Pedagogical Implications of the Study

In this last chapter I examine the pedagogical implications of the present study by addressing several areas: proficiency assessment of heritage speakers, classroom research and suggestions for specific teaching methods and tasks based on the findings of this study.

A discussion of all these topics should begin with a clarification of the basic concept of “linguistic knowledge” and how this concept applies to heritage learners and their proficiency levels. In Chapter 4 I outlined the fundamental characteristics of linguistic knowledge as presented by Philips (2012) as part of the debate on native language attainment initiated by Dąbrowska (2012). I summarize his main statement again below so that we see how the theoretical model can be connected to its implementation in teaching practice. According to Philips, linguistic knowledge consists of:

a) The representations that a speaker can construct or accept as well-formed, regardless of how hard it might be to construct those representations
b) The speaker’s skill or efficiency at constructing specific representations or interpretations.

Improvements in that knowledge could be achieved, according to Philips, through training. Particularly, he argues that training can change an adult’s ability to comprehend certain sentence types; thus, training can affect only the second ability, namely, the efficiency of processing linguistic knowledge. However, the results of the present study showed that the representations that some low-proficiency heritage speakers have built could be well-formed but still lack certain pragmatic components, such as knowledge of the Information Structure principles, for example. With the development of language proficiency, such representations become more sensitive to pragmatic rules and hence, much closer to the target-like representations of native speakers. Given that heritage speakers represent a rather heterogeneous group along the proficiency continuum, teachers and educators need to keep in mind that

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1 Cf. the guidelines developed by the American Council of Teachers of Russian about the various levels of proficiency in speaking: http://www.actfl.org/professional-development/certified-proficiency-testing-program/testing-proficiency.
classroom instruction alone will be more beneficial primarily for enhancing the skills and efficiency of representation of heritage learners, that is, the second component in Philips's model. Still, combined with other sources of input and executed over a long period of time, instruction also can have an effect on the post-syntactic level of representation, the discourse-pragmatics.

**Heritage Learners in the Classroom**

Earlier in the book (Chapter 1) I referred to a couple of definitions of a heritage speaker that were based on the linguistic abilities of these speakers. In the present chapter I shift my attention to the heritage learners who do or in some cases do not qualify as heritage speakers, especially if they don’t speak the heritage language at all. A group portrait of heritage learners is not possible since they were found to exhibit various cultural identities and linguistic needs (Carreira, 2004).

Still, scholars commonly specify three main criteria that apply to heritage language students (cf. Valdés, 1995). These students:

a) are raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken  
b) speak or merely understand the heritage language  
c) are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language.

However, there are heritage learners who do not exhibit all three characteristics, in particular, students who were adopted by American couples who do not hear their heritage language at home but still qualify as heritage learners according to the second and sometimes the third criterion. The minimum requirement for a student to be considered a heritage learner (and not an L2 learner) is the presence of active or passive bilingualism to some degree together with the less problematic ethnic heritage (Kondo-Brown, 2005; Van Deusen, 2003). Self-identification could prove difficult to evaluate since it tends to be less inclusive than an identification based on linguistic criteria. However, it also has been argued that at least in certain cases self-perception

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2 The main distinction between heritage and L2 learners often quoted in the literature is that heritage language acquisition begins at home while L2 acquisition begins in a classroom setting (cf. Kondo-Brown, 2005). The considerations raised above do not change the rationale behind such a distinction since adopted children are still exposed to their heritage language first in their native country unless they are adopted as infants; in that situation the language of their adopted family becomes their first and native language.