

An “educator’s” perspective: How heritage language pedagogy and technology can decolonize the English classroom

Paul J. Meighan

McGill University

1 | INTRODUCTION

English is a dominant colonial language which carries power at many levels of globalized society. The power to access social capital and prestige (i.e., education and job opportunities) has further consolidated English dominance in the digital, online world (Arnó-Macià, 2012).

With this advance, the English language has replaced the voices and identities of speakers from many diverse cultures and heritages. Valdés (2000) defines these individuals as heritage language speakers “raised in homes where a language *other than English* is spoken and who are *to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language*” (emphasis mine, pp. 6–7).

Fishman (2001), using the example of the United States, identifies three types of heritage languages: (i) immigrant (belonging to those who have immigrated after U.S. independence), (ii) indigenous (those of indigenous peoples), and (iii) colonial (those of European groups who have colonized the nation state now known as the United States).

2 | RECONCEPTUALIZING THE HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEAKER

The issue with the widely accepted definition and categorization of a heritage language and its speakers is that it is too categorical, simplistic, and symptomatic of a Eurocentric, reductionist worldview.

First, there are many heritage language speakers who have not had the opportunity to become fully bilingual or who may not readily identify as immigrant, indigenous, or colonial (i.e., second or third generation speakers who may have a tri- or multi-lingual background).

Second, many may have been forced to speak, or have been assimilated into a dominant colonial language with a Eurocentric/Western worldview. English and other colonial languages carry a legacy of linguistic and cultural genocide (e.g., the Indian residential school system in Canada which imposed the use of English and a Eurocentric worldview).

In essence, heritage language speakers encompass a myriad of cultures, very distinct languages, and a multitude of traditions across the globe which have survived colonial “erase and replace” educational policies (McCarthy & Nicholas, 2014, p. 107). Simply put, dichotomizing the ideal of a heritage language/speaker with bilingual proficiency milestones and colonial/“other-than-English” undertones is problematic (e.g., Seal of Bilingual inequities; Subtirelu, Borowczyk, Thorson Hernandez, & Venezia, 2019).

Given this complex panorama, there is a need to reconceptualize the heritage language speaker. This article proposes (i) viewing a heritage language as any language which has to some extent been diminished or disenfranchised as a result of another, and (ii) understanding a heritage language speaker as anyone who speaks, or is in the process of reclaiming, an ancestral language which has emotive and cultural significance.

3 | THE HERITAGE LANGUAGE DEFICIT

With this view of a heritage language speaker and colonial history in mind, our monolingual, “English only” classrooms can, even unwittingly, perpetuate a colonial narrative which silences and marginalizes learner identities as multilingual and multicultural beings. In the mainstream English learning classroom, learner identities and other worldviews are, by default, subjugated to that of the dominant language.

Furthermore, the perception of English as a gateway language to success in a global arena has compounded the negative impact on the use of heritage languages and the formation of heritage language identities (Cummins, 2005). Beginning in adolescence, some heritage language speakers experience “desire to integrate into the target culture ... so strong that there is apathy toward or even rejection of the heritage culture and language” (Tse, 1998, p. 25). In other words, the aspiration to assimilate into the dominant culture and language is accelerated by monolingual English classroom environments, particularly those which endorse an “English only” policy and high-stakes standardized testing (Cummins, 2005).

Cho, Shin, & Krashen (2004) also found that as heritage language speakers age and progress through monolingual English schools, heritage language use decreases (p. 24). Cummins (2005) notes that heritage language use in the mainstream classroom is “viewed as either irrelevant or as an impediment to the learning of English and overall academic achievement” (p. 585). In short, heritage languages and their speakers are “viewed through a deficit lens” (Little, 2017, p. 4) in mainstream education and their identities will continue to be compromised in a monolingual English classroom, arguably another example of “erase and replace” educational policy.

4 | THE BRIDGE OF TECHNOLOGY

So, what can we do to avoid “erase and replace” policies and allow our learners to thrive as multifaceted individuals with experiences to share and identities to cherish? One of the less-researched answers is technology. In the 21st century, more digital and online technologies are being incorporated into our day-to-day lives, and many of our learners have grown up in a digital culture.

Despite the dominance of English, the pervasive digital panorama has also opened up a communicative space and given greater visibility for heritage languages. Technology creates opportunities for the growth of online learning communities which provide heritage speakers with facilitated access to multimodal (audio, visual, video and print) resources.

Moreover, technology use can assist in developing heritage language literacy and may help heritage speakers connect with their cultural identities, family abroad (Little, 2017, 2019) and develop self-esteem (Eisenclas, Schalley, & Moyes, 2016). As stressed by Arnó-Macià (2012), “technology provides new opportunities for immersion in real situations, which are ... realistic in the communities that are emerging in virtual environments” (p. 94). In a nutshell, we can harness the potential of technology to bridge the heritage language deficit.

5 | BRIDGING THE “PAST” AND THE “FUTURE”: HOW HERITAGE LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY AND TECHNOLOGY CAN DECOLONIZE ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Monolingual teaching methods which restrict the use of heritage languages should be questioned in order to decolonize the classroom (e.g., problematicize the status quo), promote social justice, and implement transformative pedagogical strategies (e.g., García & Otheguy, 2019).

First, technology use can be a strategy to facilitate cross-language transfer. There are instances where technology is viewed under a negative light or as a distraction (i.e., students using cellphones to text or use social media). However, in a positive light, these personal communications are new forms of textual and virtual interactions across diverse sociolinguistic spheres. These technological interactions should be explored and permitted in our classrooms because they are integral to our learners’ lives and assist in the development of multiliteracies (i.e., visual and digital literacy).

Second, technology as a pedagogical strategy can also help us to decolonize our classrooms. The English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) classroom is a political microcosm (Pennycook, 2001): How we and our students see the world and how we implement pedagogy (such as the idea of a monolingual English, technology-free classroom with a colonial, assimilationist agenda) are political acts. We should allow our learners to explore the affordances of technology through their heritage lens, their own worldview and ways of languaging (e.g., translanguaging; García & Otheguy, 2019). Punishing any use of technology or heritage language (i.e., “English only in the classroom and no cellphones, please!”) is impractical, detrimental to the overall learning environment, and a colonial practice.

Third, given the complexity in our English learning classroom, there is a need for a heritage language pedagogy which fully accommodates all languaging and ancestral lifeways. A heritage pedagogy provides a safe space for our learners’ identities to be explored and navigated in an era of “under siege bilingualism” and Trumpism (Macedo, 2019, p. 7). For example, let’s ask our learners: Which views are advantaged, silenced, or frankly ignored in this article on Facebook? Does this video or meme privilege a manufactured white, English “native-speaker” with a standard accent?

Although we cannot [sigh] change everything, there is an immediate need for a “present” framework or a toolkit which allows learners to bridge the “past” (ancestral languages and cultures) and the “future” (technology). In this manner, we can assist in the creation of a multilingual, multimodal space where technology assists in the present-day reclamation of heritage cultures and languages. We can also facilitate more meaningful, real-life interactions while learners acquire English in the classroom.

6 | IMPLEMENTING A HERITAGE LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Heritage language pedagogy and technology can allow our learners’ multilingual and multicultural identities to flourish where they can (i) question the status quo, (ii) tell their own stories, (iii) create

their own graphic and visual representations of their reality, and (iv) share experiences, all while implementing multiliteracies, critical literacy, and multimodality.

Adult learners in my “intermediate” postsecondary English for a academic purposes (EAP) classroom have used technology as part of a heritage pedagogy in various ways. For example, they have researched their family or community histories online. They have expanded on their understanding of contrasting worldviews to construct narratives, such as a Google Doc learner reflection log on indigenous knowledges as a way to combat the climate crisis. The online learner reflection log, in response to the “educator’s” questions, allows multilingual learners to evaluate to what extent their personal worldview corresponds with the dominant one portrayed in a written or spoken text. They then reflect on how the dominant worldview impacts greater society (e.g., the colonial view of water as a product as opposed to the indigenous view of water as a spirit). Classmates can then comment on each other’s Google Doc and share their own worldview or perspective.

Learners have also created storyboards, graphic novels, blogs, and YouTube videos to respond to articles. Learners have used technology autonomously to consolidate both English language acquisition and ancestral ties. For example, in our “intermediate” classroom, we have used online bilingual dictionaries to explore English words such as *globalization* through a heritage/decolonial lens. Learners assess who is globalizing whom, whether the English definition has a positive or negative bias, and how the English term compares with the meaning/nondominant worldview in their heritage language.

In conclusion, it is important to trust in the transformative learning process by allowing decolonial thinking and heritage interactions to develop naturally. A heritage language pedagogy provides a safe space for learners to actively reflect on their experiences with ancestral and present-day cultural artifacts (e.g., texts, videos, or the colonial idea of a “standard” ethnocentric, nation-bound language). In this fashion, learner identities can avoid further minoritization in a Eurocentric system of knowledge and colonial ideologies. Heritage language pedagogy and technology matters because learners are free to explore their “past,” “present,” and “future” multilingual/multicultural identities in a decolonized, multimodal classroom.

7 | THE AUTHOR

Paul John Meighan is of Scottish-Irish Gaelic heritage and is a PhD student at McGill University. His research encompasses heritage and decolonizing pedagogies in language education, ecological approaches in teaching methods, sustainability in education, and Indigenous language revitalization.

REFERENCES

- Arnó-Macià, E. (2012). The role of technology in teaching languages for specific purposes courses. *Modern Language Journal*, 96, 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2012.01299.x>.
- Cho, G., Shin, F., & Krashen, S. (2004). What do we know about heritage languages? What do we need to know about them? *Multicultural Education*, 11(4), 23–26.
- Cummins, J. (2005). A proposal for action: Strategies for recognizing heritage language competence as a learning resource within the mainstream classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 89, 585–592.
- Eisenchlas, S. A., Schalley, A. C., & Moyes, G. (2016). Play to learn: Self-directed home language literacy acquisition through online games. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 19(2), 136–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2015.1037715>.
- Fishman, J. (2001). 300-plus years of heritage language education in the United States. In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 81–89). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

- García, O., & Otheguy, R. (2019). Plurilingualism and translanguaging: Commonalities and divergences. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1598932>.
- Little, S. (2017). Whose heritage? What inheritance? Conceptualising family language identities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1348463>.
- Little, S. (2019). "Is there an app for that?" Exploring games and apps among heritage language families. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 40(3), 218–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2018.1502776>.
- Macedo, D. (Ed.). (2019). *Decolonizing foreign language education: The misteaching of English and other colonial languages*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- McCarthy, T. L., & Nicholas, S. E. (2014). Reclaiming Indigenous languages: A reconsideration of the roles and responsibilities of schools. *Review of Research in Education*, 38, 106–136. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X13507894>.
- Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: An introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Tse, L. (1998). Ethnic identity formation and its implications for heritage language development. In S. Krashen, L. Tse, & J. McQuillan (Eds.), *Heritage language development* (pp. 15–29). Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.
- Valdés, G. (2000). Introduction. In *Spanish for native speakers, Vol. I* (pp. 1–32). New York, NY: Harcourt.
- Subtirelu, N. C., Borowczyk, M., Thorson Hernandez, R., & Venezia, F. (2019). Recognizing *whose* bilingualism? A critical policy analysis of the Seal of Biliteracy. *Modern Language Journal*, 103, 371–390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12556>.