

Introduction

I am here to share my experience of building a heritage-novice dual-track Korean language program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Depending on your language, region, or the level you are teaching, my experience will mean a different degree of relevance to your program or personal and professional goal, but more than half of the reason I am here is to get your feed back and learn how other programs –Korean or other language- are tackling the heritage issues in the States.

First of all, some background of our program is in order, which leads to the need for defining what ‘heritage learners’ mean. Just like most other Korean heritage learners in the States, the heritage learners in the state of Washington have a varying degree of spoken and writing skills. Roughly, for our program, I define ‘heritage learners’ to be those who have been exposed to the Korean language at home during their childhood. They may have immigrated to the States when they were 4 or 5 but continued to hear their parents speaking to them in Korean at home. Others may have been born in the States but have been exposed to the language by going to Saturday or church schools. (In minimal cases, some students have background in the language because they took Korean courses in the Defense Language Institute or because stayed in Korea for a few years for their parents’ or their own business).

History

Before I began teaching as a lecturer at the University of Washington in 1999, the program maintained three first-year Korean language “sections” under the same course number, which housed ‘advanced’ to ‘half-cooked’ to ‘really bad’ Korean speakers. One major problem with the system is that there was no room for non-heritage learners. Every year, 2-3 students from the International

Studies Program would register for the Korean first-year courses. But with one and the same grammar-oriented textbook, non-heritage students, if any, were dropping out of class as fast as winter leaves. So the program gained its notorious fame among those who took interest in the language but didn't dare to take any courses. "Everybody speaks the language fluently in that class."

To vitalize the program, having non-heritage student registration was very important. So my first task was to sort the heritage from the nearly non-existent non-heritage students.

To digress from the subject a little, what strikes me as interesting, if not odd, is that no one else is discussing the sorting of heritage learners from non-heritage learners. I can see that the heritage learner issue is not always relevant to all programs in all states, as you are all aware. Two main factors responsible for the heritage learner issue are the immigrant history of the speakers of the lg and the culture of the particular lg speakers. If the history is long/short enough to create a 1.5 and 2nd generation learners, and if the linguistics culture drives the learners to classrooms, you will have a good heritage population. One may challenge the need for sorting at all. One could imagine a situation where both parties -- heritage students and non-heritage students benefiting each other in the same class. Non-heritage students tend to do better on spelling and grammar while heritage students' oral/aural skills supercede the non-heritage learners' abilities. This untested assumption of benefiting the other kind was taken for granted at least at UW, and no formal "sorting" was implemented for many many years.

Putting students in the 'right' track is an imperative. We don't expect absolute novice learners to be able to learn together with intermediate learners in the same classroom; we shouldn't expect heritage learners to be put in the same classroom as non-heritage learners. Because what they know and how much they

know is crucially (and sometimes fatally) different from non-heritage learners. Only when we know what the students need to learn, can we decide on the content and the methodology. So my task was to sort the heritage and non-heritage; select a proper textbook for each track; and train the T.A.'s for each track – heritage and novice.

What is an apparent first step (sorting) is the most difficult task to tackle. **Hedghog witchcraft and wisardary sorting hat: slytherin vs. Griffendor – but even the Harry Potter had a problem**) I needed to make what might seem to you an arbitrary decision. We as teachers encourage students to make educated guesses when they meet a problem unbeknownst to them, and this was the case I made an educated guess myself. I spent a good deal of time selecting the first-year textbook for each track first. Reflecting the wide-practiced reality, all the materials I reviewed were heavily based on the grammar of the language, including the University of Hawai'i's most recent textbook Integrated Korean, but I ended up choosing it to test it out. We are currently using the U of H's textbook for heritage learners and a different, task-based textbook I and two others wrote together.

Textbook & Placement test

Once I selected textbooks, the next task was to write a placement test. Writing the test based on the heritage textbook made the whole process relatively easy.

Placement test writing involved three steps. First I wrote a draft, which had the listening comprehension, grammar, vocabulary (spelling and conjugation), and reading sections. I met with a test-design specialist at the Center for Instructional Design and Research at UW for the dependability/accuracy of the test. The second step was revising. Over a year

and a half period of time --so I could get a cycle of different population), I gave the test as part of the curriculum, as a final test at each term, so I could gauge its accuracy, level-wise. The test results were analyzed by the Office of Educational Assessment data specialists, who gave me feedback. Currently, the third version of the test is required for all students who have had any amount of exposure to the language, and approximately 200-250 students are taking the test each year.

Some issues with the placement test: Only “heritage students” are required to take the placement test and they are charged for it. For now there is no solution to the ‘unfairness’ as we need a way to put students in the right classroom. Also, the test does not have oral interview as a component. Well, one person (me) while teaching 2-3 classes each term and supervising 5 T.A.’s for two different levels and two different tracks gives me no time to interview 250 students. We also occasionally get students who claim that they know less or more than the test results show. (What I call a Harry Potter phenomenon). Motivation for such a claim varies. Some students feel that they are not ready to go to the heritage section, some want an easy language course so they don’t have to work hard, and yet others want to graduate without taking a language course (UW currently requires a year of lg course for graduation). I personally interview with these students and sometimes override their test results, depending on their background and oral/aural skills.

Teacher training (which goes hand-in-hand with material development)

To prepare instructors for the two different tracks, what should be emphasized before any other training is increasing the instructors’ awareness. The instructors have to be *trained* to be aware of the unique needs of their students for the particular level and the track they are serving. Instructors also need to understand the pressure from the parents in the community (this is an

important issue in the Korean community) and deciding what is helpful and needed for the students.

I would like to share three issues that came up while training the teaching assistants in our program. I learned these by trial and error. First is being aware of the learner's need, second is being aware of the linguistic structure of the language they are teaching, and the last issue is being aware of the difference between the demand and our professional responsibility; specifically, –somewhat unique to Korean -- Chinese character teaching.

Learner's need Partly due to the particular textbook we selected for the heritage program, (which puts a heavy weight on grammar rules), and partly due to my own lack of understanding of the nature of heritage needs, all heritage teachers were turned into grammar fanatics, which in turn drove students to become grammar machines. Boring conjugation drills and grammar lesson used to take up the most of the heritage class time, and there was very little room for students to learn where to apply such grammar rules in real life. As you all know, emphasis on dry grammar lessons cannot take the students farther away from the real use of the language, often missing the goal of teaching a language. Heritage students come to take classes not only to gain *competence* but also *confidence* in their daily communication. I experienced that explicit grammar teaching often does not succeed in helping students gain competence but has a reverse effect of stigmatizing already somewhat fluent learners. In order to avoid sacrificing the heritage learners' confidence, we now stop at pointing out grammar points and are focusing on helping students expand their knowledge. Especially at the 2nd year level, a good part of the class time is spent on students' discussing the reading materials that they have been given prior to the class period. Students also get ample feedback on their regular composition homework assignments, as well as short-sentence writing based on new

vocabulary. (Rather unfortunately, this is a lot more work for the teachers, and I have to say I am fortunate to have devoted teachers as teaching assistants in our program.)

Linguistic structure Teachers who are not competent in a particular aspect often ends up drilling students on the subject they themselves do not have competence. Traditionally, Korean teachers came from various disciplines such as history, culture, literature, or art. *Now* our program is requiring the teachers to take at least one course introducing them to the structure of the language. A course in introduction to the structure of Korean also helps the teachers to be aware that language is a complex thing with many functional aspects (For example, languages have a formal vs. informal uses., written vs. spoken uses., and dialectal vs. standard varieties). Now our teachers (all teaching assistants) are more *professional*, as they know well enough not to stigmatize students who only have informal (home) vocabulary or who speak a dialect. Teachers are trained to encourage students to have confidence based on what they know and to help them gain more formal use of the language.

I observed two things from the time when heritage and novice students were put together in the same class; first, novice students show enmity toward the heritage students (why are you in a beginner's class?) because they were not getting enough practice of the materials taught, and they weren't being taught what they needed to learn). Ironically, it was heritage students who would get the lowest grades in class, often failing to learn how to conjugate verbs or how to spell words. Bringing the TA's to awareness that although the Korean writing system is near-phonetic, the orthographic convention is morpho-phonemic came to be a big help. Since the Korean writing system is relatively easy to learn, most heritage students come with the undesirable baggage as they enter first year. They write as words sound –almost like “Hooked on phonics” (this they can do

well, since most of them are good speakers of the language already). Helping them *unlearn* their long practiced habit can only be achieved when the teachers have the understanding of the particular linguistic characteristics at hand.

Demand and responsibility

The last bit of experience I would like to share concerns the teaching of Chinese characters in a Korean classroom. In the past, courses named “mixed-script writing” were taught at UW, starting at the 2nd year level, in order to help the students in the literature and the international studies programs; the courses were numbered 300 and above, where most other lg courses in the university begin with 100. This encouraged graduate students to take 2nd year Korean courses at the expense of the majority of undergraduate students continuing from first-year classes. Thus, there was a pressure from other programs in the university as well as parents in the community who think that ‘educated folks know Chinese characters’. Instructors often failed to tease apart the cultural pressure from the basics of the language. Thinking that Chinese characters are a must in learning the Korean language is a misconception. It is not unlike one studying Latinate vocabulary in English when she has barely mastered the English alphabet. If the learner’s goal is to gain competence in the Korean language, basic reading and writing skills must be acquired prior to tackling Chinese characters. (Even in schools in Korea, formal Chinese character lessons begin in the 6th or 7th grade, having given students an ample opportunity to acquire the basics of the language).

Future Goals

My next goal in our department is to make an arrangement with the Database department so we can automatically place heritage students to the right

course based on their test scores; this will eliminate the process of me personally handling 200 entry code requests every year.

Another imminent goal I have is to create an *accelerated grammar review course* in order to accommodate limbo students who are too advanced for first-year but need solid grammar lessons to be able to start at an advanced level. (And to re-name the courses to 100 levels.)

Final Word

Now a word of warning/advice for those who see a dual-track fit for their program is in order. You can expect MORE work (and a lot of it) during the process of establishing a dual track program, and there will be (and should be) constant re-adjustment and little fiddling you will need to do yourself. This is even tougher especially if there is no funding or resources (which was my case). But these continuous workings are not necessarily a problem, and it is necessary and certainly worthwhile for the students. Now 180 some students are registering for first- and second-year Korean classes (compared to half that many from 2 years ago), and most rewardingly, 80 of them are non-heritage students, this with many students on the waiting list who are not lucky enough to get in.

Establishing a dual-track program with clear level distinction also doubled the number of students who are registering at the intermediate and advanced classes.

Also beware that the whole process requires constantly negotiating and convincing the school that what you are working toward is an obligatory goal. (Changing course names or creating a new course, let alone a track can be seen as a big headache and lots of paper-work)

Good luck with your program!