Students Search for the Words To Go With Their Cultural Pride

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Body

Last summer, watching Al Jazeera's reports of the war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah, Fidele Harfouche was startled to realize that in addition to understanding the Arabic spoken by the anchors, she could, for the first time, read some of the ***words*** marching across the bottom of the screen.

Ms. Harfouche, 20, was born in Lebanon, but moved to this verdant Bergen County borough of 9,000 people when she was 6, before learning to read and write in Arabic, the language she and her parents still speak at home. Her mother often tried to sit her down for lessons, but Ms. Harfouche said she avoided them, feigning headaches or claiming that she was too consumed with schoolwork.

"I wanted to fit in so badly," she said. "I figured if I practiced English, if I spoke English well, I'd be an American, like the other kids in my school."

But during her sophomore year at Drew University, a small liberal arts college not far from here, Ms. Harfouche signed up for a class in classic Arabic in a quest to become fully literate in her mother tongue. It's a move that many immigrants who came to the United States as children and those who were born here to immigrant parents have been making, said language experts, who refer to such ***students*** as "heritage speakers."

"As more and larger immigration groups are represented in the United States, what we're seeing is sort of a renewed sense of ethnic ***pride*** taking hold among the younger generations," said Kathleen E. Dillon, associate director of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The U.C.L.A. center, with financing from the United States Education Department, is conducting the first national count of college programs geared toward heritage ***students***, most of whom grew up speaking a language other than English at home.

So far, 28 institutions have responded, from large state universities to small private colleges in all regions of the country. In all, they reported offering 54 foreign-language courses, including 28 specifically for heritage speakers. The survey will continue for at least another two years.

According to a survey by the Modern Language Association of America, which promotes the study of languages and literature, the percentage of ***students*** enrolled in foreign-language courses fell, to 9 percent in 2002 from 11 percent in 1970, even as college enrollment nearly doubled overall. But enrollment in certain languages exploded during that period, mirroring immigration patterns, according to the survey.

Enrollment in Chinese classes, for example, grew to 34,000 ***students*** from 6,200. The number of ***students*** in Arabic classes grew to 11,000 from 1,300, and enrollment in Korean courses jumped to 5,200 from 100.

The Modern Language Association survey did not count how many of those ***students*** were heritage speakers. Researchers at U.C.L.A. and Portland State University in Oregon estimate, however, that about half of the college ***students*** in the United States who are taking classes in Korean, Vietnamese, Hindi and Tagalog, one of the main languages spoken in the Philippines, are heritage speakers.

At Rutgers University, the South Asian studies program began offering a two-semester Bengali course in 2004 in response to requests from ***students*** of Indian and Bangladeshi descent. They make up about 80 percent of the 17 ***students*** in the class this term, officials said.

At the State University of New York at Stony Brook, two kinds of Russian classes have been offered over the past decade, one for ***students*** who are new to the language and another for those who grew up with it. The division reflects the growth in enrollment by immigrants from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union.

''A lot of the ***students*** who come from Russian-speaking homes join the class thinking they're going to get an A,'' said Prof. Anna Geisherik, who teaches the course for heritage speakers at Stony Brook. ''But then they find that their Russian is not that good and that it's pretty hard to learn to read and write using an alphabet and grammar structure that's different than the one they're used to.''

Some of the ***students*** end up dropping out, Professor Geisherik said.

Twelve years ago, when Prof. Frances Yufen Lee began teaching Mandarin at Cornell University to heritage speakers of Chinese and Taiwanese descent, the course had one session per semester that enrolled about 20 ***students***. Now, there are four to five sessions each semester, with a total of 120 ***students*** -- and a waiting list.

''We jokingly call it Chinese for illiterate people or Chinese for people who can't read or write well, because that's essentially what it is,'' said Lu Ning Yang, 20, who is in the second semester of the three-semester course.

Mr. Yang, who is ethnic Chinese, was born in Mongolia and learned a bit of Mandarin in kindergarten before he moved to the United States in the early 1990s. He said he used to struggle to get past the headlines in Chinese newspapers. Now, Mr. Yang said, he is able to write short compositions and read magazine articles and letters from his Chinese relatives.

''This is going to sound nationalistic, but as I grew older, I realized that as a Chinese man, I needed to learn Chinese,'' Mr. Yang said. ''I guess this is about reconnecting with a big part of who I am that I had neglected for a long time.''

Unlike courses for new learners, which are often conducted in English, classes for heritage speakers typically are carried out in the language being taught from the start. ***Students*** work on learning the alphabet, if needed, and the rules of grammar while discussing politics and current events. In many cases, they also improve their conversational skills by rooting out the bad habits they have learned in an English-speaking environment.

Heritage speakers' language skills vary widely, depending on how much and how often they were exposed to the language growing up and on the literacy level of the relatives who taught them to speak it. Regardless, teachers say, they have inherent advantages over new learners: correct pronunciation, a vast vocabulary and familiarity with phrase construction.

Guadalupe Valdes, a professor of education and Spanish at Stanford University, said that in most cases, it takes heritage speakers just a few semesters to reach a level of sophistication that beginners take years to achieve.Vanessa Guevara, 18, a ***student*** in the Spanish for Heritage Speakers class at Seton Hall University, said she was motivated to improve her skills in the language she learned from her Peruvian-born parents because she wants to be a diplomat. During a recent class, she struggled to conjugate the preterito pluscuamperfecto, or the past perfect, which is used in formal conversations, to represent an action that began in the past and ended in the past, before another past action.

"This is hard," Ms. Guevara said, scratching her head with a pencil as she worked to fill in the blanks on an exercise sheet. "I'm majoring in diplomacy, so I need to be really good at it so I can say that I'm fluent on my resume."

Roman Zrazhevskiy, 21, who immigrated from Moscow to the Nassau County hamlet of Woodmere at age 6, said he joined the Russian class at Stony Brook, where he is a junior, "because with all this talk of globalization, it just seemed kind of stupid not to be able to read and write in this language that I was pretty much born speaking."

At Drew, where Ms. Harfouche is pursuing a double major in political science and Middle East studies, ***students*** of Arabic descent make up about a quarter of the enrollment in Arabic classes, up from a handful a decade ago, said Prof. Nora Colton.

"These individuals from Arabic background who join these classes are speaking colloquial Arabic with their parents, so they've still got a steep learning curve," Professor Colton said. "To them, though, the classes are much more than just learning a language; they're about reclaiming their roots."

Ms. Harfouche said she grew up hearing her parents discuss works of Arabic literature that she wished she could read, and she was often frustrated at having to ask them to translate letters from cousins in Lebanon.

Now a junior, Ms. Harfouche has taken Arabic classes for three consecutive semesters.

"It was really helpful," she said. "I could learn the alphabet, I could make up ***words*** and phrases, and my reading and writing got to reach the level of, like, a first-grade Arabic ***student***, even though I can speak pretty well.

"This was very fulfilling," Ms. Harfouche said. "It opened a whole new world for me. The beauty of my culture, of my Arabic culture, is in the writing, in the poetry, and knowing that I can rely on myself to read it and understand is really amazing."

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Graphic

Photo: Fidele Harfouche, center, at home with her mother, Salam, and father, Sam, used to avoid Arabic lessons. (Photo by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times)(pg. B5)

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