

TEACHING HERITAGE LANGUAGE – WHY SO DIFFERENT? ISSUES IN TEACHING SERBIAN AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE

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Abstract. *Although scholarly interest in heritage language preservation dates back to the mid-1960s and early 1970s (Kagan, Dillon, 2008, 145), the last few decades offered significant results in terms of teaching and testing. This paper highlights some issues in teaching Serbian as a heritage language, contrasting it to teaching Serbian as a foreign language. Practitioners face many challenges teaching students who study their home language: from approaching these students to meeting their needs, which go beyond just speaking the language and include identity matters, psychological, social, and intercultural burden (Kagan 2012, 72) of being bilingual and bicultural. These issues, with the right approach in language schools and at home, can become a real prerogative in a multicultural world. It is, therefore, essential for teachers and scholars, to collaborate and, with adequate state support and language policy, make “community-based curriculum” (Carreira, Kagan 2017), which considers students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral needs and would help them to “cope with two cultural worlds that they simultaneously inherit” (Kagan 2012, 80). This paper presents methods used at the School of Serbian Language, culture, and Tradition “SAVA”, which has been working with more than 500 families in 70 countries teaching Serbian as a heritage language.*

Key words: *heritage language, bilingualism, methodology, identity, innovation*

1. HERITAGE LANGUAGE

“A heritage language is a minority language (either immigrant or indigenous) learned by its speakers at home as children, and difficult to be fully developed because of insufficient input from the social environment” (Valdes 2000). With the increasing trend of migration for various reasons worldwide, an ever-growing number of people now speak a language different from that of the host country in their homes. According to Lacorte and

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Canaball “in 1999, 38% of public school students in the USA were categorized as belonging to a minority group, particularly Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001)” (2002:109). Additionally, a study conducted in America in 2007 and 2008 found that twenty percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home (Kagan, 2012:73). The situation in Europe does not differ significantly too.

It is important to note that many linguists, including Fishman, Meisel, and Kupisch, when interpreting the term “native language,” do not restrict themselves solely to the languages of minorities. Rather, they consider any language used within a particular society — be it indigenous, colonial, or otherwise — that is neither dominant nor officially recognized (Benmamoun, Montrul 2013:261). The phenomenon of native language and culture extends beyond mere linguistic definitions. Marija Polinski writes that, in a broader sense, a native language speaker (heritage speaker) can also be considered one who does not actually speak the language at all, but it is his native language more in the cultural than in the linguistic sense (Polinsky 2015: 5).

Heritage language preservation is not only a matter of personal aspiration, but also the matter of wider language and political matter. It begins with personal sentiments, motivation, family arrangements, and what is commonly referred to as the “family language policy”, but the support from the country of origin, as well as assistance from the host country is highly important. If the preservation of the native language relies solely on the family without support from the native community and the host country, there is a high probability that the language will, at best, be maintained for just one more generation. Conversely, if the native country implements a strong language policy that includes providing and training teaching staff, developing materials, and organizing cultural events, it creates a strong foundation for lasting connections and the preservation of the native language. By fostering socialization, nurturing traditional gatherings, and working to unite community members, a supportive environment which will further encourage the ongoing use and maintenance of the native language is established.

As Maria Carreira pointed out (specifically addressing Spanish as a heritage language, but the concept can be applied to heritage languages in general), heritage languages are typically subjected to the “three-generation rule” (Polinsky, 2015: 4). In the first generation, actual immigrants speak their mother tongue whenever and wherever possible. The second generation exclusively uses the heritage language at home with their parents until the age of five or six, when they begin kindergarten. As their vocabulary in the dominant language expands, they gradually transition to the dominant language, using the heritage language less and less. By the third generation, immigrants are often entirely monolingual. While they may know some words in their heritage language and be familiar with customs, they are unable to communicate in the language, unless, of course, they undertake language learning in a classroom environment.

At the very beginning it is imperative to stress the crucial role of the family in preserving the languages of immigrants and minorities. As Mila Schwartz points out “Family Language Policy” (FLP) has “the critical role of the family in the preservation of immigrant and ethnic minority languages “(Schwartz, 2014: 172). Emphasizing the use of the heritage language within the familial domain, coupled with the cultivation of cultural norms and traditions, may represent a singularly effective strategy for language preservation for another generation. Family language policy encompasses various socio-linguistic and socio-psychological factors, as elucidated by Schwartz: “Intra-family factors of FLP (family structure, parental education, acculturation of the parents, family cohesiveness and emotional relations),

family language ideology and practice, and management, internal control for FLP” (Schwartz, 2014: 172).

When parents insist on the exclusive use of a particular language at home, there is a heightened likelihood that the language will become ingrained in everyday communication, thus enabling the maintenance and enhancement of language competencies across generations, countering the typical rule of language loss within three generations. Our practical experience from “SAVA” school supports this assertion. As an illustration, I'd like to share my personal experience with several students from America, ranging in age from 10 to 17, who have one or both parents originating from Serbia.

A family in Texas rigorously adhered to a language policy that strictly forbade the use of English within the household, maintaining a bilingual environment with the father speaking Serbian and the mother speaking Russian. Consequently, their children, who conversed exclusively in Russian with their mother and in Serbian with their father, exhibit fluency in three languages and are currently enrolled as students in the upper-intermediate language group (two out of four being my students). In contrast, students from Denmark, raised in a family with Serbian parents, started language learning from a basic A level.

The importance of Family Language Policy (FLP) is further evidenced by the fact that students from the USA, who are homeschooled, have the opportunity to enhance their native language skills through increased communication with their parents (or one of the parents). However, even though they may not spend as much time with their peers and are primarily at home with their parents, this does not necessarily determine which language they will choose as dominant. Therefore, even in homeschooling scenarios where a parent insists on communication in the heritage language (even if the other parent does not speak that language), such students come to our school at the age of ten with advanced language proficiency levels and a desire to learn about culture, tradition, and literature while refining their language skills. Their vocabulary knowledge and pronunciation accuracy are comparable to that of native speakers. Speech imperfections primarily relate to grammatical exceptions or coherence in complex sentences, which is common even among native speakers of the same age. However, if there is no insistence on a strict language policy, and communication with the other parent mainly encourages conversation in the dominant language, the preservation of the mother's heritage language may not be ensured. In such cases, students typically begin language learning at our school from the initial level. This emphasizes that FLP is the most crucial factor in preserving the native language, regardless of the communication children have with their peers outside the home.

2. HERITAGE LINGUISTICS

Minority languages, dialects, and indigenous languages have consistently aroused the interest of linguists due to the various aspects and specificities that distinguish them from the learning or teaching of foreign languages. Within language groups and university classes, individuals familiar with a language from a “household setting” differed from those studying it as a foreign language. It wasn't just about what they knew, but also their attitude toward the language. Teachers, educators, linguists, and practitioners encountered many challenges when teaching these students, leading to the realization that a different approach may be necessary.

Minority languages and indigenous languages have sparked scholarly interest in the second half of the last century. Guadalupe Valdes wrote about Spanish as a heritage language in the seventies, and Joshua Fishman was writing and teaching about minority languages in the USA during the thirties. This demonstrates that, although not officially referred to as heritage language until the end of the century (the Heritage Language Conference was held in New York in 1999, followed by the Heritage Language Journal in 2002, with many magazines, articles, and conferences organized ever since, as noted by Carreira and Kagan (2017: 153), heritage linguistics indeed has a longstanding tradition.

3. SERBIAN AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE

Due to the growing number of Serbian immigrants¹ and their descendants who wish to study their heritage language, there is a strong demand for the development of programs, materials, and plans outlining effective implementation strategies for language lessons.

As noted before – preserving the heritage language is not solely a personal aspiration, but also an integral component of a broader strategy. This strategy often encompasses not only the immigrant's home country but also the educational initiatives of the destination country. While linguists stress the significance of maintaining one's native language, and individuals endeavor to uphold it within their households, many states exhibit a lack of interest and a deficiency in language strategy and planning. In certain countries, as noted by Kelleher and Haynes (2010: 4) and referencing (MacGregor, Mendoza, Spolsky), the preservation of a heritage language has been perceived as contrary to assimilation and thus anti-American².

Beyond the borders of the Republic of Serbia, the diaspora has several avenues for acquiring the Serbian language (as noted by Jovanović and Vučina-Simović) which include: 1) incorporation into the educational systems of recipient countries, 2) supplementary teaching and tutoring falling under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia, and 3) unofficial teaching conducted in various Serbian cultural centers, primarily within the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as in private schools organized and financed by parents and diaspora associations. However, despite the global presence of Serbian migrants, with only 0.4 percent participating in Serbian language classes

¹ “According to the official results of the 2020 census in the United States of America, 193,844 Serbs currently live in this country. However, it is believed that the most people of Serbian origin are in Germany. There are different estimates of the number of people of Serbian origin living in Germany, ranging between 400,000 and 800,000, according to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The mayor of Vienna, Michael Ludwig, said recently that about 76,000 residents of Vienna have Serbian citizenship, and that there are about 100,000 more who have origins in Serbia. According to the statistical office, 121,643 Serbs live in Austria. It is estimated that more than 30,000 Serbs live in Sweden, and about 10,000 in Norway.”

<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/gde-zivi-najvise-srba-sta-popisi-kazu-o-nasoj-dijaspori/> [21.2.2024]

² “From 1968 until 2002, the Bilingual Education Act provided federal support for the education of speakers of languages other than English. The Bilingual Education Act underwent a number of challenges and reauthorizations through the years, but while it was in effect, it provided some basis for the legal protection of education for language minorities. The situation changed in states such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts between 1998 and 2002, with the passage of “English-only” initiatives that restrict students' access to first language support in addition to English instruction. This also changed at the federal level when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) superseded the Bilingual Education Act. At that point, all mention of “bilingual” education was dropped. Instead, NCLB focuses solely on English language development for immigrant and U.S.-born “limited English proficient” students.” (Kelleher, Haynes 2010:2)

according to data from the Ministry of Religion and Diaspora in 2008.” (Jovanović, Vučina-Simović, 2011: 387).

For the benefit of these students and their educators, the Institute for Textbooks (Zavod za udžbenike) in Belgrade developed an e-book titled “Serbian Language and Language Culture” in 2011. This e-book, authored by Nataša Dobrin and Gordana Štasni, serves as a textbook tailored for students ranging from the 4th to the 6th grade of primary school, as a part of *Special Program for the Education Abroad*.

But still, in contrast to Serbian as a foreign language, which benefits from an abundance of materials, textbooks, teaching plans, programs, and Educational Achievement Standards, Serbian as a heritage language encounters three primary challenges: a lack of teaching materials, the absence of a standardized program, and the lack of a comprehensive language policy. Teachers often find themselves lacking written resources and are compelled to use materials intended for teaching Serbian as a foreign language or as a mother tongue.

Moreover, existing books tailored for students learning Serbian as a foreign language may not fully address heritage students’ needs due to varying proficiency levels in different language skills (listening comprehension, reading, writing, and speaking). For instance, textbooks designed for level A1 of Serbian for foreigners typically start with fundamental grammar concepts such as conjugation and cases – topics that heritage students may indeed need due to frequent errors. However, these resources also cover basic vocabulary like greetings and introductions, which heritage students are already familiar with. Consequently, a heritage student’s writing skills may align with A2 levels, while their reading and comprehension skills could extend to a B1 level. On the contrary, grammar textbooks created for Serbian as a mother tongue, offer more detailed explanations than a heritage student might require, potentially becoming redundant for those who seek grammar guidance primarily to enhance their speaking proficiency. All these issues are just a part of a larger problem which is – the absence of a standardized methodology or program.

Since teaching Serbian as a heritage language is a new field in Serbian linguistics, a formalized program or curriculum is yet to be established. However, there was some positive developments last year, marking a shift in this landscape. The Serbian Ministry of Education dispatched thirty teachers to various European countries and the USA with the mission of teaching Serbian as a heritage language. Three subjects were formulated as a result: Serbian language, My Homeland Serbia, and Basics of Serbian Culture. Additionally, a comprehensive textbook was created to aid teachers in structuring their lessons. The ministry is presently crafting three sets of instructional materials for students in different grades (1st-3rd, 4th-6th, and 7th-8th), with completion expected in the latter half of 2024³.

In order to prepare these teachers for this educational mission, a study group comprised of ten professors and educators authored a textbook titled “Training Program for Teachers Working Abroad.” „The first part of the Handbook discusses aspects related to organizational and other general issues of importance for the way of carrying out educational work. The second part is dedicated to functional and specific questions of teaching practice, offering concrete materials and exercises, adaptable different educational needs of working with students and the most diverse organizational activities.“⁴

In 2023, Rajna Dragičević, Valentina Ilić, and Vesna Nikolić authored the “First Handbook for Serbian as a Heritage Language” titled “On the Wings of Words.” This

³ [https://dijaspora.zuov.gov.rs/\[4.3.2024\]](https://dijaspora.zuov.gov.rs/[4.3.2024])

⁴ [https://zuov.gov.rs/prirucnik-za-nastavnike-koji-se-upucuju-na-rad-u-inostranstvu/\[4.3.2024\]](https://zuov.gov.rs/prirucnik-za-nastavnike-koji-se-upucuju-na-rad-u-inostranstvu/[4.3.2024])

comprehensive handbook is designed for three proficiency levels and encompasses over three hundred exercises for students. Recognizing the growing trend of educated people leaving Serbia and having families abroad, Professor Dr. Vesna Lompar initiated a seminar titled “Contemporary Challenges for Teaching Serbian as a Heritage Language.” The purpose was to draw attention to the responsibility of the Serbian government and institutions dealing with the Serbian language. The focus was on children growing up abroad who need to maintain a connection with Serbia, particularly through language learning (Dragičević, Ilić 2023: 5).

While this may appear to be a modest stride, the acknowledgment that teaching Serbian as a heritage language necessitates its own methodology, curriculum, and materials is crucial for in terms of developing a new field and empowering teachers to cognize and comprehend its specifics.

Lastly, an increasing number of educators, practitioners, and linguists are delving into the complexities and unique aspects of Serbian as a heritage language. Marina Janjić authored a book titled “Serbian Language for Students in Diaspora,” accompanied by the publication of handbooks and the organization of lessons in private schools with specialized methodologies. A notable example is the online school “Sava,” where I had the pleasure of teaching Serbian language, culture, and tradition. This institution has developed a distinctive methodology, program, and materials tailored for teaching Serbian as a heritage language.

4. HERITAGE STUDENTS – WHO ARE THEY AND HOW DO THEY DIFFER FROM STUDENTS STUDYING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

Narrow definition by Polinsky and Kagan describes heritage learners as those who were exposed to a particular language in childhood but did not fully learn it because another language became dominant. Broad definition links heritage language with those who were raised with a strong cultural connection to a particular language, usually through family interaction (Polinsky and Kagan, 2007).

Once in the classroom, the teacher will observe notable distinctions between these students and those studying language as a foreign subject. The primary differences encompass:

1. Identity matters:
2. The Immeasurable knowledge
3. Motivation
4. Competence

4.1. Identity matters

Identity matters form the basis for everything else, as there is a strong connection between identity and the language being used. “Researchers highlight the fact that identity, self, and agency are linguistically constructed and negotiated” (Val, Vinogradova 2010:2). Children growing up in families where a language other than the dominant one is spoken may face challenges in adapting to new environments.

The language learning process is intercultural, as these children simultaneously inherit two different cultures. Usually, they start learning the dominant language around the age of five, or even earlier, when they start kindergarten. It is very important for them to assimilate, to build identity and become a part of the group. Learning the dominant language and accepting and assimilating in the mainstream culture can be crucial for the years to come. It might be one of the reasons that parents also communicate with children

in the dominant language. By the time they start school, this language becomes their comfort zone—spoken with friends and peers. Without a strong family language policy about using exclusively heritage language at home, there's a good chance that children may forget their heritage language by the time they become teenagers or even earlier. As Val and Vinogradova pointed out “language capital is part of one's cultural capital, where identity is developed, described, and contested” (2010:3) and children sometimes may not see the cultural capital of their heritage language, since it doesn't have that “cultural or market level” (2010:3). That's why preserving heritage language has to be their decision which usually takes a lot of time and effort since speaking with grandmother or parents will not provide everything they would get in a classroom environment.

The consequences from an identity perspective are significant. Even if the child is completely fluent in the dominant language and speaks it without a foreign accent, which is often the case, their parents speak another language at home. First-generation immigrants, as written before, often maintain a connection to their mother tongue and culture through activities like listening to music from their homeland, watching television, and following cultural events, including sports. However, if children do not speak or understand their heritage language well enough to share their parents' interests (as observed in our school experience), they may struggle to engage in conversations with their parents or with their relatives in their parents' homeland.

Joshua Fishman emphasizes the importance of this connection to a grandmother, stating that one will not learn their heritage language without one. However, the issue extends beyond language acquisition—it can significantly impact one's development if they lose connection with their relatives.

Identity changes throughout life and it is influenced by factors such as age, societal dynamics, and political climates. Depending on one's “language capital”, particularly language proficiency, a child has the opportunity to shape his identity. This proficiency can produce numerous psychological and cognitive benefits, as emphasized by M. Polinsky⁵, which become evident later in life. However, it also entails challenges, as it may necessitate reconciling various aspects of identity when integrating into a society and a group. Heritage language speakers thus engage in many negotiation of their identities, navigating not only within dominant language communities but also within their heritage language communities.

Ethnic identity, in particular, can oscillate and lead to ambivalence. It is crucial to approach students with sensitivity, recognizing that they may have strong feelings about their identity from a young age. Slobodan Selenić addresses this complex theme beautifully in his novel, “Fathers and Forefathers”, illustrating the fluctuation of identity over time. This spectrum can range from a positive affirmation – “I love who I am; my national identity forms the foundation of my opinions and way of thinking” – to a negative stance – “I hate my identity; it troubles me.” The question of identity is anything but simple – encompassing national, gender, and many other identities, with language identity being just one facet among them.

“Identity is dynamic and changes depending on the goals of interaction and the situations in which individuals and groups find themselves.”(Val, Vinogradova 2010:2) Guadalupe Walds also explores this theme, highlighting how some students actively seek connections to the challenges their home country faces. Conversely, others may exhibit total indifference. It's essential to note that some individuals even dislike the term

⁵ Polinsky, M, 2015, *Cognitive Benefits of Bilingualism*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-ml2dD4SIk>

“heritage” due to its association with the past. “We have to understand that ethnolinguistic complexity as teachers”, says Valds⁶.

4.2. The immeasurable knowledge

The immeasurable knowledge is one of the problems teachers face is assessing students who possess certain knowledge in their native language. In contrast to testing foreign students, oral and grammar placement tests might not be the best choice for heritage students, as these tests can provide misleading results. Heritage students usually demonstrate ability to communicate fluently in basic conversations e.g. when talking about themselves and their family, since these skills sharpened throughout repeated practice. Relying solely on this can mislead teachers as they may not accurately reflect the student’s language proficiency.

Traditional grammar tests frequently produce inaccurate results due to the prevalence of grammatical errors commonly made by heritage learners. Relatives and grandparents, while engaging in long-awaited conversations with their grandchildren over Internet, prioritize immersing the conversation over grammatical corrections. So, it shouldn't be assumed that a relative will automatically take on the role of an educator. While parents often fulfill this role, they can only do so effectively if they speak the standard variant of the language and are knowledgeable about grammar rules. However, students often inherit speech patterns from their parents, which they then combine with grammatical errors influenced by the dominant language. Therefore, one of my students, who is fluent in Serbian and can express himself on various topics with great speed, still makes a lot of grammatical mistakes. Correcting these mistakes can be quite challenging because they have become ingrained in his speech and are now part of his language use. On the other hand, their reading and comprehension skills, as well as their vocabulary, usually significantly surpasses their knowledge of grammatical norms.

Maria Polinsky, who researches and evaluates effective methods for assessing student language proficiency at Harvard University's Polinsky Lab, proposes that vocabulary tests, such as reading comprehension exercises or matching images with corresponding text, offer more precise insights into language acquisition than grammar placement tests. These assessments provide more accurate information regarding language proficiency. Additionally, Olga Kagan suggests a three-part assessment approach, comprising oral examinations, short essays, and a questionnaire about personal background. However, Polinsky contends that this method may not be suitable for beginner students (Polinsky, 2015: 17).

Lacorte, Canabal point out that biographical data that are particularly important include age at immigration, family relationships and composition, family attitudes toward assimilation and language preservation, personal interests, and academic or professional aspirations (2002:111). It is difficult to really meet your students’ needs and to tailor programs and materials unless at least some of these questions haven’t been answered. For instance Kagan writes that students of Russian as a HL in the UCLA were placed in 3 groups based on biographical information – when did they leave Russian speaking country and what level of education they got in it⁷. In addition to that, Russian-speaking students

⁶ Guadalupe Valds *The Power of the Heritage Language in Identity Formation and Engagement*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1EIPITNyt4&t=790s> [7.3.2024]

⁷ Group 1, the most proficient group, comprises students who graduated from high school in Russia or a Russian-speaking country, Group 2 consists of students who attended school in a Russian-speaking country for five to

at UCLA (41 respondents) were asked to translate a series of sentences from English into Russian. The sentences tested students' knowledge of grammar. (Kagan 2005:216)

At School “Sava,” we evaluate language proficiency using a dual approach. After assessing proficiency across four language skills through a comprehensive questionnaire, we conduct trial lessons, which may involve several groups, to create an environment best for stimulating student progress and fostering optimal language acquisition. Through this process, we strive to identify the most effective and motivating settings for our students' progress. An environment that encourages development and progress involves not only language proficiency comparable to other students in the group but also sharing similarities in age, interests, and overall compatibility with fellow students. This includes alignment in temperament, mentality, aspirations, and motivation for learning.

4.3. Motivation

Motivation is a significant area of inquiry concerning heritage languages. During the first few years of childhood, a heritage language often serves as the child's mother tongue, shaping the earliest expressions and perceptions of the world. However, as previously mentioned, the dominant language gradually replaces the heritage language once formal education begins, posing a challenge to regain the motivation to relearn the heritage language.

Integrating the heritage language into a child's already packed schedule demands time and effort. It's plausible that a child might prefer engaging in other activities, such as sports or learning a language perceived as more “marketable” than their heritage language. In such cases, external motivation becomes crucial. Parents who prioritized the acquisition of the dominant language during the child's formative years since it is viewed as the “basis for mainstream educational achievement and civic participation, and it is related to processes of acculturation or adaptation to a new social environment.” (Kelleher, Haynes 2010:2) may later realize the importance of heritage language when the child struggles to understand or communicate with relatives.

As Kelleher and Haynes pointed out: “The goals of individual heritage language learners range from personal (e.g., the desire to communicate with a relative), to community cohesion, to religious participation, to ideological (e.g., the desire to see one's language or culture preserved), to academic and professional.” (2010:4)

“Some data are available to indicate the nature of HLLs' motivation: in a survey of speakers of Russian conducted at UCLA in 2000, 16 of 41 students named preserving family ties as the main reason for studying Russian, 31 named their desire to preserve Russian culture and 33 said they studied Russian so that they could read Russian literature. Only seven mentioned career goals.” (Kagan 2005: 219)

In the small survey I conducted, when asked about their reasons for learning the Serbian language, my students (ranging in age from 10 to 17) primarily cited their desire to communicate with their grandparents, their interest in reading and writing in Serbian, their aspiration to enhance their grammar skills, their Serb heritage, and their desire to establish connections with Serbia. Additionally, they found the language intriguing and believed that learning it would help them in acquiring proficiency in other languages.

seven years (an approximate equivalent of American junior high school, Group 3: (a) students who attended elementary school in a Russian-speaking country, and (b) students who emigrated as preschoolers or were born in the USA to Russian-speaking parents, and have been educated entirely in English.)

Thus, their motivation to learn Serbian appears to stem from personal reasons, aimed at maintaining cultural ties with their relatives and addressing issues of identity. Notably, none of them mentioned aspirations to live or work in Serbia or pursue a career there. This observation supports the hypothesis that learning one's native language is predominantly driven by factors related to identity and personal sentiment, rather than practical goals, which are typically the primary motivators in learning a foreign language.

Heritage students' motivation for studying their heritage language can serve as a guiding principle for materials selection and curriculum design as Kagan points out (2005: 216) since it differs significantly from traditional foreign language learning programs, which often focus on structure, grammar, and the gradual adoption of language norms followed by vocabulary acquisition.

4.4. Competences and challenges

So far, we have discussed the distinctions between native language learners and those learning a foreign language, particularly in terms of identity, motivation, and language usage. In this section, our focus shifts to assessing students' language competence across four areas: speaking, grammar, reading, and writing.

Our teaching experience has revealed that native language students typically demonstrate stronger abilities in language comprehension and speaking/pronunciation. However, they often encounter challenges with grammar and writing. This difficulty can be attributed to the fact that the heritage language is primarily spoken, not written, and is learned primarily from parents. Consequently, it may involve both standard and non-standard forms of the language.

When foreigners start learning the Serbian language, they typically cannot speak it, except in rare cases where they might know a few words from music or films they've encountered. In contrast, native Serbian speakers usually begin their language learning journey with some level of familiarity with the language. Even if they cannot speak it fluently, they are often exposed to Serbian through interactions with their parents or exposure to music and television shows watched by their parents, which helps them acquire a certain vocabulary. This exposure facilitates easier comprehension, even at lower levels of proficiency. Consequently, their speaking skills tend to be at a higher level compared to those encountering the language for the first time. Some of them exhibit better pronunciation, while learners of Serbian as a foreign language often struggle with affricates (c, đ, č, dž, ć) pronunciation and distinguishing these sounds in words. Additionally, it's quite common even for heritage students to have difficulty with the pronunciation of affricates, resulting in a pronunciation that falls somewhere in between the correct sounds. While this may not be immediately noticeable in speech or significantly impact understanding, it can lead to substantial challenges in writing. Students often struggle to identify which sound they have pronounced. For instance, they may confuse words like "kuće" and "kuče" or "đak" and "džak" and so on.

Regarding grammar, students learning Serbian as a foreign language typically receive structured instruction with a comprehensive plan and evaluation. As a result, their grasp of grammar is methodical and gradually improves over time, leading to more lasting and solid retention. In contrast, native language students often encounter difficulties in grasping grammar rules due to their pre-existing familiarity with some speech structures, often characterized by incorrect grammar usage. Additionally, the lack of teaching materials for

the native language complicates grammar acquisition beyond the A1 level, resulting in an approach primarily focused on error identification and correction.

Due to its phonetic script (one phoneme corresponds to one grapheme), reading is a relatively easier aspect of learning the Serbian language. The Latin alphabet is typically introduced first, and learners usually adapt to it quite easily, with the exception of certain sounds like affricates and specific sonants (ž, đ, š, ć, č, lj, nj). Learning the Cyrillic alphabet, however, poses a greater challenge, particularly for foreign language students who have had no prior exposure to it. In contrast, native language students often possess some familiarity with the Cyrillic alphabet even before formal schooling begins. This is because they are exposed to it at home, where their parents may read to them in Cyrillic, thus facilitating early contact with this script. They usually learn how to write their name and first words in Cyrillic script.

When it comes to writing, the situation is quite intriguing. Students of Serbian as a foreign language typically learn to write concurrently with learning to read and understand the meaning of words. Although this process may be slow, it is grounded and guided within the classroom, leading to fewer challenges in writing. However, exceptions arise due to phonetic or morphological changes, of which there are eight in Serbian, often causing confusion among students when writing.

On the other hand, the writing abilities of native language students present a different scenario. Despite often possessing an average or high level of proficiency in Serbian, particularly in comprehension, reading, and mastering grammatical norms, they frequently make numerous errors in writing. These errors primarily stem from the fact that their native language is primarily spoken, used for communication rather than written expression. Consequently, they often encounter difficulties not only in spelling words correctly, but also in issues such as combined and split writing. Additionally, phonemes that are pronounced correctly may be spelled incorrectly. Therefore, proficiency in writing in the native language holds significant importance, especially in higher education, necessitating special attention across different learning levels.

Table 1

Competencies	Foreign language students	vs. Heritage language students
Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No speaking abilities (just a few Serbian words, or none) ▪ Difficulties at pronouncing ▪ Difficulties at differentiating Serbian voices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Better pronunciation ▪ Usually start with some basic vocabulary ▪ Well hearing and differentiating similar voices (s:c, p:b, dž:đ, č:ć...)
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Slower but structured acquisition of grammatical rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Often make many mistakes in speech ▪ Have difficulties at accepting grammatical rule (since they've learned to speak incorrectly)
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acquire Cyrillic slowly and with difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acquire Cyrillic faster since they are introduced with it in early childhood
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learn spelling simultaneously with learning meaning, word by word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make many mistakes in writing since they language usage is mostly oral, not written

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE “SAVA” SCHOOL

Olga Kagan presents heritage language learning as a “triad that includes community, family, and formal education. If all three elements are not in place, the acquisition process suffers”. (2005:213)

We have previously discussed the significance of society, or the country of origin, in preserving the native language, which is evident in the provision of support such as materials, qualified teaching staff, and structured language learning programs. Additionally, we emphasized the crucial role of the family in preserving the native language as the foundation and creator of linguistic identity.

Now, shifting our focus to the third aspect—formal education, specifically language education—we must begin with the organization of classes before delving into their structure and implementation. Regarding the organization of classes and learning options for Serbian as a heritage language, we previously outlined both formal (within the school setting) and informal methods, such as occasional classes organized by entities like the Serbian embassy, church, or other organizations. However, to sustain language preservation and foster linguistic culture, sporadic efforts are insufficient. What is required is continuity, which can only be achieved through regular language instruction.

At the school where I teach Serbian, students are required to attend three language lessons per week, along with optional history and cultural history lessons. Additionally, over the weekend they get digital material with tasks and exercises, which serve as a homework, allowing them to review and practice what they have learned during the week. This structured approach ensures continuity in their Serbian language learning, with a minimum of three hours dedicated to Serbian practice each week. As a result of this consistent practice, noticeable progress in students' knowledge and proficiency levels can be observed over time.

Guadalupe Valdes highlights the challenges involved in teaching heritage languages. In contrast to teaching foreign languages, where the emphasis is often on teaching students how to speak, read and write by acquiring proper grammatical terminology to establish a structured system, a different approach is needed for heritage languages. In teaching heritage languages, students are not only interested in the language itself but also in the subject matter. Therefore, to capacitate them to get to the subject, it is essential to first teach them how to read and write proficiently. This approach acknowledges that developing literacy skills is fundamental to accessing and understanding the subject matter in heritage language instruction.⁸

Guadalupe Valdes emphasizes the importance of the “conceptualization of language”⁹ in language instruction, whether it be a second, foreign, or heritage language. Regardless of the specific language being taught, having a well-defined program and plan is crucial for effective language instruction. This program should outline clear objectives, methods, and strategies tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of the learners. By carefully conceptualizing language instruction, educators can ensure a systematic and comprehensive approach to teaching that facilitates language acquisition and proficiency development.

“Sava,” an online school dedicated to Serbian language, culture, and tradition, has been operating for four years, during which time it has educated over 7,000 students from 73

⁸ Guadalupe Valds, *The Power of the Heritage Language in Identity Formation and Engagement*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1EIPITNyt4&t=790s> [7.3.2024]

⁹ Ibid.

countries worldwide. Our dedicated team of teachers and scholars coming from diverse backgrounds in language, literature, history, and art has crafted a comprehensive curriculum. This curriculum not only fosters proficiency in the four essential language skills — reading, writing, speaking, and understanding — but also fosters a deep appreciation for Serbian tradition, culture, and folklore.

Recognizing the unique nature of heritage language instruction, Maria Carreira and Olga Kagan emphasized the necessity for it to be “community-based” (Polinsky, 2015: 15). Each lesson, whether focusing on vocabulary or grammar, is deeply rooted in the principle that the curriculum must be interconnected with Serbian culture and tradition. As a result, it is not uncommon for our classes to incorporate hands-on activities such as preparing Serbian traditional dishes like *proja* or Serbian-style pancakes, particularly during lessons covering Serbian national cuisine. Likewise, we may engage in traditional customs such as dyeing eggs in the traditional way during lessons centered on Easter traditions. Additionally, we explore customs related to various traditional holidays, such as tying parents and asking for gifts during pre-Christmas holidays or learning about the Christmas traditions of preparing Christmas bread and hiding coins in it. Through these immersive cultural experiences, students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Serbian heritage and traditions.

To effectively combine material from culture, history, tradition, and literature with essential grammatical categories while enhancing writing and reading skills, our teaching approach must be grounded in an integrative principle. This involves seamlessly integrating cultural content and literary works with grammatical instruction, providing students with a holistic understanding of the language and its cultural context. By intertwining language learning with cultural exploration, historical insights, and literary analysis, we create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that not only fosters linguistic proficiency but also cultivates a deeper appreciation for Serbian culture and heritage.

For instance, when studying the First Serbian Uprising, which coincides with the Day of Statehood, as well as the day of the voting of the first Serbian modern and liberal constitution, special emphasis is placed on illuminating the intricate historical events. Topics such as the life of the Serbs under Ottoman rule, the catalysts for the uprising, the pivotal figure of Karađorđe Petrović, and the circumstances surrounding the drafting of the first Serbian constitution are presented to students through engaging and enjoyable activities to prevent overwhelming them. For example, while learning about Karađorđe Petrović, students may create portraits of him, examine images of his childhood home, depict the Serbian coat of arms on flags, and complement these activities with music or age-appropriate video material related to the topic. Similarly, when exploring Women's Day, we take the opportunity to commemorate significant Serbian women who have left an inerasable mark on Serbian culture through their humanity or remarkable professional achievements. Students may then create greeting cards for mothers and grandmothers from Serbia, writing messages in written Cyrillic script. By intertwining historical narratives with creative and interactive activities, we not only facilitate deeper understanding but also foster appreciation for Serbian heritage and culture among our students.

At “Sava,” we firmly believe in the power of forging connections, both with culture and tradition, which provides numerous linguistic and cognitive benefits. Moreover, fostering connections among peers is integral to our teaching philosophy. Through collaborative group work, our students often form friendships rooted in shared interests and cultural backgrounds. Serbian language serves as a common bond among them, transcending geographical boundaries and preserving these meaningful connections.

Therefore, we practice numerous activities that allow students to socialize outside of the classroom. One such activity is our “Big Break” gatherings held on Saturdays, conducted via Zoom. During these sessions, students from different countries come together to engage in discussions on various topics or participate in games. All communication occurs in Serbian, fostering language practice and immersion. While teachers serve as moderators, their role is not to correct language errors but rather to guide and suggest activities.

Additionally, our students have the opportunity to socialize during the summer months, particularly those who spend time with their grandparents in Serbia. At our school in Belgrade, “Zvezdobrojci,” students can immerse themselves in live Serbian language practice with their teachers, participate in enjoyable and educational activities, and interact with local students. Furthermore, many of our students join summer camps organized by the “Sava” school in Kopaonik and Tara. Last year, for example, a whole group of students from Europe arranged to attend one of these camps together, fostering friendships and strengthening their connection to Serbia and the Serbian language.

It's worth noting the significant bond that develops between students and teachers. Scholars in heritage language education, such as Kagan, Polinsky, and Carreira, emphasize the importance of teachers in fostering students' self-confidence and ensuring the continuity of language use and learning. Teachers play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and roots, serving as special figures for families. At our school, this relationship is nurtured through close communication with parents, who are kept informed about their child's progress and are involved in advising and guiding each other. Additionally, visits, exchanges of birthday greetings, and gift-giving further strengthen the bond between students and teachers, fostering a supportive and enriching learning environment.

As previously mentioned, teaching a native language with a wealth of material from culture, history, and tradition can be very demanding and potentially overwhelming for students. Embracing the power of play, we utilize a variety of online tools—including Canva, Blooket, ThingLink, and Wordwall—to create dynamic, interactive learning experiences that are accessible and engaging for all learners. By making our classes and materials both informative and enjoyable, we strive to ensure that every student can grasp and appreciate the richness of the Serbian language and culture.

When teaching a heritage language, it is essential to have a structured plan, program, and agenda for what and how to teach, but on the other hand – also to remain attuned to your students' interests. This involves deviating from the written program when necessary to accommodate their preferences. We strive to bridge their interests with the subjects we aim to teach, fostering a meaningful connection.

6. FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Serbian as a heritage language is still in its early stages within the field of language science. Both the analysis of Serbian as a heritage language and teaching practices in this area are still in the process of development at the state level. The Ministry of the Republic of Serbia has made some initial efforts to create basic materials and a curriculum for learning Serbian as a heritage language, but these efforts are still in their infancy, incomplete, and in draft form. Therefore, there is a pressing need to devise a detailed and evaluated curriculum and program for learning Serbian as a heritage language across all four language skills.

Despite the lack of institutional support, an increasing number of immigrants are seeking opportunities for their children to learn the Serbian language. Many teachers, both independently and within schools such as “SAVA,” are making efforts to compensate for this gap and provide instruction in Serbian as a heritage language. At “SAVA” school, for example, we have developed a comprehensive program and curriculum for learning Serbian at different levels (A1, A2, B1.1, B1.2) and ages (under 7, 7-9, 10-12, 13+, adults).

In addition to curriculum development, it is crucial to devise effective methods for assessing students' language proficiency, which should not only evaluate their grammar knowledge but also assess their vocabulary (both active and passive), comprehension, and communication abilities. Once these assessments are designed, the next step is to tailor instruction and materials to meet the individual needs of students based on their level of proficiency.

While there is still much work to be done by linguists, teachers, and educators in the field of heritage language education, it is encouraging that the groundwork has been laid, and progress has been made, especially with the milestone achieved at the state and official level in the past year of 2023.

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PODUČAVANJE ZAVIČAJNOG JEZIKA – ZAŠTO JE TOLIKO DRUGAČIJE? IZAZOVI U PODUČAVANJU SRPSKOG KAO ZAVIČAJNOG JEZIKA

Mada interesovanje za očuvanje naslednih jezika potiče još iz šezdesetih i sedamdesetih godina dvadesetog veka (Kagan, Dillon 2008:145), poslednje decenije ponudile su značajne rezultate. Ovaj rad ima za cilj da ukaže na probleme u nastavi srpskog jezika kao zavičajnog i pokaže kako se ona razlikuje od nastave srpskog kao stranog jezika. Sam pristup učenicima mora biti drugačiji, sa obzirom na to da njihove aspiracije često prevazilaze samo savladavanje jezika. Proces podučavanja i učenja često uključuje pitanja identiteta, psihološki, socijalni i „interkulturalni teret“ (Kagan 2012:72) dvojezičnosti i pripadnosti dvema kulturama. To su pitanja koja sa pravim pristupom u školama jezika i kod kuće mogu postati pravi prerogativ u multikulturalnom svetu. Stoga je neophodno da se nastavnici, naučnici i praktičari okupe i da uz državnu podršku i jezičku politiku naprave ono što se naziva „nastavni plan i program zasnovan na poznavanju zajednice“ (Kareira, Kagan 2017). Ovakav, posebno napravljen kurikulum uzima u obzir kognitivne, afektivne i bihejvioralne potrebe učenika, te bi pomogao da se „suoče sa dva kulturna sveta koja su istovremeno nasledili“ (Kagan 2012: 80). Ovaj rad takođe opisuje metode koje se koriste u Školi srpskog jezika, kulture i tradicije „SAVA“, koja radi sa preko 500 porodica u 70 zemalja širom sveta.

Ključne reči: zavičajni jezik, dvojezičnost, metodologija, identitet, inovacija