Guest Editor's Foreword

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This inaugural issue of the South Asia Language Pedagogy and Technology (SALPAT) journal concentrates on the important subject of teaching and learning heritage languages of South Asia. Heritage language education has established itself as an important field, and has raised awareness about the differences between first language, second language and heritage language teaching and learning. Heritage language learners' strengths were particularly recognized after September 11th, when it was realized that they can be trained in a relatively short period of time for professional level proficiencies needed for national security and global business when compared to non-heritage learners. Since then, heritage learners are perceived as a national resource, and there have been attempts to provide special opportunities in schools and colleges for honing their linguistic abilities. In 2006, a National Heritage Language Resource Center was established by the U.S. Department of Education to promote research and effective strategies for teaching and learning of heritage languages.

The study of heritage learners of South Asian languages is of particular importance because 80 to 90 percent of the students currently enrolled in South Asian language classes in American universities are from South Asian homes. There are also large numbers of South Asian heritage learners in community schools where children learn and develop their heritage languages. Soon there will be heritage students in public schools, as under the STARTALK initiative of the US government Hindi and Urdu will be offered to high school students beginning in the summer of 2008. Hindi is also being introduced at K-12 levels in some public schools located in areas that are heavily populated by South Asian immigrants, such as Edison, NJ. In the near future, there will be even more heritage learners of South Asian languages, and they will differ from each other in terms of age and formal education among other factors.

For building successful language programs, teachers and program directors must know their learners. They can make informed pedagogic and administrative decisions only if they understand learners' language backgrounds, needs, learning styles and pedagogic challenges. The articles in the current issue throw some light on the term heritage learner, the diversity within the heritage learners, gaps in their socio-linguistic competence, their learning processes, strategies for teaching mixed ability classes, building dual language proficiency, the role of technology in bridging grammatical and stylistic knowledge gaps, and more.

This issue comprises six articles, two items on technology and one book review. In my article "The Rich Tapestry of Heritage Learners of Hindi" I define who is a heritage learner of Hindi and classify various types of heritage learners based on their home languages and their prior levels of proficiency in Hindi. I also discuss some important curricular issues and instructional models being practiced at different institutions. Further, there is a discussion about how teachers align their curriculum and methodology to accommodate the varying needs and proficiency levels of heritage and non-heritage students.

Gabriela Nik. Ilieva in her article "Project-based Learning of Hindi: Managing the Mixed Ability Classroom" presents a model of learning where varied heritage and non-heritage learners can develop their individual productive and receptive skills in Hindi by working on projects collaboratively with their classmates or family members. Project-based learning promotes meaningful use of language for completing a task, and it provides language learning opportunities in and out of classroom. The author gives concrete examples and outlines various stages of unplanned and planned production, reflections and evaluations.

In her article "The Role of Heritage Students in Incorporating Culture into Language Teaching",

Sungok Hong addresses how heritage students can act as facilitators in leading discussions on intercultural differences in a mixed classroom. Cross-cultural awareness can be raised by talking about artifacts of the target culture, or by discussing world views hidden in language structures, idioms and body language. The author elaborates on how culture can be taught through literature and the kinds of interactive activities that can be designed for teaching culture and language.

Renu Gupta in her article "Initial Literacy in Devanagari: What Matters to Learners" examines the traditional method of teaching Devanagari symbols using sound-symbol correspondence and two recent innovative approaches based on shape similarity of symbols and their frequency of occurrence. The author points out processing difficulties involved in the traditional method based on relevant research on writing systems. She suggests trying shape-similarity model with adult heritage learners as it had some success in adult literacy programs in India.

Vasu Renganthan's article "Formalizing the Knowledge of Heritage Learners: A Technology Based Approach" demonstrates how a technology rich curriculum can allow learners to activate their knowledge of informal style of language, and help them learn formal styles and become aware of regional dialects. The author discusses typical proficiency profiles of heritage learners of Tamil and compares linguistic needs, learning styles and learning contexts of the two groups of heritage learners: adult university students and teenage community-school children. He gives samples of his technologically rich interactive materials, including online activities suitable for both heritage and non-heritage learners.

Herman van Olphen in his article "A New Model for Teaching South Asian Languages: The University of Texas Hindi-Urdu Flagship" reports about the newly funded Hindi-Urdu Flagship program with a goal of taking students from Intermediate Level proficiency to Superior Level in Hindi and Urdu in all the four language skills in a period of four years. The author gives details about the admission criteria, curriculum, methodology and assessment. He also describes the junior year abroad component of the Flagship program, which has both heritage and non-heritage learners.

There are two items by A. Sean Pue on harnessing technology for South Asian language pedagogy. In his first write-up, "Web-Browser Extensions for South Asian Language Classrooms", the author provides information about three different tools that help convert a number of Indic fonts into Unicode, download and save videos from internet sites to a local disk for off-line viewing, and organize digital media for research or creating bibliographies. In his second piece on "Digital Encoding of South Asian languages: A Contemporary Guide to Unicode and Fonts", the author explains the what, why and how of Unicode with reference to South Asian languages written from left-to-right and right-to-left.

Naseem Hines presents a review of Usha Jain's "Advanced Hindi Grammar", published by the Center for South Asia Studies, Berkeley, CA in 2007.

As all of the contributors are also teachers of South Asian languages, we hope our readers will benefit from their analysis and experiential knowledge.