

SOHL UPDATER



July 2006

New President Elected



A new SOHL president was elected at the general meeting held in Saskatoon on June 17th, 2006. Shakeel Akhtar, who works as a consultant regarding international development, science, and technology, is an avid volunteer. Along with an extensive history with SOHL, he has worked with the Canadian Languages Association, the Diversity and Race Relations

Committee for the City of Saskatoon, the Canadian Languages Network, the Pakistan Canada Cultural Association, the Saskatoon Multicultural Council, the Islamic Association of Saskatchewan, and the Saskatchewan Parkinson's Disease Foundation, as well as a number of other committees of local and provincial organizations for language education, culture, human rights, equity, and race relations. In his work as a consultant, he has presented a number of briefs to the senate and the provincial government, and he is actively involved in advocacy and program development for language education, race relations, human rights, immigration, employment equity, intercultural awareness, and social harmony. He has been a guest speaker at several provincial and national conferences, workshops, and meetings, and due to his strong presence in the community as a volunteer and advocate, he has received a variety of honours and awards. These include the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal, the Saskatchewan Volunteer Medal, the SaskCulture Volunteer Award, the City of Saskatoon Community Service Award, and the Vice Chancellor's and Provost's Award for Academic Achievement.

Calling all Cooks!

This year, as a fundraiser, SOHL will be producing a cookbook that will be made available to the community for purchase. The theme of the cookbook is 'Holidays Around the World.' If you would like to contribute to this cookbook, please submit a description of a holiday from your cultural background including its cultural or religious significance, any celebrations that occur for it, and the recipes needed to prepare a full meal that is typical of the occasion. Please feel free to submit an entry as an individual or as a group. Also, if you would like to include other recipes from your cultural background that are popular with you or your family, but that are not part of a holiday celebration, feel free! Entries will be accepted until August 1, 2006. Please contact Lindsay Weichel at (306) 780-9478 or by e-mail at programassistant@sasktel.net for more information or to make a submission.



Silent Auction

SOHL's Fall Conference is fast approaching, and we are currently seeking donated items for the annual silent auction. We would especially appreciate items that showcase the multicultural fabric of SOHL. If you would like to make a donation, or for more information, please contact Laura Alfaro at sohlcoordinator@sasktel.net or (306) 780-9478.



Board Appointee

SOHL is looking for volunteers to sit on the Board of Directors for the coming year. If you or anyone you know would like to contribute to the Heritage Language committee as a Board member, or for more information, please contact Joanne Shannon, SOHL's Executive Director, at (306) 780-9275 or by e-mail at sohl@sasktel.net. An appointment will be made at the board meeting in September.

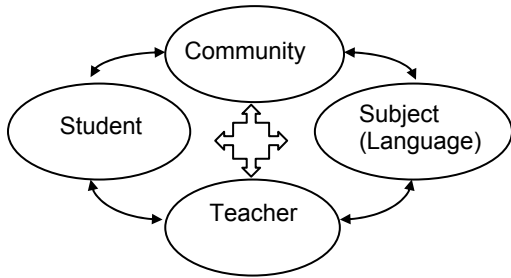
Heritage Language Teaching at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Dr. Helen Christiansen, chairperson of the Research and Skills Development Committee, along with committee members Parkash Virdi and Omar Aschim, have been carrying out a study over the past two years to examine the development of heritage language teaching and the challenges faced by heritage language teachers in Saskatchewan in recent years. All teachers of heritage languages in the province set out with similar goals, including the following:

1. Students will receive effective language learning programs.
2. Heritage language schools will be effective and sustainable.
3. Families can maintain a positive linkage with their heritage and cultural community.

However, language schools vary vastly in their organization, student populations, and teacher backgrounds, meaning that different language schools must use different strategies to achieve these goals and create effective schools and programs. In order to investigate this, committee members conducted surveys of fifteen language schools in Regina and twelve language schools in Saskatoon. These surveys were carried out on paper and in person beginning with five schools in a pilot study in 2003-4 and continued interviews and questionnaires in 2005-6. Responses were received from seventy-seven individuals in total regarding their backgrounds as teachers, the composition and organization of their classes, and the organization of their heritage language schools. The analysis of these results shows that SOHL's membership schools vary vastly in a number of ways, and must therefore use different strategies to achieve effective programming.

There are four elements that are of critical importance in the classroom, regardless of the subject. These are detailed in the following figure:



These elements, known as the 'Commonplaces of Curriculum' (Schwab 1962), impact on every heritage language classroom in a different way. Most obviously, teachers of different languages are faced with the explanation of different grammatical systems, writing systems, oral and written literature, and cultural connections to language. However, different heritage languages also vary with respect to the other commonplaces of curriculum.

First, not all language teachers have equivalent experience. It was found that up to 80% of heritage language teachers have less than five years of teaching experience. This indicates that teacher training may be necessary, but one must also note that as these new teachers work to develop experience and they are also able to find innovative ways of teaching their heritage language effectively.

Additionally, it was found that the vast majority of teachers are native speakers of the languages they teach (94%-100%). This means that while these teachers have tremendous in-depth knowledge of their languages, they may be faced with difficulties in explaining grammatical systems that were never taught to them overtly (i.e. that they learned as a part of natural childhood language acquisition). Teachers who are not native speakers face the opposite challenge; while their knowledge of the language may be somewhat more limited than that of a native speaker, they may be more adept at explaining grammatical structures that they themselves learned in an academic setting. In both cases, training is of vast importance to ensure effective heritage language programming, though the type of training needed varies based on the background of the teacher.

The importance of this is evident when examining the percentage of heritage language students who are native speakers of the language they are studying. The majority of classrooms are comprised solely of students who are members of the heritage language community (66% in Regina; 74% in Saskatoon), and as such may have some previous knowledge of the heritage language in question. However, this figure is notably different from the percentage of teachers who are first-language speakers of the heritage language. A vastly lower percentage of classrooms are solely composed of students who are not members of the heritage language community (6%-9%), while the remainder of responses indicated that their classes contained a mixture of students. Each of these situations requires different approaches to language instruction in order to insure that the students are able to engage with the heritage language in an effective and meaningful way.

With respect to class organization, schools were fairly similar with respect to class duration and number of classes per week, with the majority of students (50%-80%) receiving

approximately two hours of heritage language instruction at a time, with classes generally taking place once per week (73%-91% of the time). Still, due to the differences experienced with respect to the other commonplaces of curriculum (i.e. the students, teachers, languages, and communities in question), the activities and instruction that occupy class time must vary widely across schools.

In all types of language school, the relationship between the student and the heritage language community is of utmost importance. Students have a variety of reasons for studying the heritage language, including personal reasons such as having family members or spouses who are part of the heritage language community, academic reasons, such as credits, an interest in dance or other cultural enrichment, religious reasons, including the reading of sacred scripture, and a desire to attain or maintain bilingual literacy. Although these reasons cover a great spectrum, they all relate to the student's self-identity, as well as the student's relationship or desired relationship with the heritage language community. This makes the community tremendously important in the acquisition and maintenance of the heritage language.

In order to foster the student's learning in such varied environments, teachers use a wide variety of methods and resources. Some of the more effective strategies that teachers identified include the use of dialogues and themes, use of resources such as computers, chalkboards, puppets, crafts, music, and books, and celebration of cultural events. These resources give the language context and allow the students to engage with the material. Many teachers identified that, through these strategies, students have developed an appreciation of the language and culture; they bond with the teachers and other students and enjoy coming to class. They also work with the language outside of class, and may be able to apply it to situations with members of the heritage language community. This further shows the importance of identity and context to the heritage language learner.

However, heritage language teachers also face a variety of challenges in the classroom. For example, teachers of classes where students display wide variation in their previous knowledge of the heritage language face challenges in teaching material that is comprehensible to those with little previous experience with the language but still interesting and relevant to those with a greater knowledge of the language. In addition, many teachers face challenges when encouraging the students to take the class seriously, especially in the case of non-credit classes. Finding an appropriate teaching space for all classes is also a challenge, as is finding age-appropriate language resources, particularly when teaching adults. Finally, attracting students to the class may present difficulties.

The survey also identified workshop topics that would be useful in helping teachers to overcome these challenges. These include things such as language-specific teaching methods, lesson planning, topics for conversation classes, motivation, discipline, and positive classroom environments, dealing with behaviour issues, working with students with learning disabilities, lesson planning, and teaching adults. By remaining aware of the motivations for heritage language teaching and learning, as well as the challenges and advantages presented by different types of heritage language classrooms, we can ensure that heritage languages survive in Saskatchewan and remain a vital part of the cultural fabric of our province.