

Holidays to the home country could help bilingual children hold on to family's original language

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It's hard to keep a language in the family. Many people who migrate to different countries find that their language of origin has become a heritage language, passed on to future generations with varying degrees of success. These languages come under pressure from the dominant

language in a country as well as the lack of opportunities to practice and fluent speakers to practice with.

So how do kids use or retain heritage languages? And can visits to their parents' countries of origin help them increase their fluency?

"The role of parental language use in the country of residence is well-established," said Prof Vicky Chondrogianni of the University of Edinburgh and Dr. Evangelia Daskalaki of the University of Alberta, authors of the study published in *Frontiers in Language Sciences*. "Here we show how the opportunities to use the heritage language outside the home, and specifically in the country of origin, can help with language maintenance."

Lost for words

To understand how fluency changes over generations and how it can be boosted, Chondrogianni and Daskalaki recruited 58 children living in the U.S. and Canada, who were bilingual in Greek and English. They were divided into three groups: the children of first-generation immigrants, the children of second-generation immigrants, and children who had one parent who was a first-generation immigrant and one who was a second-generation immigrant. All children attended mainstream school in English and took additional classes in Greek.

First, the researchers interviewed the parents to understand the background to the children's bilingualism: when they had been exposed to Greek and English, how much Greek was spoken at home, and how often they visited Greece or were visited by relatives.

All the children had been primarily exposed to Greek at an early age, and exposure to English largely coincided with the start of mainstream schooling. Early exposure to a heritage language and late exposure to the

[dominant language](#) is linked to more complete acquisition of the heritage language, as is heritage language "richness": exposure to more and different sources of the language.

Spelling it out

Chondrogianni and Daskalaki carried out tests that targeted different aspects of the children's [language skills](#). They asked the children to name objects in pictures, which tested their vocabulary, and to describe events taking place in different pictures. This second test had been arranged so that the correct responses required a specific grammatical structure.

They found that the children of first-generation parents, and the children who had one first- and one second-generation parent, performed similarly on all the tests. However, there was a major gap between their performance and that of the children of second-generation parents, who were much less accurate.

Using the language at home improved outcomes in general, while visiting Greece—and therefore being exposed to a greater variety of contexts and speakers—supported particularly vulnerable aspects of language use, like vocabulary. It also helped with the correct reproduction of grammatical structures in a sentence. Increasing use of and exposure to the heritage language was linked to more accurate use of the language. The [children](#) of second-generation parents used Greek less, had a less rich exposure to the language, and visited Greece less frequently.

"It is not just about using the heritage language at home," said Chondrogianni. "It is also about the opportunities a child has to use their [heritage](#) language in different registers, contexts, and with a variety of speakers."

"Of course, visits to or visits from the country of origin might not be an

option for every family," added Daskalaki. "There are various financial and practical difficulties, and depending on the community, there may be geographical or even political barriers. Policymakers and [community members](#) need to think, creatively and collaboratively, how they can re-create this immersive experience in the country of residence."

More information: Heritage language use in the country of residence matters for language maintenance, but short visits to the homeland can boost heritage language outcomes, *Frontiers in Language Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/flang.2023.1230408](https://doi.org/10.3389/flang.2023.1230408)

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