

# *Paka(sarita)an* in the Ilokano: Reclaiming a Native Tongue, Owning a Heritage

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## **Background and Introduction**

In the last decade and a half, I have dedicated myself to Ilokano language teaching in secondary and college contexts, and my previous personal and educational experiences are a reflection of my teaching practice. Teaching is my commitment and passion, and for Ilokano language teaching, a journey and a struggle. As an educator, one of the rewarding aspects of teaching is the rare opportunity for us to enter our students' lives through our formal and informal interactions with them. Students share the stories of their lives: divorce in the family, drug use, domestic violence, gang membership, and pregnancy are some of the examples. It is through these stories that we get to know them beyond their "student" identities. Shannon (1995) asserts the importance of stories,

...stories are important to people, politics, and education. Stories are how people make sense of themselves and their worlds. In young children's spontaneous stories that they act out as they play, we can see how they believe people relate to one another, who they hope to become, and how they will behave...As adults, the true and imaginary stories we wish to tell and believe suggest what we value most in this world. In a real sense, stories make people. For this reason stories are political. Whose stories get told? What can these stories mean? Who benefits from their telling? These are political questions because they address the way in which people's identities—their beliefs, attitudes, and values—are created and maintained. These identities determine how we live together in and out of schools as much as school rules or governmental laws. (xi).

As an Ilokano language teacher at the university and secondary level, it has been a practice for me to survey my Ilokano students on their reasons for taking the course.

This exercise gives me an indication of the language history background of my students as well as ideas for ongoing curricular innovation in heritage language teaching. Based on their responses, the majority of the students were heritage learners raised in homes where Ilokano was spoken. By listening to and rereading their histories, I saw the richness and complexities embedded in their stories. This inspired me to conduct an ethnographic study (Soria 2012) to research the bigger stories of these students in the contexts of their home, school, peer relationships, and community, highlighting the role of language as the connecting element in coming up with their *pakasaritaan* or history.

The scholarship on Philippine languages as community/heritage languages in Hawai'i is lacking and is very much under-researched. Underrepresented in the field, I hope that this preliminary work will further address the bigger issues of linguistic rights and access and social justice, especially in a state where a high premium is placed on cultural diversity.

This paper reports on one Filipino high school student's story, Rimat (a pseudonym), from an ethnographic study that I conducted at Nakem High School (NHS), a public high school in urban Honolulu on students learning Ilokano as a heritage language. Her story gives voice to students who are rarely given the opportunity to tell their own stories because their voices are not heard within schooling or in the mainstream discourse. The students' native language bridges their past and their future, and, when not silenced, it is through their native language that they tell their stories (Rivera 1999). But before I share her story, I provide an overview of the heritage language field in the United States, specifically of Ilokano in the diaspora and in the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE). Next, I describe the context of the study and *pakasaritaan* as a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical lens in the collecting of students' stories. The final section is the presentation and the "making sense" of the student's narrative.

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## A Snapshot of Heritage Language Education in the US

The teaching of heritage languages is not a recent phenomenon in the United States. In 1839, many states authorized bilingual education programs, specifically the teaching of German language to children of German heritage in public schools (Webb and Miller 2000). The passage and implementation of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 provided a forum for language policy and directly involved educational institutions to meet the needs of linguistic minority students.

While the term heritage language (HL) has been in use, particularly in Canada, since the early 1970s (Cummins 2005), it has gained significant ground in U.S. research, policy, and practice only since the 1990s, becoming a sub-discipline within the fields of foreign language and applied linguistics. According to Trifonas and Aravossitas (2014), education in heritage language “is linked to the processes of identity negotiation and cultural inheritance, through language that passes from generation to generation as a tangible legacy of the past that looks forward to a future” (1). Spanish continues to dominate the field in terms of research and publications.

With the rapidly changing demographics of the United States and the increasing numbers of speakers of languages other than English in our educational system, many students study a “foreign” language that is not entirely foreign for them, but is in fact the language spoken in their homes. This is true for many of the languages taught in Hawai‘i’s public schools. In the literature, two definitions of heritage language have predominated. Coming from the perspective of language revitalization, Fishman (2001) refers to the term as a language with which individuals have a *personal historical connection*. Fishman’s definition aligns very nicely with the result of a survey conducted by the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC) in 2007–2009 (Carriera 2009) on the motivation of heritage learners in learning their heritage language. Students who were surveyed overwhelmingly responded that they chose to study their home language because they were interested in learning about their cultural and linguistic roots and wanted to be able to communicate with their family in the United States, mirroring the responses of my college and high school students. Valdés (2001), on the other hand, offers an operational/program-level definition as a language spoken by a “student who is raised in a home where a non-English

language is spoken by one who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language” (1).

## Ilokano in the Diaspora and Hawai‘i DOE

Ilokano is a Western Austronesian language spoken in Northern Luzon, Philippines (Rubino 2000). It is the third largest language in the Philippines, after Tagalog and Cebuano. The Philippine National Statistics Office 2000 census put Ilokano native speakers at 7.7 million.

The Filipino community has grown since their arrival in Hawai‘i 109 years ago, making them the largest ethnic group in Hawai‘i (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Today, the vast majority of Filipinos in Hawai‘i are of Ilokano ancestry, at least 85 percent. Furthermore, 2008 data from the Hawai‘i State Judiciary ranked Ilokano as the second highest-demand language in the state courts (Office of Language Access 2009). The University’s Ilokano Language and Literature Program, for the past forty-three years, is the only one in the state of Hawai‘i and in the United States. It is a full program that offers a Bachelor of Arts with a concentration in Ilokano, as well as a minor and a certificate, and there is no other program like it in the world. Teaching the language has propelled documentation, conservation, and other activities such as collaborative efforts in linguistic research, seminars and workshops on literary and cultural productions, publications of textbooks and anthologies of Ilokano literature, and international conferences on Ilokano literature and culture and the intersections of this culture with national and global cultures.

Ilokano is listed as one of the official languages under the World Languages program of the Hawai‘i DOE. Ilokano is currently taught at two public high schools on the island of O‘ahu. This year, the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) graduated the first-ever licensed Ilokano teacher in the state of Hawai‘i.

## The Methodology of *Pakasariitaan*

The student’s story presented in this paper is part of a qualitative study of Ilokano heritage language learners at a public high school in urban Honolulu, using critical ethnography (CE) articulated as *paka(sarita)an*. The intersection between *sarita* and *pakasariitaan* (*paka+sarita+an*) is that one invokes/summons the other, hence, the story in history and history in the story (Agcaoili 2006; 2010). As in CE, the Ilokano

traditional discourse of *saritaan*/talking story, socially grounded in the immediate contexts in which people live and work, accounts for the importance of dialogue and negotiation. *Saritaan* offers a space to give or help give voice to young people who are the inheritors of the language and culture of Ilokano and Amianan (North/Northern) peoples. It is language that allows us to tell and draw up our *sarita*/stories, and by building from these stories, we create *pakasaritaan*/history embodying our understanding of the world, of experiences, and ultimately ourselves. Our knowledge and experiences are intrinsically linked to our language. Since a language carries the conception of the world that speaks it, our native language—the language of our students, is not only the carrier of knowledge but also, as stated by Freire and Macedo (1987), “knowledge itself” (53). The students are the focus, and their voices carry forward indigenous meanings and experiences that are in opposition to dominant discourses and practices (Fine 1994). Bringing voice to the informants and giving them authority in characterizing their experiences are important foundations in which this study is based and a qualitative research methodology allows for that, articulated by the Ilokano *paka(sarita)an*.

In the Ilokano *pakasaritaan*, the researcher assumes the *manong* (older male sibling) role while the students take the *ading* (younger sibling) role. In the context of the Ilokano family, the *manong* is perceived as the *nanaknakman/nanaknakem* (more conscious), and the *ading* shares and/or confides to the *manong* because there is trust that exists between the two. The *manong* provides encouragement, support, and advice to the *ading*. In other words, the “opening up” that occurs during *saritaan* allows for an intervention to happen, which makes the *saritaan* method powerful. There are dynamics in the reciprocity between the speakers—the *manong* and the *ading*. There is trust involved in the exchange of information. The kinship of the *manong-ading* relationship is captured in *saritaan*. The students allowed me to enter their world in (re)telling their stories. In welcoming me to their world, my responsibility is to listen to what they have to say and to find meaning in what they have said.

### RIMAT: The Voice of a Heritage Learner

Rimat’s story starts off with an excerpt of her valedictory address delivered in May 2011 at NHS. Rimat was one of

the ten valedictorians of her graduating class that year. Her speech contextualizes the totality of her experiences and accomplishments, while also giving respect and recognition to the support and sacrifices of her family, friends, teachers, and mentors.

No matter who you are or where you came from you will always be an Agila (a pseudonym for the school mascot) and a member of the class of 2011. We all have our own stories and memories of the past. That’s what makes us each unique and different. We may be labeled and classified depending on what we have accomplished throughout high school, but that doesn’t determine who we are and who we will become...

NHS, Rimat’s alma mater, has served the community for more than 75 years and continues to have one of the largest student body and staff populations of any high school in Hawai‘i. It is situated in a community that is made up of lower socio-economic families with diverse ethnic backgrounds, but predominantly Filipino. Rimat describes her community this way:

There’s really friendly people in Lugar. Like everybody pretty much knows where everybody lives... But as I got older, it was more scary. It’s too crowded. There’s like houses on every little square foot. There seems to be druggies or like you hear things at night. There was an incident when someone stole something from our house because we left it on the porch.

Lugar has a rich history involving immigrants. Known as the place of transition, many immigrants, including Rimat’s parents, have settled and planted their seed of hard work in this community. They had built their own homes, established their own businesses, and raised their children who are now following and/or surpassing the footsteps of their parents. Nevertheless, Rimat grew up in a home where she was surrounded by people who supported her and made sure she grew up healthy.

Growing up, it was just me, my mom, my dad, and my brother and my grandma Rosita. So my mom’s mom, she would watch me, she would cook me food and clean. She would scold me. I remember when I was like four or five.

In Rimat’s narrative, we see the physical presence of a parent, a mother fulfilling her responsibilities to her child as evidenced in the cooking and cleaning inside the

home. These tasks are necessary so that the child is raised healthy. We also see the presence of a grandmother who is there to support the child in the home. Guerrero et al. (2006) found that, among Filipino adolescents in Hawai'i, family support and higher socioeconomic status (SES) are important protective factors against academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties.

Similarly, Rimat's home provided a rich input of the Ilokano language. At home, Rimat was immersed in the Ilokano language through her constant and intimate interactions with the "flower ladies" who worked at her mother's floral shop. Alongside, she heard tidbits of the life of these women before they came to Hawai'i; for example, the use of a rubber slipper in place of an eraser and the use of sugarcane as toothpaste.

From these stories, the value of hard work, humility, and self-reliance were instilled in her at a very young age, exemplified in her work ethic as a student. In high school, Rimat excelled academically and participated in various extra curricular activities.

Ilokano is mostly spoken at home. My mom scolds me in Ilokano. She talks to me in Ilokano when she tells me to do something. When she's telling me a story like when her workers are not listening to her and she gets "high blood" and she needs to tell somebody. Or she tells me a story; I don't know...anykine stories. It starts off as English and then she gets tired of speaking English so she speaks in Ilokano.

I grew up listening to Ilokano. My mom has a flower business and it's at our house and it's downstairs so when I was small I would go downstairs. So when I was small I would just sit and watch or like I would give them flower 'cuz they make leis, right, and if they needed more flowers I would give them flowers. Or if they asked me if I wanted food, so they would give me some snacks or they would tell me to go sleep 'cuz I was still a kid.

All of her workers are Filipino and they speak Ilokano so they're older people so of course they're going to speak Ilokano. I would always ask them what does it mean, what does it mean 'cuz I didn't understand. If I were sitting next to an old lady, I would ask her what are you saying and they would try to explain it. Sometimes they don't know, they can't find the English word for it so I just ask my mom. If my mom doesn't know then they try to find a simple word or they say "kasla [just like] something, something" and then I try to figure it out.

And like little by little, I learned.

One time they talked about when they were young. 'Cuz I asked my mom for an eraser and they told me, "Oh you know when I was young I used to use my slipper as an eraser." Or if they found out that there was toothpaste on sale at Long's and they're like, "Oh, let's go to Long's to buy toothpaste" or would say, "You know when I was small we never have toothpaste. We used the sugarcane."

So I learned about like history also. Some of them like also told me when the Japanese people went to the Philippines, they were young and one of the old ladies told me they witnessed somebody's head getting shot off.

As I got older, I would tell them what to do. Like which orders to do first, "Aramidenyo 'diay order ni May," ["Do May's order,"] 'cuz May is the lady's name. And they would ask for the pattern, "Ania ti patternna?" ["What's the pattern?"] "Three one, two one." Or they ask what kind of flower, how many inches.

If I don't have meetings I'm usually talking or doing homework. It depends. Sometimes it's for Student Government, sometimes it's for the National Honor Society (NHS). Sometimes I tutor for NHS. For student government I facilitate the meetings. For the NHS, I'm the secretary so I take down minutes.

No one, nobody, like my mom didn't tell me you should join NHS; you should be in student government. I kind of fell into the place on my own. My parents know that I'm involved. They stopped calling me when I come home late 'cuz they know I'm not out smoking, drinking, or partying.

The stories of hard work she heard and witnessed growing up inspired her to dream her own dream and work equally as hard as her parents. She studied hard and that became an expectation from her parents and other people. While Rimat was engaged in her undertakings, her parents were right by her side thinking of her well-being.

So after awhile it was an expectation like, "Oh yeah, you're going to be a valedictorian." Like when I got that C in Calculus in my grade check, my dreams started to crumble. I was like, "It's ok if I'm not valedictorian," but deep down you were like "You worked so hard for it; why just give up this last term where it actually counts?"

I had a C for Calculus for my midterm grade check and my mom was mad at me because I had that C and she was like, "Why do you have a C?"

And it was hard for me to explain to her that calculus is hard. She goes, “Yeah but you’re always studying. How come you have a C?”

They always tell me to study hard; keep doing what I’m doing. But they don’t help me. But sometimes they scold me for not going to sleep. Sometimes they scold me for being on the computer.

They always say that because they want us to do better knowing that they suffered and that they have to work so hard just to have the things that I have now. Like they have to work twice as hard.

Here we see a continued support of the parents to the child. The constant reminder is an indication that her parents are very supportive and caring about her academics as well as her personal well-being; but more importantly, they do not want to see their child go through the same challenges and hardships that they faced. But despite the pressure and the rigor of her academics, Rimat attributes her success to the encouragement of her peers, teachers, and mentors in her school.

The people I hang out with, we encourage each other to do well in school. That’s why I do well in school, I guess, because people look up to me—the underclassmen... There are teachers on campus that do care for their students but there are teachers on campus I never personally had but I heard stories about them and they don’t care about their students. Like they’ll give you work and they expect you to do it without explaining it. There are teachers who are personable so that you can talk to them. You can go to them during recess or like when you have someone to talk to or you need guidance. Like, “Oh, Mister or Miss, I’m failing my class. Do you know what I can do?”

Although it was not her first choice, Rimat grew to appreciate the Ilokano class that she took at NHS. The Ilokano classroom provided her the space to further explore her roots and this is something that she appreciated. In the exploration process, her immigrant home and her own community became her resources.

I wasn’t supposed to take Ilokano at NHS. I was supposed to take Accounting but the class was full. So I went to the registrar and I was like, “Okay, I need to take language course anyway.” So there was no language one. It was all language two. It was like Japanese II, Japanese III, Spanish II, Spanish III. Ilokano was the only opening. I was like, “might as well take it” so I took it and knew the simple stuff.

I really enjoyed the family tree project because it kinda forced you to figure out what your family was about. In Ilokano II, you had to interview your parent or grandparent about what they think life was like in Hawai’i or like when they did come to Hawai’i, what was their reaction? How did they feel? And we had to write a paper. I don’t remember and then we had to record it. We had to transcribe it. Oh my gosh, that was crazy! It was interesting learning about the history because like you speak Filipino but you don’t know how it originated. Like I learned that like the Spanish, like the Spaniards, occupied the Philippines for a long time and that’s why some people’s last name may sound a bit Spanish because of that.

Being in Ilokano class, you kind of appreciate your culture more and you understand where you parents come from and what life was like back then.

Rimat reflects on her experiences and the values that she learned from her parents. Living in a community that is rich in history and also rich in negative attributions, the supportive and caring home kept her in place.

Like I wouldn’t be the same person I am today if it wasn’t for the experiences that I had and if it wasn’t for what my parents taught and my parents wouldn’t know what they know if their parents didn’t teach them that. They taught me like always respect your elders no matter what culture. You always address them by grandma, auntie, uncle, manang, manong.

Rimat graduated with her bachelor’s degree in Public Health from a mainland university in Spring 2015. She will start her graduate program in Speech Pathology in Fall 2015 in the same university.

## Conclusion and Implications

The youth in this paper expressed pride, respect, and appreciation for her language, culture, and heritage. Part of this is the result of the caring and nurturing home that she grew up in and reinforced by her Ilokano language class which valued her heritage language and culture. The Ilokano class provided the space for the student to bring her identiti(es) and her own understandings of Ilokanoness that she has negotiated through ongoing interactions within her diasporic community.

Heritage language learning needs to start while the students are young. Advocates of heritage language stress

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the importance of programs that seek to preserve heritage languages, especially in light of the constant increases in immigration. Like the story of Rimat, many students possess this invaluable knowledge from home that needs cultivation and fostering by communities, cultural institutions, and stakeholders themselves. Putting languages at the center of our educational experience values languages as resources that can aide students' academic success and professional undertakings.

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