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UNHEARD VOICES

# Diverse tongues, unheard voices

Barriers to mainstream uptake of heritage languages in England

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**ZARA FAHIM, YUNI KIM & EVA EPPLER**

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, UNIVERSITY OF SURREY  
& UNIVERSITY OF ROEHAMPTON

Motivations and factors surrounding the uptake of language qualifications have long been discussed in educational linguistics. Often overlooked within the crisis of low uptake (Bowler, 2020) are heritage speakers and their community language(s) (Fahim, 2023). In England, over a quarter of school-aged students are first- or second-generation immigrants, with one in five registered as having English as an additional language (DfE, 2023). Despite this growing number of multilingual speakers, a disconnect between community language use and uptake of community languages at post-compulsory level remains: 76 per cent of recent school leavers from ‘underrepresented groups’ reported having knowledge of at least one community language, but 82 per cent of this sample chose not to pursue a qualification in it (Fahim, 2023).

In this article, we explore the barriers preventing heritage speakers from accessing and undertaking a qualification in their community language(s) based on the literature and two online surveys with 319 school leavers speaking 13 different home languages. The main barriers that push such languages out of mainstream education among underrepresented groups were identified as: familial and

community influences; ‘eurocentric’ school policies and curricula; and perceived value for higher education.

## FAMILIAL & COMMUNITY PRESSURES

Many community language speakers in our study observed a stigma and dismissal towards language qualifications. Both families and communities lack awareness of job prospects attached to a language qualification, and thus (mis)label the qualification a ‘soft subject’ that is supposedly futile for future vocational study (Fahim, 2023, p. 34). This low importance placed on language qualifications adds to the tendency towards risk aversion in career choice among immigrant families. Archer et al. (2012) found the pressure to pursue specific vocational pathways over humanities subjects as more prevalent in families with second-generation children. Where parents had a science or technology career, the ‘science capital’ dominating the family could influence the next generation of heritage speakers into following a path that the elder generations had deemed a ‘success’, such as science, medicine or law (Archer et al., 2012). In this context, pursuing post-compulsory study of community languages at all – much less in a mainstream setting – may not be viewed by students as a genuine option.

## SUITABILITY OF SCHOOL CURRICULA & NATIONAL POLICIES

Deterrents of heritage language uptake can be found inside the school walls, too. Although heritage speakers arrive at the secondary languages classroom with higher metalinguistic awareness compared to monolingual peers (D'Angelo & Sorace, 2022), national policies, curricula and exam specifications leave them feeling obliged to rely on rote learning instead. One respondent stated, 'I wish [languages] curricula incorporated other skills such as translation training too' (Fahim, 2023, p. 33).

More worrying still, heritage speakers often cannot access qualifications in the first place, despite availability via multiple exam boards (for example AQA, Edexcel). Factors impeding provision of heritage language education in schools include financial constraints, lack of community language teachers and a 'language hierarchy', wherein languages outside of the 'big three' (Spanish, French and German), that is, non-European languages, typically receive fewer resources and may be perceived as 'inferior' (Carruthers & Nandi, 2021; Fahim, 2023). Students may be unaware that they can study their heritage language or be actively discouraged from studying it for the above reasons. Respondents explain (Fahim, 2023, p. 35):

'My school didn't offer Punjabi GCSE as I went to a white majority school. I didn't even know I could. I would've liked to, though'

'My school wouldn't allow me to take a non-European language for GCSE'.

Therefore, less-than-inclusive curricula combine with the importance placed on European languages by schools to keep heritage speakers outside of the mainstream and prevent them from accessing and/or undertaking heritage language education.

## HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS

There is also a widespread, but erroneous, idea that 'native speakers' already 'know' their language and thus do not require education in it. Research, however, shows that heritage speakers almost never demonstrate similar language competence to peers in the home country (Montrul & Polinsky, 2019). In fact, heritage speakers often make similar errors to young children or second-language learners in grammatical areas that are a focus of formal instruction. Considering heritage speakers' wide variation in language competence, 'native speaker' is almost a social construct, not one that maps meaningfully onto what is taught and evaluated in the classroom.

The 'native speaker' myth is perpetuated by admissions policies to some university courses that do not accept languages A-levels from students who have used the

language in a home or community setting. Such policies can discourage students with a genuine academic passion for their heritage language, especially if they fear their ethnically identifiable name could diminish perceptions of their achievement. The implication is that good A-levels do not represent an academic challenge for these students. Yet A-level exams in community languages include skills that are not acquired naturally by a child at home, such as critical essay writing.

Young heritage language speakers with their diverse languages are the unheard voices of mainstream language education, not due to a lack of interest (Fahim, 2023), but because family and community pressures and barriers erected by the education system push them out.

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