

WHY HERITAGE LANGUAGES MATTER

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. LI-JEN KUO

Dr. Li-Jen Kuo is an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Texas A&M University and is currently also a visiting scholar at the Freie Universität Berlin. Dr. Kuo has a PhD in educational psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and two Master's degrees, one in linguistics, also from UIUC, and one in language learning and language policy, from Stanford University.



Dr Li-Jen Kuo © Chih-Ping Lo

Dr. Kuo, what brings you to Berlin?

One of my research areas is in second language acquisition and on literacy development among *heritage learners*¹. In the past, I have conducted research on bilingual Spanish, Japanese and Chinese heritage learners in the US. The main purpose of my research in Berlin is to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the differences between young heritage learners in the US and Germany. The overarching goal of

¹ IN THE US, RESEARCH ON HERITAGE LANGUAGES, I.E. THE LANGUAGE OF MIGRANTS AND OTHER MINORITIES, HAS A HISTORY OF SOME FIVE DECADES. IN GERMANY, THE TERM "HERKUNFTSSPRACHE" IS COMMON. IN GERMAN CONTEXTS, THE USE OF HERITAGE LANGUAGES IS ARGUABLY STILL A HEAVILY UNDER-RESEARCHED FIELD IN THE INTERSECTIONS OF MIGRATION STUDIES, EDUCATION AND LINGUISTICS.

this research program is to examine the challenges for heritage learners, their teachers, and their parents.

How do you want to find out?

I have conducted classroom observations at several Chinese heritage schools in Berlin. I have also conducted focus group discussions with the parents to learn about their concerns and anticipated outcomes for their children's heritage language education.

What were their answers?

The answers were quite diverse. About 50 percent of the parents would like their children to be able to conduct some basic conversation about daily matters in Chinese; about one third of them want their children to be able to appreciate Chinese literature; the rest of the parents haven't thought of any anticipated outcomes. Most parents are primarily concerned about how their children can read and handwrite Chinese characters. Although character learning is important, it is sad to notice that Chinese language learning is often only thought of as Chinese character learning.

Wouldn't it be enough if heritage learners speak their language? Does literacy matter?

Literacy is critical for heritage language development. Literacy allows heritage language learners to develop a deeper understanding of their language and their culture. Literacy also empowers heritage language learners to embark on independent learning, rendering language and culture learning a lifelong process.

What are the challenges with regard to heritage literacy education?

Heritage language learning often has to start at home, but parents have the issue of limited time. There is a general misunderstanding that mother tongue maintenance happens naturally, just by speaking or being exposed to the language at home, but in fact heritage language maintenance requires tremendous efforts by parents and educators. Another major concern is the lack of comprehensive research on heritage language learning. This tends to be a research topic of greater interest for linguists and sociologists, but they typically do not have much training in (early) childhood or language and literacy education. On the

other hand, heritage language learning is usually not valued in public schools, and there it is difficult for researchers in education to obtain funding or any type of support from their institution or the government to conduct systematic research.

Politicians and educators in Germany sometimes argue that 'immigrant children' should focus on learning German. From your perspective, why should they maintain their heritage language?

Losing language is losing culture. Many concepts and ideas are language - and culturally - specific, which means that they can only be expressed and fully understood in a particular language. If people do not speak their heritage language, they lack the basis of engaging with their culture and may lose the means to develop their own specific identity. Learning the official language is definitely important, but this does not have to be done at the expense of the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of the society. In fact, research has shown that solid language and literacy skills in the mother tongue facilitate the learning of a new language among young children. Providing a better education for immigrants, which is an increasing population in many countries around the world, requires joint effort from educators, linguists, sociologists and policy makers.

AN INTERVIEW BY HENNING KLÖTER

Henning Klöter is Professor of Modern Chinese Languages and Literatures at IAAW. His research interests are language and society in East Asia, language planning and the history of Chinese linguistics in Europe.



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