

How not to Improve Heritage Language Competence: The Case of Farsi

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Abstract

Observations of "wear and tear" in books for self-study in Farsi (Persian) in a Los Angeles library revealed that few readers persevered beyond the first few pages. The library was in a neighbourhood where there were a considerable number of families from Iran, suggesting that the potential readers were interested in improving their heritage language, but found the traditional method unappealing.

As children grow older, use of competence of Heritage Language (HL) generally declines, but the attitude toward their heritage languages generally (but not always) remains positive (Cho, Shin & Krashen, 2004). We will examine here, what is probably the most frequent path to try to improve competence in the heritage language—the traditional study of the language. The specific route we will examine here is the use of self-study language books; in this case, books designed to teach basic Farsi grammar.

We have applied a method established by McQuillan (2008), who developed an interesting and unobtrusive measure (Webb et al., 2000) to determine perseverance in voluntary foreign language study; a way of determining whether library books were just taken out of the library or whether they were actually read.

McQuillan's "wear and tear index" was simple: It involved simply noting the last page on which any of the following were found:

1. Separation of pages on the binding,
2. Fingerprints or smudges on the pages or the corners,
3. Worn or wrinkled corners likely caused by page-turning.

McQuillan then applied this wear and tear index to ten self-instructional foreign language books found on the shelves of a local branch of Los Angeles Public Library. All ten books had been in circulation for at least one year, and all of them had clearly been used by the patrons of the library, judging by the covers and binding. No phrase books or books for travellers were included. McQuillan examined ten books—five for Spanish, and one each for Portuguese, German, Chinese, Italian and Cantonese. The results were quite consistent. On an average, the wear and tear index revealed that out of a total of 2836 pages, only 16.8% pages were read with the maximum

being 27% for the book, *Teach yourself - Spanish* (McGraw -Hill, 2003).

In our study, the same procedure was used to measure perseverance in reading or studying entry-level Farsi in a public library located in an area populated by a substantial number of families from Iran. According to the bookstore owners we interviewed, most customers of self-instructional books in Farsi were heritage language speakers who were interested in improving their competence in the language. Some spouses, co-workers or friends of Iranians occasionally showed some interest in these books, but they were in the minority. We assume the same is true of those who attempt to read instructional books in other public libraries.

Table 1
Farsi Heritage Language Speaker's Entry-Level Reading Perseverance

Book Title (Publisher, Year)	Total Pages	Last Page Read	Percentage Read/Used
<i>Farsi for Beginners</i> (Tuttle Publishing, 2015)	160	12	7.5
(Hippocrene Books, 2018)	248	20	8
<i>Basic Persian</i> (Routledge, 2012)	304	14	5
<i>Persian: The Complete Course for Beginners</i> (Routledge, 2011)	288	5	2
<i>Persian Vocabulary</i> (Cambridge University Press, 1969)	408	11	3
<i>Elementary Persian Grammar</i> (Cambridge University Press, 1972)	250	18	7
		Average	5

As seen in table 1, readers appeared to have read on an average only 5% of the textbooks. Although only six books were inspected from one library, it is remarkable that there was so little variation in the wear and tear scores. This is quite similar to McQuillan's results. There seems to be no single self-instruction book in any language that holds the readers' interests, even among

readers who pick up self-instruction books voluntarily.

This is an important finding. In foreign language education, failure is generally interpreted as the fault of the student, the teacher, or the student not having a "talent" for language learning. However, when the children of immigrants do not master their heritage language to the native speaker's level of expectation, it is attributed to a lack of interest on the part of the young person, or lack of effort on the part of parents.

The results of this study as well as McQuillan's study (2008) suggest that there is another culprit—the method of instruction. All of the books used in this study were traditional, grammar-oriented books and assumed that the path to competence was through hard study and conscious learning of grammar and vocabulary. There is a good reason to suspect that the method has been the problem. The results presented here are very similar to McQuillan's 2008 results—the texts he inspected were traditional as well. They are also similar to studies showing a lack of perseverance

in traditionally taught foreign language courses in the US. McQuillan (2019), gives a thorough review of perseverance in academic as well as commercial courses.

The results of this study echo the remarks of young people who have attended heritage language classes. Students feel attending the heritage language classes a chore. Interviews with bookstore owners in California also share that customers interested in Farsi typically buy only the first book in a series designed for students; they do not buy any further books.

These observations are consistent with research findings on language teaching over the past 40 years. We do not acquire language through study, but rather by understanding messages; conscious learning plays only a peripheral role. This way of developing competence through an understanding of the language has been shown to be far more effective and also far more pleasant than the traditional skill-building approach (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 2003; Mason & Krashen, 2017). It is clearly time to try something different in heritage language education.

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