

## **Teaching Mandarin Chinese to Heritage Learners in America**

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Chinese heritage learners are people brought up in a home where mandarin or another Chinese dialect is spoken who subsequently switch to another dominant language (English in the US). Because of their exposure to Chinese throughout the childhood and for some, even into early childhood, heritage students do significantly better than their non-Chinese-background counterparts in speaking, listening, grammar and sentence construction. However, most of them have weaknesses in reading comprehension, academic vocabulary and Chinese character writing. Therefore the primary need of heritage learners' is to connect their oral language competence with the written form of literary skills.

Since heritage learners have already acquired some of the language skills, it is crucial for teachers to respect their linguistic and cultural knowledge and teach them in ways that meet their special needs and address their limitations. It is less likely to be successful if a student's heritage knowledge is ignored. Sometimes heritage students may use regionalism that the teacher has never heard of. Or they may have some information different from what the teacher presents. The teacher should be willing to listen to their opinions to avoid a damaging effect on the student's self-esteem.

“To be a teacher in the right sense is to be a learner. I am not a teacher, only a fellow student” (Soren Kierkegaard). Teaching is a life-long journey filled up with exploration, experiment and self-discovery. There are many practical problems and specific issues when dealing with administration, class sizes, language levels and various other factors. However, it sets up the foundation to become a good language teacher only when one cares about the profession, critically reflects on one's teaching practice and makes every effort to create an encouraging and supportive learning environment. As for a growing number of heritage learners, language teachers are expected to look into their special needs and help them improve their language skills based on their prior knowledge. A tolerant and diversified cultural attitude should be taken when dealing with the fossilized linguistic tendencies which heritage learners have inherited from home and their surrounding ethnic groups.