Curricular Models for Heritage Korean Learners in the U.S. Colleges

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1. Introduction

Heritage language learners comprise a substantial proportion of foreign language learners in U.S. colleges. With regards to Korean language, 85 percent of Korean language students in U.S. colleges are heritage learners, according to a survey done in 2000 (You, 2001). As heritage language (HL) learners bring their unique linguistic skills and needs to foreign language classrooms, language teachers face the challenge to accommodate varying degrees of linguistic proficiency demonstrated by HL learners. Accordingly, interest in special instructional models or special curricula that target HL learners is growing. While the number of HL learners is becoming more visible, there has been little research, to date, on curriculum innovations and instructional materials tailored to the needs and interests of HL learners. Although the HL curriculum can be developed based on general curriculum theories and models, due to its specified target population and specific needs of the target learner group, the HL curriculum is more comparable to the language curriculum for specific purposes (Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2008). Failure to attend to the different curricular needs of HL and non-HL learners often results in dissatisfaction for both HL and non-HL learners (King, 1998). As such, more attention should be paid to the curriculum designs and teaching strategies that can meet the demands and potential of heritage language learners.

The purpose of this paper is to examine pedagogical challenges that teachers of Korean frequently face in the classrooms where heritage and non-heritage learners are mixed, and to discuss different curricular models that can be useful to HL learners of different degrees of language proficiency. In particular, an extensive discussion is provided on Individualized Instruction as a curricular model that can better address the linguistic and situational needs of the students from diverse backgrounds.

According to Kondo-Brown and Brown (2008), the HL curriculum development should be informed and guided by taking the following areas into consideration: (1) the degree of meeting the linguistic and cultural needs of HL learners, (2) reflecting HL needs in the curriculum goals and objectives, (3) appropriate
assessment of HL learners’ abilities and performance (4) development of materials for HL learners, (5) teacher development and institutional support policies in implementing the HL curriculum (pp.7-9). While this study discusses the curriculum models for heritage learners of Korean, addressing the above five areas of consideration, L2 (second language) pedagogical implications and hands-on curricular guidelines presented in this paper can also be applied to general L2 educational settings targeting both heritage and non-heritage learners.

2. Linguistic characteristics and needs of Korean HL learners

There are various perspectives on the definition of heritage language learners. In this study, I adopted a definition that is frequently used from the language teachers’ perspective: A heritage language learner is “one who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken and who speaks or at least understands the language and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English” (Valdés, 2001:38).

Typically, Korean heritage language learners have at least one parent who speaks Korean as a primary language and have been exposed to Korean at home or in Korean communities. Although there are few empirical studies on the linguistic characteristics of HL learners, L2 teachers generally agree that HL learners tend to have superior aural and/or oral proficiencies compared to their non-heritage peers. Among the common linguistic features of HL learners are: native-like pronunciation, high proficiency in vocabulary that is related to common daily functions, grammatical intuition, and competency in informal registers (Campbell and Rosenthal, 2000).

While many heritage learners demonstrate advanced abilities in spoken communication, they generally show weakness in literacy skills and grammatical accuracy. They have a tendency to write the way they would speak and use colloquial registers when expected to use more formal registers (H. Kim, 2001). Many of the spelling errors that HL learners make are not commonly found in the case of non-heritage language learners (Kagan and Dillon, 2001). In the study done by E. Kim (2006), Korean HL learners identified reading and writing as their weakest areas of linguistic skills and expressed their desire to develop and expand literary skills through more reading and writing activities. In a comparative needs analysis between HL learners and non-HL learners, Yu (2008) found that heritage learners counted “writing skills” as an area that needs the foremost improvement while non-HL learners prioritized “listening skills” for improvement. While HL learners are generally perceived to have a certain level of competence in spoken Korean, Lee and Kim (2008) draws attention to the often-overlooked fact that