

Co-Constructing a Sustainable Vietnamese Heritage Language Program in Tokyo

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Research Overview

This paper examines how Vietnamese heritage language (HL) stakeholders and parents in Tokyo co-construct a sustainable community-based HL environment under policy absence and resource scarcity. Drawing on a qualitative case study, it identifies three co-construction domains and discusses implications for HL programs internationally.

Purpose of Study

Heritage language (HL) maintenance depends not only on formal instruction but also on the vitality of the communities that sustain it (Fishman, 1991; He, 2010). Yet existing scholarship has largely focused on countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada, where some degree of institutional support provides a baseline for community efforts. Far less is known about how communities sustain HL education where that baseline does not exist.

Japan represents a theoretically productive case precisely because this baseline is absent. With Vietnamese immigration exceeding 600,000 residents as of 2025 (Immigration Services Agency, 2025), demand for Vietnamese heritage language (VHL) education is acute, yet Japan's assimilationist educational framework offers limited institutional support for HL maintenance (Nishikawa & Liu, 2020). As a high-pressure industrial society where assimilation expectations are strong, Japan exemplifies conditions increasingly common across East and Southeast Asia, making its community responses potentially instructive beyond the national context.

Within this context, the agency of those closest to the learner, such as program stakeholders and parents, becomes the primary mechanism through which HL education is sustained. These actors make daily decisions about pedagogy, program design, and educational goals that collectively shape whether children maintain meaningful engagement with their heritage language. This paper examines how stakeholders and parents construct and sustain HL education within this policy vacuum, through the collaborative process through which participants jointly build and adapt an educational environment.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach focusing on a VHL program in Tokyo (Program X), established in 2014 by Vietnamese parents concerned about maintaining the Vietnamese language and culture among second-generation children. Over the past decade, the program has developed into a structured non-profit organization serving approximately 150 - 200 students, managed by a small executive board whose members just contribute voluntarily while maintaining full-time jobs.

Data were collected between August and October 2025 through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Particularly, thirteen interviews were conducted with six program stakeholders, including organizers and teachers and seven parents whose children participate in the program. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, audio-recorded with consent before being transcribed. Participant observation was carried out during a three-day Autumn Camp and selected weekly online classes. Relevant program documents, including teaching materials and internal guidelines, were also analyzed. The data were examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combined with constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2014).

Results and Discussion

There are three interconnected co-construction domains emerged from the analysis, reflecting how members of this Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) actively negotiated and reshaped their shared educational environment.

The first is pedagogical co-construction. Rather than applying a fixed imported curriculum, teachers and parents continuously negotiate instruction to fit children's lives in Japan. Sustained engagement is prioritized over linguistic accuracy, and formal lessons are supplemented with real-world language experiences, such as slang, family interactions, and popular media, that textbooks alone cannot provide.

The second is operational co-construction. The community builds a self-reliant ecosystem across three dimensions. Financially, parents frame tuition as investment in collective cultural identity rather than a service fee. Structurally, a deliberate hybrid online-offline model addresses the time and geographic constraints of urban immigrant life. Organizationally, event-based parent involvement distributes responsibility across the community to prevent volunteer burnout.

The third is the co-construction of outcomes. Initial proficiency-based goals were collectively redefined toward the cultivation of *ibasho* - a Japanese concept of psychologically safe belonging, as the primary measure of success. The clearest evidence is the spontaneous emergence of student-led peer networks that extend beyond the program's formal activities.

Overall, these three domains demonstrate that resource-constrained communities are not merely reactive but are actively reshaping the goals of HL education itself. This model is, however, partly supported by the socioeconomic stability of participating families, raising questions about equity given that these co-building activities may not be easily accessible to more disadvantaged Vietnamese families. This highlights the structural limitations of community-based solutions without policy support.

These findings have implications that extend beyond Japan. While prior research has documented financial instability and volunteer burnout as major threats to HL program sustainability (Liu et al., 2011; Bui, 2025), this study shows that co-construction can address these challenges while simultaneously reshaping educational goals from within. By extending Wenger's Community of Practice into a diasporic context, it further demonstrates that these communities do not merely adapt, but redefine what counts as learning. The emergence of *ibasho* as a community-driven outcome offers a culturally grounded alternative to the proficiency-based frameworks that dominate the field, with transferable insights for diaspora HL programs worldwide.

Keywords: Vietnamese heritage language; co-construction; community-based programs; belonging; Japan

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