



Mina Tran, 8, reads along with teacher Ly Kim Lay during a Cambodian language class at the Park Village Apartments in Stockton.

Preservation, one word at a time: S.J. programs keep 'heritage' languages alive

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Teacher Ly Kim Lay stood behind Paulina Var and guided the 9-year-old through lines of Cambodian script printed in black marker on a white board.

There were words for the date, for fruit, for morning, for flowers.

Paulina finished. Lay congratulated her in Cambodian, then said in English, "She's the smartest one."

Destiny Channim, from the second row of desks in a classroom at Stockton's Park Village Apartments community, disagreed. Teacher is the smartest, she said:

"Hello! That's why she's the teacher. Duh."

Among California public school students, roughly 1.6million - or one in four - speak a language besides English at home. Late last year, the U.S. Census Bureau released data

showing that of the country's 47million non-English speakers, nearly 30 percent live in California.

While schools are challenged to teach those students English as quickly as possible, some educators and language advocates worry that English is perceived as a replacement for rather than an addition to children's first languages.

Losing so-called heritage languages, according to some researchers, costs the United States an important national resource and costs children an educational opportunity.

At Park Village, Lay is one of two instructors teaching Cambodian reading, writing and speaking to children who largely speak English at school and among friends.

It is one of several community-based programs in San Joaquin County that aim to preserve foreign languages and cultures.

"We don't want to forget it," Lay said. "We don't want to forget our culture."

Destiny, 9, said her father enrolled her in the classes because he wants her to learn to speak Cambodian. Mostly, the third-grader said, she speaks English.

Mina Tran, an 8-year-old third-grader, said: "My mom is Cambodian. She wants me to talk Cambodian to my grandpas and stuff."

In 2004, representatives from universities, language associations, businesses and government agencies, including the U.S. Department of Defense, gathered to discuss the country's foreign-language expertise.

A paper produced by conference participants urged action toward improving "the foreign language and cultural capabilities of the nation."

"Our domestic well-being demands action to provide opportunities for all students to learn foreign languages important for the nation, develop the capabilities of our heritage communities and ensure services that are core to our quality of life," the report said.

Some educators also argue that a student's academic success is advanced if that student's first language is preserved.

"In my experience, a good program uses a student's native language while also assisting them in acquiring English and gaining knowledge," said Jack McLaughlin, superintendent of the Stockton Unified School District. McLaughlin, when he was a superintendent in Berkeley, argued against Proposition 227. Approved by voters in June 1998, the law requires all English learners to be placed in one-year English-immersion classes and aimed to end the practice of teaching students in their native languages until they gained English fluency.

Supporters of the law say children learn English faster when they are taught almost entirely in English.

Fong Xong is Stockton Unified's Hmong liaison. She works with students to help them improve their English skills but also serves parents as an interpreter and translator.

At home, Xong and her husband have decided that their nine children should speak the Hmong language.

"That's my native language," she said. "So, for my family, when you come inside the house, you need to speak your own language. That way, you show respect to your elderly people."

She said her children do not struggle in school and have learned English quickly.

A 2004 article in the Journal of Secondary Gifted Education supports Xong's experience.

According to authors Paul H. Matthews and Michael S. Matthews, teaching heritage languages can enhance students' other studies.

"By fostering connections between school, home and community, ... heritage language courses can provide an excellent venue for developing the intracultural social networks that have been shown to promote achievement among language minority students," the authors wrote.

At Park Village last week, Lay discussed Cambodian rice growing with the students in her beginning literacy class.

"When we want to plant rice, we have to prepare the ground," she said. "Then when we plant it, we get good rice."

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