

## Chapter 8

# Asian Immigrant Communities' Civic Participation in Cultivating Bilingualism and Biliteracy in the United States

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses how Asian immigrant communities in the United States cultivate Asian immigrant children's literacy learning in their heritage languages. Although the United States has historically been a linguistically diverse country, bilingualism has not always been valued and acknowledged. Strong social and institutional expectations for immigrants to acquire the socially dominant language have resulted in language shifts among immigrants. Concerned about their descendants' heritage language loss, Asian immigrant communities make organized efforts to establish community-based heritage language schools. Heritage language schools play an important role in immigrant children's learning of their heritage language and culturally appropriate ways of behaving and communicating. It has also been noted that heritage language schools encounter several challenges in motivating heritage language learners. Heritage language schools should be considered as complementary education for immigrant students because they take critical responsibilities to support immigrant students' language and literacy development in their heritage languages.*

### INTRODUCTION

The United States has always been a linguistically diverse country as various languages have been spoken by immigrants from different countries and Native Americans. However, the mass immigration has revived and propelled the dramatic increase of linguistic diversity in the last few decades. Specifically, the number of the linguistically diverse population has increased up to 148% in between 1980 and 2009 (Ortman & Shin, 2011). According to 2015 American Community Survey, approximately 21% of

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the population age 5 and older spoke a language other than English (LOTE) at home, and at least 350 languages are spoken (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Linguistic diversity in the United States, however, has not always been valued and encouraged in various social domains and institutions. Rumbaut and Massey (2013) indicated that sociopolitical reasons had influenced the fluctuation of linguistic diversity and the social attitudes toward linguistic diversity in the United States. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the monolingual, assimilationist ideology urged the implementation of English-only policy in public schools and the language requirement for immigrants' naturalization, systematically imposing assimilation on Native Americans and immigrants, creating negative views of multilingualism (Ovando, 2003). Linguistically diverse students were pressured to make linguistic and cultural adjustments without receiving much institutional and societal support while being blamed for their academic failure.

After World War II, however, linguistically diverse students seemed to be supported as foreign language education came to be promoted and as bilingual education was reintroduced in the schools that served immigrant students. In particular, the Bilingual Education Act enacted in 1968 embarked on the systematic and institutionalized educational support for disadvantaged linguistically diverse students who were mostly Hispanics. Ovando (2003) indicated that the Bilingual Education Act provided an opportunity to recognize "language-minority students' ancestral languages and cultures ... in some form in the contents and processes of school life" (p. 8). However, even with bilingual education programs, the focus of educational support was heavily centered on linguistically diverse students' acquisition of English, not on promoting linguistic diversity. Thus, instructions in students' first language or heritage language were considered as a complement to support their learning of English and to help students make a better transition to an English-only learning environment.

Language shifts can quickly take place as linguistically diverse immigrants try to be acculturated to the main society. American-born immigrant children or children who came to the United States as toddlers quickly move to the socially dominant language as early as when they are at pre-school, and the language shift continues through the grade schools as they learn to read and write in English through schooling (Hakuta & D'Andrea, 1992; Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Therefore, immigrant students acquire English eventually not only because there are strong social and institutional expectations for immigrant students' English acquisition, but also because immigrant students may have an internal desire to belong to the dominant society (Kouritzin, 1999). However, their use of heritage languages may decline dramatically over time as the social expectations and the opportunities to improve their heritage language proficiency are limited (Fishman, 1991; Hornberger, 1998; Rumbaut & Massey, 2013).

Individuals' heritage language loss could also lead to language shifts across generations, making it challenging for immigrant groups to maintain their cross-generational communication (Rumbaut, 2009). The first generation of immigrants may predominantly use their heritage language at home while using English for socio-economic survival. The second generation may use their first language at home when they are younger, but they use English predominantly for academic, social and economic reasons. After two to three generations, immigrants' descendants may lose their heritage languages in entirety due to low expectations and insufficient support for maintaining a heritage language from social institutions (Wong Fillmore, 1996). This means that the current linguistic diversity may be maintained mostly by the first generation of immigrants and their immediate descendants.

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