HC, but become disconnected from them as they grow older. Now, during their time in college, the participants are reconnecting with their language and culture through classes and community. In line with Lee’s (2002) findings, the majority of the HLLs in this study displayed a strong will to learn and improve their language skills in spite of their varying levels of proficiency. Therefore, it is important to provide HLLs with sufficient opportunities in their HL and HC to adequately fulfill their aspiring identity and linguistic goals.

KH: Korean was my first language even though I was born here. My sister was... I was the only one born here... they... I was born here for like you know like citizenship purposes (Susan)
SH: sure (Santiago)
KH: and what is it... that my mom couldn’t take care of me for the first years of my life, so I would... I lived in Korea with her sister, and so Korean was my first language. And then I remember coming back to America, coming to the U.S., to California, and trying to learn English and, you know, thinking, you know. It’s... it’s just so crazy, you know. Like you know everything around you is so American and you feel so much conflict within you, like internal conflict like... like at least because my... my dad was an incredibly traditional Korean or conservative traditional Korean in that like he wanted to preserve all of the values and create Korean values or traditions. Like we wouldn’t
eat non-Korean food at home. Like that’s how strict he was. And so, like, I felt a lot of conflict and, like, and I felt that, you know, in order to properly assimilate into American schools, or like friendships, or a society whatever, it maybe I had to perfect the English language. And I consequently completely forgot the Korean language and I... I resented it, actually in the beginning. I mean now I don’t. I mean I’m like, oh man! I should’ve gone to Korean school (Susan)

SH: Totally. (Santiago)

KH: but I mean it’s still...it’s I don’t know it’s sort of...I don’t know. Do you have any like, not like negative experiences with having like grown not a negative, but just like more ... more difficult experiences having grown up in a certain culture you like... culture you identify with and then having it clash? (Susan)

SH: Uhm... well definitely I felt like... I don’t know... both the idea of like... like my first words were both in English and Spanish definitely (Santiago)

KH: interesting! (Susan)

SH: Oh and then, as I grew up I think it definitely became clear that Spanish was a secondary language. Uhm, and I think that there was a lot of times when like, I know, my dad like all the time was like, “you guys need to be taking Spanish classes on the weekends” And then we never did. And like I remember sort of rejecting it when I was little just because it was hard probably. (Santiago)

KH: Yeah. (Susan)

SH: because it was too much effort. I was like uhm, school on Saturday? and I but.. like so my dad never really...it was it was kind weird because he was like...uh... like... like I knew he really wanted me to do it, but then also he... I felt like he should have spoken it more with us. And so like that was kind of a weird dynamic; and like, honestly, like my mom so my mom isn’t Puerto Rican, but she’s pretty fluent in Spanish, she lived there for a couple years, so I feel like I learned a lot more Spanish from her... (Santiago)

KH: Oh, interesting! (Susan)
SH: which is just kind of weird and like, I don’t know, like sometimes you think that maybe, you know, my dad was working all day and when he would come home -though he’s totally bilingual - and so like he wouldn’t... he just wanted to, like, to be able to connect with us and that was just an extra hurdle (Santiago)

KH: Yeah! Yeah! You don’t have that much time like, after work, you know, and you’re not going to be using that as a Spanish lesson (Susan)

SH: Exactly (Santiago)

KH: Yeah, that makes sense. (Susan)

SH: yeah so that was tricky. And so like now... and then, so when I was in Middle School and I had to choose a language to take, I chose Chinese (Santiago)

KH: Oh my God! (Susan)

SH: because our middle school... yeah well it was really cool, I mean uhm... but the way I figured it out... well, you know I’m 11, like I speak English and like I could get along in Spanish, so like, why shouldn’t I be able to speak to a billion other people? Like, that seems like the best use of my time. Uhm but then, of course, you know I took it for years and at the end of high school I was like, well I still can’t speak Spanish! Uhm... so I got to college and I was like it’s time to do something about this, yeah uhm (Santiago)

KH: Wow! Then, do you speak Chinese? (Susan)

SH: just a little bit... anyway, no but, yeah, so like that was always kind of like tense and it was always sort of like whose fault is it that I don’t know this? (Santiago)

KH: yeah, yeah. (Susan)

SH: Kind of mine. Whose? I don’t know? (Santiago)

KH: No one’s fault. (Susan)

SH: Yeah, it’s... (Santiago)

KH: No, no! We’re mitigating it, like, by taking these [heritage] classes and doing this [HMH]. (Susan)

SH: Yeah, yeah.
As KH-SA indicates in the conversation above, sociopolitical factors affecting the HLLs, such as ethnic identity and assimilation to the majority society, may result in their HL attrition (Schmid & de Bot, 2003).

HLLs share similar characteristics in identity and linguistic needs that have connections to their family or ethnic background (Carreira, 2004). As participants expressed through their conversations, having any kind of opportunity for HLLs to share and express their experiences or thoughts on heritage identity with heritage peers would be very powerful and meaningful because community support may provide them with comfort and encouragement, and fosters an environment to reconnect with their HLs and HCs.

KH: I’ve thought a lot about... Being Korean-American, and also as a person who moved around a lot… am I more Korean or more American..? It was a hard question for me. I definitely consider Korean culture in a way (…) culture that respects elderly and even the language changes when you speak to those people. Also food and music, I guess I can all related with. Especially when I came to college and asked myself…, if I am American, especially Korean-American. Because here there are pretty set-crews: Koreans from Korea, Korean-American who don’t identify with their Korean culture at all. I really see myself in the middle. I think I consider myself as bicultural. (Calvin)

SH: I’d never thought of the idea of being bicultural. Yes. Expressed through Spanglish, friendship Latinx, a lot of diasporic qualities and things. There are songs we grew up with (…) we don’t know the names nor the words, but when we hear them, they trigger nostalgia just because we know them from growing up. There is a diasporic quality. It’s comforting to know that there is an entire group of people that can relate. (Benicio)
HL and HC identities play a crucial role in HL instruction. Not only do they help to shape the status of the learners and the languages they are learning (Wiley, 2001), but also help instructors in designing and preparing suitable HL curriculum and pedagogy. As emphasized by Carreira (2004), it is important to design a curriculum that focuses on the bicultural and/or bilingual identity of HLLs. In other words, language programs should consider including curriculum with an emphasis on topics that are meaningful to HLLs, such as topics that address some aspects of their identity and linguistic needs. The HMH project is one of many ways to provide HLLs across languages with educational and social interaction between language use and cultural practice through the school community.

3.2. Affective Factors

*Question 4. How would you describe your feelings towards your heritage language?*

Learners’ language attitudes towards their target language may affect their language learning (Cho et al., 1997; Kim, 1992, Yang 2003; Pineda 2011; Kong 2011). HLLs tend to have a strong cultural connection to the language through family interaction (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003) and similarly, the participants in our study expressed positive feelings towards their HL.

KH: I feel really proud of myself as I learn my heritage language. Good to get back in touch.(Anna)

SH: At the same time, it is also satisfying… taking class with other heritage speakers…it’s very…being able to speak fluent/almost fluent in my language is necessary to legitimate my identification with it. (Angélica)
KH: I associate with Korean more at home, comfortable (Henry)
SH: Speaking Spanish was natural when I was growing up. (...) Now I speak Spanish and it makes me feel very homey. (Dolores)
SH: I love it in many ways...(Benicio)
KH: I feel cozy, home (Joshua)
SH: I feel the same. (Eugenia)

At the same time, participants also expressed their feelings of guilt, frustration, or disappointment with regards to their HL proficiency. Although HLLs may feel linguistically insecure, they tend to be highly motivated in learning the language and feel a sense of reconnection to their once-paused or disconnected HL.

SH: Ashamed when I screw things up. There’s no excuse, I should be better. (Angélica)
SH: I feel more connected to Spanish, when I speak Spanish, I speak with my family, relative, in church (Carmela)
KL: I really envy my heritage friends who grew up speaking in it. I sometimes do feel alienated... I feel like I’m on the outside trying to get in. (Calvin)
SH: In some ways, it’s a source of frustration. The fact that I’m not fluent but could have been. Disappointment. Sadness, I have to work. I have to take Spanish even though I could have grown up with it. (Benicio)

HLLs are clearly aware of the language gap between their speaking and listening abilities. HLLs have a stronger competence level in speaking and listening as compared to their literacy skills, which would be reading and writing. This is reflected in many HL curricula, where HL instructors focus on literacy. However, this study found that many HLLs are also eager to improve their speaking skills, as these learners show:
KH: I can’t express myself as well as I can in English. English is my first language. When I hear Korean, I feel very comfortable and very familiar, but when I speak it, I feel disconnected...When I speak with Korean friends, they understand me...it makes me feel so good. I really need to work on translating things like my emotions...it is really hard... (Joshua)

SH: I feel the same. I can understand what people are saying in Spanish, because I hear it all the time. When I speak the same phrases, words, sentences they say, I realize it comes out wrong...I definitely feel warmth toward my HL, I just wish I could do more with it other than just feeling good when I hear it. I want to be able to... (Eugenia)

**Question 5. Do you feel you connect equally to speakers of your heritage language and monolinguals?**

With respect to this question, the findings suggest that some of the HLLs feel more strongly connected to speakers of their HL, or even other H learners. For example, our learners observed the following:

KH: Yes, with Korean-American... they went through sort of the same situation- struggle of fitting in, identity crisis... (Henry)

SH: I unjustly judge people who choose to speak only one language because they are closing doors to other people. I connect to people of my HL very well (Dolores)

HL teachers are encouraged to design a course curriculum that provides the heritage students with opportunities to build a community and mutual support. The simple act of sharing and knowing how they feel and the experiences of being HLLs should thus allow them to realize that they are not alone. The students’ responses point to the benefit of sharing their experiences with peers:
SH: At college, meeting other heritage people makes me feel so glad to meet and find they have the same issues and problems(...) We can connect in a way that others can’t. (Santiago)

SH: I haven’t met many heritage speakers besides Spanish heritage, but here, I met more heritage speakers. I definitely feel connection even you don’t speak the same heritage language, even having that shared experience (...) I feel more connected. (Carmela)

SH: I never knew any other heritage speakers growing up, I never felt removed or kept out of the community. I also enjoy the students in my class, the level of the language I can speak is enough for me to be connected with the people... it helps. (Dolores)

One of the major focal areas for the HL curricula, as Carreira and Kagan (2018) have emphasized, should be in building wide networks of support among HLLs, parents and family, local HL communities, teachers across disciplines, and school administrators.

Although HLLs feel instantly connected to speakers of their HL, they feel connected with them by culture, not necessarily through their HL. This may be due to their language barrier. As Potowski (2012) pointed out, the ability to speak a HL is neither required nor sufficient for heritage identity in this case. From this finding, we can understand that the students’ HL proficiency should thus take on an important role in the curriculum and beyond.

KH: No. We are American, but hyphenated American. When meeting someone who speaks Korean, instantly connected. It is meaningful. Automatically bonded to them...sharing the similar culture and values. (Susan)

SH: stressful for me due to my language ability. But culturally, I am very excited. (Santiago)
KH: Connect more with monolinguals because my Korean isn’t as great as heritage language students who do speak very fluent Korean. Because of that language barrier, I’m not able to connect with them as much as I am able to connect with people in English. (Ben)

SH: So it’s not a cultural thing at all? (Norberto)

KH: I think it’s more of a language thing. (Ben)

Our HL students expressed a desire to increase their HL proficiency. HL proficiency seems to mean more than language proficiency to HLLs, as it (re)connects them with their identity, culture, and both the people at home and in the community.

SH: Uhm, I would say definitely it’s fulfilling when you’re able to kind of communicate with people ...especially people whose first language is your heritage language, so in my case Spanish. It definitely feels good when you can have a full conversation. Uhm. For Spring break, I went to Barcelona and visited a lot of my relatives there and it was awesome, you know, getting to communicate all of my family in Spanish pretty much exclusively. I mean, they speak English, too, but Spanish is definitely their first language, and it always feels great when they say: “Oh, your Spanish is great!” Like it’s really nice to be able to communicate with you. Also, because my dad doesn’t speak a lot of Spanish and he was the one that was on the trip with me. I was kind of able to talk our way through Barcelona, which is kind of like fun being the person that can speak to locals, especially the people who don’t speak English. It was kind of like almost empowering, you know, interesting to speak to people in their native language. (Marisol)

KH: That’s really cool. So I think I would say I feel more connected to maybe other Korean-Americans. Sometimes with Koreans I’m a little...uhm...hesitant to speak Korean, cause I know I’m like not as great with it. Uhm, to Korean-Americans, I ...it’s kind of nice to speak Korean because it’s like “oh, I’m more connected to you” than, say, just people
I speak English with. So sometimes we say little, short sentences of English...uhm... whenever like it’s appropriate, I guess. Or when I’m speaking to, like, my relatives, like my grandmother or my grandfather. So sometimes use...or I have to speak Korean with them, but it’s really nice to hear them say: “oh, you’re improving” (Robert)

SH: Yeah (Marisol)

KH: Especially throughout the year, this past year where I’ve been like learning Korean. Learning more like grammar and they can definitely sense that. It’s really nice to feel more in touch with them. (Robert)

SH: Yeah, for sure... I definitely...My relatives, particularly my grandma, when I talk to her on the phone, is always saying: “Oh my gosh! You’re Spanish is getting so much better! I’m so happy that you’re taking Spanish in college!” So, I’m definitely very grateful for the choice of the language program here. (Marisol)

KH: I feel like the connection is kind of different with speakers of Korean, or my heritage language, there is just speaking in the language I feel like there’s an understanding of the culture and an understanding of like the norms and the values of being Korean. Whereas, that doesn’t exist when I’m speaking in English, obviously. It’s a very different thing to speak in English about Korean culture and just speak actually in Korean. I think because embedded, I feel like embedded in the language are already so many cultural values and norms. Like, for example, the way that, I think I was kind of talking to you earlier about how the way that we address like people of higher authority or even people who are older than us, like there’s a different way that you address them like the language changes even in terms of like labels and what you address them by or the way that you end sentences, like it’s very different. So, I think it’s just different. (Calvin)
Question 6. Do you feel any connection to speakers of heritage languages other than your own?

Studies show that cultural and affective values influence HLLs’ language-learning motivation (Andrews, 1999; Cummins, 2005; He, 2006). In brief, it is an essential signifier in their identity (Lee and Kim, 2008). Other important motivational factors are tied to relationships with family members and the HL community (Phinney et al., 2001).

Although HLLs in post-secondary language courses tend to be highly motivated, one must consider how their affective needs may influence their motivation (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). For example, students who experience linguistic shaming (Preston, 2013) are less likely to voluntarily use HL. In the nurturing environment of a well-designed HL class, students can then begin to understand that their self-perceived shortcomings are not unique and gain the necessary confidence to begin using the HL in a broader environment. With this project, students learned that the “problems” they face are not necessarily language-specific.

SH: I feel more connected with this project, hearing how other HLs speak or feel. It’s nice to know that it’s not just a Spanish thing or a Korean thing. Every HLS struggles with trying to connect with people with native language ability. (Fausto)

Commonalities sometimes extend beyond linguistic borders to shared experiences: this would be the offspring of immigrants.

KH: most HLS I’ve met are sons and daughters of immigrants, that carries
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a special experience that we share. Being able to relate on that front helps a lot. (Kurk)

Courses designed for HLLs could also allow students to explore how they share the same or very similar experiences (Sohn 1995; Faulx, 2013). If a HL track is not feasible, initiatives to promote HLL connections, such as the HMH project or HL tables, can foster a community of HLLs and facilitate peer support.

Question 7. Do you ever avoid using your heritage language? If so, when/why?

From our students’ conversations, it appears clear that embarrassment and shame are the most common reasons for not speaking their HL. As Boon and Polinsky (2014) point out, the HL speaker’s confidence is predominantly determined by their proficiency in speech. The lack of ease, and the shame and embarrassment felt are likely results of negative assessments (Urcioli, 2008), which, in the case of oral interactions, are immediate, face-to-face, and impact directly upon the HLLs self-perception. Our students expressed these feelings of shortcoming and embarrassment, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

SH: There’s that hesitation, that fear. It’s embarrassing when you mess up. (... ) Also with my relatives. When they visit from Venezuela, I’ll avoid speaking it because I don’t want to get a grammar lesson. I’ll speak English so that I don’t get corrected all the time. (Marisol)

KH: Sometimes it’s embarrassing. When I can’t express what I want it can be really frustrating. (Kurk)

SH: speaking Spanish is much more difficult. (... ) Especially speaking to
older people, it’s a different thing: you feel you have to speak perfect Spanish or Korean. They point out mistakes. I feel reluctant to speak with them (Fausto)

As the students articulate above, HLLs, especially those with low proficiency, are more likely to be discouraged when they are immediately corrected, criticized, or even ridiculed by fluent HL speakers, and consequently avoid using their HL. Likewise, students whose linguistic background is not sufficiently acknowledged in the classroom are reticent to speak. As instructors, it is thus important to adopt a ‘glass half full’ approach, i.e. a more optimistic outlook that should be based on how much heritage speakers already know” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, p. 379). Overall, to reduce some HLLs’ “language shyness” (Krashen, 1998), HL instructors may want to consider reducing direct error corrections and changing their attitudes toward correctness or lessening the focus on accuracy. HLLs with a lack of linguistic confidence should be encouraged to risk producing errors and given sufficient opportunities to interact with other HLLs.

One student pointed out that although he felt more discomfort than shame, it was the “parents” who seemed embarrassed by the HLL’s inability to express themselves properly.

KH: Sometimes when I’m with friends and I don’t know how to say it properly, my mom might be slightly embarrassed for me...almost like ashamed that I don’t know something she might think I should. It’s like a little frustration on both sides. (Kurk)

Some students remarked that the lack of prestige of and the stigma attached to their HL played a significant role in their desire to actively use the language
(Silva-Corvalán, 1994), even when they felt a strong connection to the HC.

KH: I don’t know there’s this thing, this concept called “fresh off the boat”(Sam)
SH: OK (Manuel)
KH: Where they think like you’re fresh off the boat. It’s kind of a bad thing, almost racist. (Sam)
SH: yeah (Manuel)
KH: Where they think you’re too Asian, you’re not like assimilating into the American culture, so that’s kind of a negative stereotype that a lot of my friends had back in middle school, not as much as high school. So, people would avoid using their heritage language and use more English. And when I was in elementary school, whenever I would speak Korean, all of my Caucasian friends would tell me we don’t speak Korean, like that’s screwed (Sam)
SH: Wow...(Manuel)
KH: So...(Sam)
SH: Yeah, so yeah I guess I can’t ...I went through maybe not...uhm... exactly the same with it. Where I come from most of the community is Hispanic, but we would like—even the Hispanic people, we would assume—like... if you spoke Spanish like you’re kind of like ...again... instead of fresh-of-the-boat, but we should say like “refi”, kind of like refugees...it’s ten times worse, I think. Yeah, it was kind of like “oh why are you speaking Spanish?” kind of like, low educated... like... I don’t know (Manuel)
KH: I see (Sam)
SH: So I guess I would avoid it when I was like younger, kind of like so no one would make fun of me. But I think now, uhm, I like use it when it’s needed; like if I need to speak to someone in Spanish or something I’m not as embarrassed about it anymore as I used to be. (Manuel)
SH: yeah (Manuel)
KH: Nothing bad. (Sam)

KH: Do you ever avoid using your heritage language? If so when and why?

So I think this goes back to like just having...just being proficient in
the language. Just 'cause I'm not very great yet. Uhm...like there's this
insecurity speaking with people who are like fluent in the language.

(Ben)

SH: Yeah. Yeah, I get that. One time when I visited Spain for a regatta,
I was in the North East region, which is called Catalan, and they speak
like a slightly different variation of Spanish, it's like, kind of hybrid
between Spanish and Portuguese, I could be completely wrong. Uhm.
and I remember trying to order food at the restaurant and they like
wouldn't let me order in Spanish. Every time I ordered in Spanish they
would pretend that they didn’t understand what I said, even though I
was like reading off the menu and I said OK, well I guess I’ll use
English. It was like really strange. It was like they didn’t want me using
their language. It was kind of “different”. And I think there’s some
times when I’m in Miami. Miami is like, little Cuba kind of thing in
certain parts...uhm...and I think there are some places where if you use
Spanish instead of English, you’re either treated better or worse,
depending on the scenario. So like there are places where it’s like a
Cuban café and if you like speak in Spanish it’s like “Ey... estoy aquí..
dame mi ¿?” they’ll like give you your food really quickly and you’ll
get good service. And then there are places where uh, not necessarily
more high-end, but a little more, like “cosmopolitan, big city”
Miami-type places that usually won’t... it does not behoove you to use
Spanish, it’s seen as lower class is the wrong word, but your seen as
like “those people”. Uhm (Norberto)

KH: So there’s like discrimination? (Ben)

SH: A little bit. Yeah. (Norberto)

Students shared their feelings and experiences that may have discouraged
them to speak their HLs—“negative stereotype,” “discrimination,” “lower class,”
“insecurity,” “not assimilating”. HL curricula, classrooms, learners, and communities need to include advocacy to raise proud and confidence level of HL use, development, and maintenance. This is one of the goals HMH project tries to promote in an educational setting.

3.3. Language Use

The intention of the questions on HL use (questions 8 through 12) was to i) allow students to share something specific about the language, ii) raise the learners’ awareness of emotional and personal connections to the HL and iii) see if there were any patterns among the languages.

*Question 8. When/ with whom do you use your heritage language? Why?*

Both KH and SH demonstrated typical patterns of HL use: with family, in particular with parents and grandparents, but not with siblings. In this study, most KH said they spoke to their parents in Korean, whereas the SH were spoken to in Spanish by their parents, but the children tended to respond in English. This pattern cannot be claimed as common, due to the small set of data in this research, but it is likely that the participants’ parents are fluent in English based on the conversations that occurred.

KH: I’m probably second generation. They speak Korean to each other. I speak Korean to them, but sometimes it’s harder for them to say more abstract things, so they speak English to me. Same with my little sister. Korean feels more natural for my family. It feels more like we’re connected, in a sense. (Robert)
More often than not the students claimed they did not use the HL with friends because it is “easier to communicate in English” (Fausto).

SH: With my family. With friends who speak Spanish, I hardly speak to them in Spanish because it’s easier to communicate through English. None of us are that proficient in Spanish. Quicker in English than having to muddle through Spanish. (Fausto)

These findings coincide with Wong-Fillmore’s (1991) research, as well as with the results of the Heritage Language Learner Survey conducted by the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC) in 2009.

KH: My dad is more comfortable in English, my mom is pretty equal. At home, we mainly spoke English. My exposure was hearing my parents speak Korean with their parents. Now that I’m studying, I’m trying to speak with my parents. I had a good conversation with my grandfather about the K war. It was really cool. (Calvin)

KH: ...I learnt Korean especially for my mom. (JR)

The HLLs’ desire to communicate with family members may be encouraged by their parents or family members, who are stronger in the HL or by the fact that there is a perceived connection of the HL to home and family, such as the culture and interactions. In other words, parents or the family take an important role and act as both valuable resources and motivation for their children’s HL learning process both at home and in the community.

**Question 9. What words/concepts connect you to your heritage?**

This question was included to invite students to reflect not on the “what”
or the “how”, but the “why” of their language selection, in the hopes of encouraging them to become more aware of their emotional /psychological connections to the language. However, few KH-SH conversation pairs chose to answer this question. One KH student named the aroma of a particular condiment to be an unequivocal trigger. SH students said place and smell. It is worth noting that although the place is tied to an older family member (grandma), it was the house and not the grandmother that elicited the HL. Interestingly, in the case of smell, it was not always a “delicious aroma,” but rather the unpleasant smell of burnt rubber and gasoline (perhaps exhaust fumes) of large trucks.

SH: My grandma’s house triggers me to speak Spanish. (Marisol)
SH: Smell. Rubber and gasoline of big trucks. It feels like home. Tires. Food over metates [comal]. Smell of used, worn out things. Specifically when it’s hot. (Eugenia)

KH: Pepper paste, 고추장 (gochujang). it is very distinct smell. that is more than anything. almost every food uses it. Screams Korea to me. (Joshua)

As mentioned in excerpt above, place, taste and smell may all play a role in heritage learners’ connection to their languages.

**Question 10. Favorite words in your heritage language and in English. Is there any relation between them?**

Caldwell-Harris (2014) suggested that HLLs may become more emotional and feel more attached when they encounter specific words, phrases, or expressions in their HL. Only two pairs answered this question, and this could be an indicator that it either did not interest the participants or the nature of
the question involved more thought than they were willing to give. One KH liked the argumentative language he picked up from Korean television. Both KH participants related their favorite words to certain foods in Korean, but not in English. A HS participant stated that they had no favorite words in English, but liked words that sounded “funny” in Spanish.

HS: I like words that sound funny. albóndiga, totopo. Not a favorite English word. I like the word “nebulous” in English. (Carmela)

KH: Cold noodle, 냉면 (naengmyeon), buckwheat noodle with ice cubes for summer day. (Joshua)

HS: Paleta (ice pop, fruitie) (Eugenia)

While this study showed some examples of such emotional connections to words or phrases, the data is very limited and it is not sufficient enough to foster the drawing of any definitive conclusions from it.

**Question 11. Are there any words you always say in your heritage language? Why?**

Both KH and SH students agreed that on a word level, they felt a greater connection to the HL. They also mentioned that words in English were not as evocative as those in the HL. It is not surprising that students referred to words related to food, to experiences related to everyday life, and words they heard in their childhood: commands or words of encouragement (Montrul, 2010), or for onomatopoeia. In both languages, there were words or expressions that evoked a concept that the students deemed untranslatable.

KH: 아이고 (aigo) [Oh my god!] (Sam); 보글보글 (bogeulbogeul) [soup boiling sound] (Anna); 담담해 (dapdappae) [when someone can’t
Although HLLs may have difficulty retrieving words that they do not frequently use in their HL (Montrul, 2010), research shows that code-switching may not always be compensatory. Unfortunately, although the students in this study shared specific words or expressions, they did not answer why they used these words in the HL. While this may be true in general cases, it is also very likely that HLLs often use code-switching for specific words or phrases that do not have an equivalent in English or in cases where certain words carry a special meaning or emotion in their HL and HC.

**Question 12. Are there any words or concepts whose meaning you feel changes according to the language?**

In both Korean and Spanish, the concept of respect and how it is expressed through language is key (6 out of 10 specifically mentioned respect or register). In addition, students noted that both languages show a greater degree of caring, warmth, and inclusiveness. Experiences that bring people together (like ‘meals’) are particularly emphasized in our students’ conversations.

KH: Have you eaten? Eating connects people. (Sam)

SH: More ways of expressing like and love. Stronger. I use it with family. (Manuel)

SH: Strong emphasis on extended family and being connected. Just because
you’re not related by blood doesn’t mean you’re not family. Guests become integrated. (Marisol)

KH: Different levels of politeness. Very present in language. Friends are “brother” and “sister” all the time in Korean. Big kind of family shared experience. It’s changed the way I see, and act and view things. (Robert)

KH: Most countries are pretty homogenous. (...) Benefit of being Korean-American is that I have an awareness that makes me able to relate to [others]. (Calvin)

One student commented on how race and skin tone are perceived differently.

SH: Race [color of skin]: moreno. It’s what you call the person, really casual.
You don’t say “negro”, although “negro/negrito” is a term of affection.
Racial dynamics are different. Sensitivities are different. (Benicio)

HL and HC are strongly tied to heritage identity, and consequently, identity affects motivation. HL curricula and instructional strategies should thus not only focus on fulfilling students’ linguistic needs, but more importantly, on cultivating as many key aspects that the HLLs already have exposure to in some degree: HL, HC, heritage identity, heritage motivation, shared experiences and emotions, community involvement including family and peers, etc.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The Modern Language Association (MLA)’s Ad Hoc Committee’s report on foreign languages (2007) recommended that the goal of language education in higher education settings lies in producing educated speakers who have a deep translingual and transcultural competence.
Our whole culture must become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaean in judging other cultures, and more at home with the rest of the world. Higher education can do a lot to meet that important challenge. (Geisler et al., 2007, p.235)

HLLs have great potential to reach this goal. In fact, many of them already have developed transcultural and translingual competences to various degrees. The HMH project is an example that can help HLLs become more aware of the significance of developing HL and HC competences, as well as fostering their potential to reach such goals.

As suggested by King and Mackey (2007), “cultural connections can enhance language learning and can be very motivating for learners” (p. 166). Emphasizing cultural awareness and practices may be even more crucial in HL curricula, in order to help HLLs further develop and maintain connections with their HL and HC through various activities, such as being involved in heritage cultural organizations or clubs, HC performances, HL tables, diaspora poetry sharing, cooking, appreciation of literature/films/arts. In addition, engaging with the community (i.e. a community-based approach) appears to be a very positive learning strategy among HLLs (Kagan & Dillon 2009; Carreira & Kagan 2011; Lee-Smith 2016), and the creation of such a community of practice “can strengthen and enhance the students’ sense of identity and community” (Van Deusen-Scholl 2018, p.133).

Furthermore, it is vital to raise parental, institutional, and public awareness to foster “collaborative partners” (Szecsi et al., 2005, p.77; Zhang 2010; Liang 2018) in HL maintenance. It is “essential to formulate cross-linguistic teacher training and professional development” (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2014, p.79) in
order to solidify and mainstream HL education. It is important that joint efforts from parents and family, educational institutions, and communities should be made to develop HL curriculum development. In this regard, the HMH project could provide the HL students, family, and faculty with a small yet highly meaningful and supportive opportunity to raise awareness, embrace, and empower HL learning.

Besides the HMH project, designing other learning projects for HLLs that provide them with opportunities to explore their identity; communicate with family, friends and speakers of HL; and pursue professional/academic goals are highly suggested for the HL curriculum. Such projects should include appropriate and relevant topics and goals that build on HLLs’ linguistic and cultural strengths, reflect their experiences, and respond to their needs, motivation, and goals. For example, other learning projects may include exploring their name in HL, oral history, career mentoring, and community-based volunteer services.

The following excerpts which were collected from the participants’ reflection on the project clearly reflect the significance of the project:

(…) **My partner’s feeling towards his HL were very similar to mine.** (…) We both felt a mix of love for and frustration towards our HL, which come from the difficulties we’ve had speaking to relatives, but also the pride and joy that we feel when we can maintain a conversation with our grandparents. (…) I think these conversations are **useful for understanding the many ways that children of diaspora understand their lives.** We all have largely similar perspectives, but with small differences which can help educate us about what it means to be an HLL. (SH: Benicio)
The project was the first time I had really gotten the chance to think about where I stood as a Korean-American. (...) I enjoyed learning the amusing similarities and differences in my experiences compared to those of my project partner, and I was able to gain a newfound appreciation for my language and heritage and how it’s shaped me into who I am. (KH: Henry)

As clearly reflected in the learners’ epilogues above (the most significant parts of the project were bolded by the author), the mission of the HL curriculum should focus not only on language teaching, but also on providing the learners with opportunities to become aware of their cultures and identities, which would be equally important. Through the HMH project, participating HLLs had the opportunity to find out that they share very similar perspectives on their heritage language and culture, gain a positive attitude and start building confidence and appreciation for the language, culture, and identity of their heritage.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study are limited by the small sample size, and it is understood that a larger number of participants across languages would be more helpful in generalizing HLLs perceptions. Also, Questions 9-11 of the guided conversations should be more elaborate in order to elicit more complete responses. This study only scratches the surface of a wealth of information that should be examined in the future. However, the HMH project is significant in the following aspects:

Firstly, the HMH has provided HLLs across various languages and cultures with peer support opportunities, which seems to play a significant role in
increasing the levels of comfort and motivation in and out of the classroom.

Secondly, through the project HLLs discovered that they share similar goals and learning processes that are different from those of foreign language learners. The project allowed HLLs to understand that they are not alone in their struggles with learning their HL. This common ground may help to ease their frustrations, anxiety, or lack of confidence in the learning process.

Thirdly, heritage populations are the new majority group in today’s multilingual and multicultural society. The project led the HLLs to take opportunities to think about their heritage identities – bicultural and bilingual – and encouraged them to embrace, honor, and further develop their translingual and transcultural competences in today’s global world, thus making them ideal advocates for HL programs.

Lastly, through the HMH project, the Spanish and Korean participants were provided with an opportunity to talk about their shared experiences as heritage speakers with new interlocutors. By vocalizing their thoughts in a one-on-one setting, students tackled issues related to identity, motivation, and language learning. The face-to-face format provided a rare instance of human contact in an age of technology and thus led them to a better understanding of how they are an integral part of the greater HL community.

As a closing thought, the author would like to share one of the project participant’s reflections:

Being a heritage language learner is like being an archaeologist in your
own mind. It is to see and understand words and grammar and concepts that have always been there, to clean them off and to be able to put them in a context so that they are no longer scattered or buried but part of a complete story. And it is to discover that there are other people with language experiences similar to your own. (SH: Angélica)

References


Notes
1. The HLL pairs’ conversations presented here are transcribed as they were produced by the participants. No errors are corrected. However, clarifications are indicated in [] .
2. The participants’ detailed biographical information related to their immigration status were not collected.
3. Korean words were Romanized based on the Revised Romanization of Korean - the official Korean language romanization system of the Republic of Korea.

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