

Unfortunately, this class, in which Jose was blossoming, was canceled due to programming problems. José ended up in another Level III Heritage Learner class where I was not the teacher. However, José's enthusiasm for learning Spanish continued. He attended the Spanish class in which he had been scheduled as well as my class every day, even though my class was at the end of his day. And he participated actively. He wanted to learn as much Spanish as possible. I admired him for that and for his enthusiasm. I learned that when he was in the Level III class, it was more difficult for him because of the teacher's teaching and the level of Spanish she used. During the second term, José was in a class where the teacher only spoke English, even though it was a Heritage Language Learner class, and it was too easy for him. In order to get more practice in Spanish, he joined the club, *Orgullo Hispano*, in which the participants are all heritage language learners.

This year José is in Level IV Spanish and is improving continuously. Once again, he is attending my Level III Heritage Language class. He has acquired cognitive ability in Spanish but has also learned a lot about his culture. José is a wonderful young man and a teacher's dream because of his enthusiasm and his thirst for knowledge.

## A Framework for Learning about Your Students

All students bring with them to the classroom a set of personal stories, experiences, and emotions that affect how they behave, interact, and learn. By asking the right questions, teachers can acquire the essential insights into the minds and the worlds of their learners and, in so doing, develop the sensitivity and the responsiveness that will help them to achieve success in school. Knowing the right questions to ask can be elusive, particularly when there is no sound basis for shared commonality.

The lists of questions presented here have been divided into six categories. All of the questions were devised by the Project Development Team, checked for validity by teachers experienced in working with heritage language learners and in a variety of school settings. In the six categories, there are questions relating to:

1. *Linguistic proficiency*, that give the teacher a view of the strengths that the learners bring to class with them and the areas where they need further instruction.
2. *Motivation*, that take into account the nature of the learners' identification with the heritage language that make them interested in studying it in school.
3. *Academic preparedness*, that enable the teacher to understand the types of prior educational experiences the students have had as well as their areas of strengths and areas in need of further development.
4. *Cultural connectedness*, that provide insights to the relationship that the learners have with their culture, the extent of their actual involvement with the culture at home and in the community, and their attitudes about that relationship.
5. *Emotional factors*, that help teachers to understand how the learners feel about themselves as people and as students within the context of the classroom and the school.
6. *Societal factors*, that yield information about the place of the students and their families in the larger community.

## A Framework for Learning about Your Students

### Linguistic Proficiency

#### General Questions about Language Use

1. What language does the learner speak? Does the learner use a particular identifiable variety of that language?
2. What is the purpose of language for heritage language learners? Do they see it as a social tool, a political tool, a means of acquiring knowledge, a means of communication? With whom do they use their heritage language for these various purposes? In what settings?
3. In the case of immigrants, what was the nature of their prior school experience before coming to the United States? What attitudes do they have toward schooling that may have emanated from those prior experiences?
4. To what extent are the learners actually successful when engaging in the interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational modes of communication for personal purposes? For academic purposes?  
(*Some learners, for example, may have a high degree of proficiency in the interpretive mode but be unwilling to use the language in either the interpersonal or presentational modes. This unwillingness may give a mistaken notion that the student does not know the language.*)
5. To what extent are the learners willing to engage in each of these three modes of communication?
6. How successful do they think they are when engaging in these three modes of communication?
7. What are their attitudes regarding their heritage language? How do they feel about using it?
8. How do they feel about being from that heritage language background? How are those feelings expressed?
9. To what extent do the students use the heritage language for communication in school? Describe the situations in which they tend to use the heritage language in school.
10. To what extent are the students engaged in the use of the interpersonal mode of communication in the heritage language outside of the school?

### Understanding/Receptivity

1. In what ways do students expose themselves to their heritage language through media (for example, television, radio, motion pictures, theater, music, newspapers, and magazines)? When? Where? What type?
2. Is there a difference between their ability to see/hear/comprehend the various forms of media and their ability to react or respond? In what ways are the students able to demonstrate their comprehension of what is seen/heard?
3. In what types of media do the students tend to express and demonstrate the most interest?
4. For recent immigrants, what exposure did they have to the various media prior to coming to the United States?
5. What types of media are students best able to understand? What is the level of language used in the media that they are best able to understand?
6. What forms of media tend to be the most difficult for the students to understand?

### Oral Proficiency

1. What are the students able to speak about? What topics do they speak about and what communicative functions are they able to perform?
2. What is the range of comprehensibility and appropriateness (fluency) of the language used when they are engaged in the interpersonal and presentational modes of communication?
3. What is the degree of linguistic accuracy in their use of the interpersonal and presentational modes of communication? What types of grammatical structures do the students tend to be able to use correctly, and what types of grammatical errors do they tend to make? Are there any discernable patterns in their correct or incorrect use of the language?

### Reading

1. What prior exposure has the learner had to reading? What degree of reading readiness has the child achieved prior to entering the school or prior to coming to this particular class?
2. What role does reading play in the student's culture or country of origin?
3. What level of interest in reading do the students appear to have? How much interest do they express?

4. With what reading topics are the students most familiar from their everyday lives? What topics are the students most interested in reading about?
5. What types of texts (for example, newspapers, signs, announcements, advertisements, short stories, and books) are students able to read in the heritage language? What is the level of language of those texts? What subject material do students tend to read most? What is the degree of facility with which they can read?
6. To what extent do students actually engage in reading the heritage language outside of school? What types of reading materials are found in the home? Where do they obtain the material that they read in their heritage language?
7. How are the students best able to demonstrate the degree to which they have understood a text?

#### *Writing*

1. What role does writing play in the students' cultures and countries of origin? What has been students' experience with writing prior to coming to this school? To this class?
2. What are the students able to write about? How comfortable are they with writing? How successful are they in accomplishing their writing tasks?
3. What is the range of comprehensibility and appropriateness (fluency) of their language when writing?
4. What is the degree of their linguistic accuracy in writing? What types of grammatical structures do the students tend to be able to use correctly? What types of errors in writing do they tend to make? Are there any discernable patterns in their correct or incorrect use of the heritage language when they are writing?
5. To what extent do the students engage in writing? For what purposes do they tend to write when they are outside of school?
6. What level of interest in writing do the students express? What level of interest in writing do they demonstrate in class?

#### **Motivation**

##### *General Interest*

1. To what extent and in what ways do the learners demonstrate an interest

- in maintaining association with their heritage language at home? In the community? With other students of the same background in school?
2. How willing are the students to learn in general and to learn their heritage language in particular? How is that willingness demonstrated?
3. To what degree do the students demonstrate interest in heritage language classes, and how this interest is actually shown?

#### *Learners' Goals*

1. What types of overall academic and life goals do the students seem to have? If the students and their families are recent immigrants, is there any apparent connection between their choice of goals and the immigration experience? Is there any apparent connection between their choice of goals and their proficiency in their heritage language?
2. What do the students want to be able to do in their heritage language? Are there any discernable patterns in their choice of linguistic goals as they move through their years in school or as they are exposed to their heritage language classes?
3. What connection do they see between their heritage language and the world of work? The world of higher education? What influence does their awareness of this connection have on their performance in heritage language classes? In their performance in school in general?
4. What is the nature of the relationship that the students have with their heritage language teachers? Their teachers of other subjects? To what extent does this student-teacher relationship influence the students' attitudes and their performance in the heritage language class? In school in general?

#### **Academic Preparedness**

1. For immigrant students, what was the nature of their exposure to formal schooling in and through the heritage language before coming to the United States? What skills do the students bring with them?
2. What study skills and learning strategies do the students tend to use? Where/how did they acquire those skills and strategies?
3. What study skills and learning strategies do the students need to acquire in order to be successful in school in general? In heritage language classes?
4. To what extent do the learners know what to expect in terms of classroom procedures? Course requirements? Teacher expectations?

5. What kinds of stress do the students experience when dealing with their academic subjects? With different/unfamiliar teaching strategies? How does this stress manifest itself?
6. In which courses do the students tend to excel? What are the reasons for their success in these courses?
7. Which courses tend to be the most difficult/problematic? What are the sources of their difficulties?
8. How do the students view themselves academically in relation to others? To what extent are the students able to evaluate their academic performance in relationship to that of their peers? To what extent are they able to evaluate their heritage language proficiency in relationship to that of others?

### Cultural Connectedness

1. What is the nature and extent of the students' involvement with the practices of their heritage cultures outside of school? To what extent do they participate in the cultural life of the community? What type of social life do they lead after school?
2. What is the nature of the students' family lives? Are the students living with their biological parents? To what degree do they participate in the cultural lives of their families?
3. To what extent and in what ways is family life associated with the heritage culture?
4. To what degree are the students involved with the tangible products of their heritage culture?
5. To what extent are their life perspectives and their goals associated with their heritage culture? How comfortable are the students with their perspectives and goals within the school setting? Within the larger social context? In what ways do their perspectives and goals tend to change over time?
6. How aware are the students of the political, social, and economic events that surround them?
7. Do the students have a perception of themselves as a minority or as a minority within a minority? If so, how does this perception manifest itself in the classroom? In the school?
8. Are there forces/influences at work in their environment that affect their willingness to learn their heritage language? If so what are those forces/influences?

9. How long have the students and their families been in the United States? If they are recent immigrants, why and how did they come here? What are their families' plans vis-à-vis their future and their country of origin?
10. What are the attitudes/perceptions of parents toward their own language in the United States? In what ways do these attitudes/perceptions affect their children?

### Emotional Factors

1. What is the nature of the students' life experiences outside of school? In what ways do those experiences affect their academic performance and/or general behavior in school?
2. What is the nature of the relationship among students of the same heritage language background? What attitudes do they have toward each other's language varieties? Toward each other's socioeconomic status? In what ways do those relationships and attitudes affect their academic performance and/or general behavior in school?
3. What types of emotional support do heritage language students tend to need in class? In school in general? Are there any discernable patterns in the way in which these needs are expressed?
4. What degree of self-awareness do students exhibit in relationship to the learning task and to the learning environment?
5. How do students feel about what they already know in their heritage language?

### Societal Factors

1. Where do the students and their families tend to reside? What is the nature of their living conditions?
2. What is the nature of the family structure in the heritage culture? How does this compare to the family structure as it exists here in the United States?
3. What is the employment history of the students' families? How does this employment profile affect their life style? What are the students' attitudes/perceptions regarding their families' socioeconomic status? How do those attitudes and perceptions manifest themselves in class? In school in general?
4. What is the nature of the relationship between the heritage language stu-

dents and students of other language backgrounds? What attitudes do they have regarding other students' languages and cultures? In what ways do the relationships and attitudes affect their academic performance and/or general behavior in school?

5. What are the attitudes of the non-heritage language students and teachers toward the heritage language students and their culture? How do those attitudes manifest themselves in the school setting?
6. In what kinds of extra-curricular activities do the heritage language students become involved? To what extent do language and culture issues affect that involvement?

Teachers who are able to answer these questions about their students will have an adequate understanding of the backgrounds and experiences that they bring to class, thus enabling them to approach the entire teaching/learning process in a more informed and, therefore, a more effective manner.

It is important to keep in mind that some of the questions can be answered for entire groups of learners, but that it is often necessary to seek specific answers for individual learners, recognizing that each learner may have a particular set of characteristics that will impact uniquely on the teaching/learning process. It is also important to remember that the answers will not be found in a week, a month, or even a year. There are many questions and answers. Over time, as teachers keep asking and probing, they will become more adept at seeking out information. Gradually, they will build a valuable information base that will inform them in their work and prevent them from basing what they do on mistaken personal assumptions about the learners.

## Heritage Language Learners Look Back

### Emily: A Life Lived in Two Worlds

Andrew Parker

*This language barrier has fossilized Emily's relationship with her parents at a kind of infantile level of development, which is unlikely to improve until either they improve their English or she works on her Korean.*

My friend Emily was born in New York about a year after her parents moved here from Korea. Rather than living in a Korean enclave like Fort Lee, New Jersey, or in the neighborhoods of Elmhurst or Flushing in Queens, her family settled down in the almost all-white borough of Staten Island, where she lived until the age of seventeen, when she went to an out-of-town college.

She grew up isolated from other Koreans geographically, and also isolated from her white American neighbors culturally and linguistically. Her parents barely spoke any English at all when they first arrived, and they were mistrustful and afraid of non-Koreans. So, Emily virtually had no exposure to English or to anyone outside of her family until she went to a public-school kindergarten at the age of five. She was pretty much the only ESL (English as a Second Language) student in her school, and it took her a while to assimilate with her classmates and learn English. Ultimately, by the time she was in second or third grade, she learned to get by in English, a product of the "sink-or-swim" method of English