

Latino Parent Perspectives: How to Promote and Implement Additive Bilingualism

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Abstract

There is limited research that investigates parent perspectives with respect to their early elementary school children's home language use. The findings reported in this article are part of a dissertation study on parent perceptions of bilingualism conducted in Northern California. To fill the gap in research, this study investigates how first generation Latino parents create an additive bilingual (English and Spanish) environment in the home. The findings include home language maintenance strategies that, in some cases, contributed to children's increased use of Spanish. Limitations to the study include selection of subjects was not random, the number of participants was limited to six parents, and the study took place in the researcher's school.

Introduction

Despite the fact that many Latino (people of Latin American origin) families in the United States speak Spanish at home, first generation immigrant parents are noticing that their children are losing fluency and interest in their home language (Brodie, Levin, Steffenson & Valdez, 2002). Research suggests that Latino families struggle to preserve intergenerational communication by incorporating the use of Spanish in the home (Schechter & Bayley, 2002). Latino immigrant parents have historically understood the necessity to learn English in order to have social, academic, economic and even personal success in the United States (Cummins, 2000; Portes & Hao, 1998; Valdés, 2001). They also want their children to gain competent academic English skills (Fishman, 1991; Schechter & Bayley, 2002; Suárez, 2002; Wang, 2009; Wiley, 2000; Wong Fillmore, 1991; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006).

Nonetheless, while research shows that Latino parents want their children to maintain the home language (Fishman, 1991; Lutz, 2006; Wong Fillmore, 1991), they often receive the message that English is preferable and more valued than speaking Spanish. As second and third generation Latino children speak less Spanish, while showing a preference for speaking English (Brodie et al., 2002), the ability and desire to use the home language begins to recede. This presents an enormous challenge to Latino parents who wish to preserve the home language and culture.

Background and Need

According to the California Department of Finance, 54% of K-12 public school students in California identified as Hispanic or Latino in 2015. This data does not speak to the numbers of families who choose to speak Spanish at home, but it is significant that the majority of students in California are Latino. A study conducted by Brodie et al. (2002), in which 3,000 Latino adults living in the United States participated, found the following: Almost three fourths (72%) of first generation Latinos speak Spanish as their primary language, but only one in four (24%) are bilingual, and 4% speak primarily English. "In contrast, second generation Latinos are mostly divided between those who are English dominant (46%) and those who are bilingual (47%). Third generation or higher Hispanics are largely English dominant (78%)" (p.16). One Mexican born grandmother living near her children and grandchildren in San Antonio, Texas lamented:

It would be beautiful for ... my granddaughters to truly understand what I wanted to say because it was a way of, getting closer to them and knowing them, or for them to know me ... And it seems that it's SWEETER in Spanish, more emotional ... But, well, they don't understand me in, in Spanish, well, how am I going to tell them these things? (Schechter & Bayley, 2002, p.74)

The yearning for a lifelong, meaningful relationship with her granddaughter heard from this grandmother's voice resonates with Latino immigrant families throughout the United States.

Purpose

This study seeks to explore home language maintenance strategies used by Latino immigrant parents of elementary school children at a public charter school in the San Francisco Bay Area. Specifically, what exactly are Latino parents doing in the homespace to ensure that their children are speaking Spanish in addition to English? Moreover, this study may advise parents of all language backgrounds who wish to reverse home language loss or resistance. The following research question guides this study: What are parent perspectives on how to promote and implement additive bilingualism?

Reversing Language Shift

Fishman's theory of Reversing Language Shift (RLS) is one framework that takes an additive approach to bilingualism. An additive approach to bilingualism suggests that the home and dominant languages are both valued as resources, and are therefore worth preserving. Fishman (1991) and other researchers in the field of socio-linguistics (Lutz, 2006; Portes & Hao, 1998; Schecter & Bayley, 1997, 2002; Shannon, 1995; Tse, 2001; Wong Fillmore, 1991) have studied speech communities that are in danger of dying, as well as those whose language is widely used. Although the language is widely used throughout the United States, Portes and Hao (1998) argue that second-generation children of Latino immigrants are speaking less Spanish, and prefer to speak English. Therefore, RLS is an approach that speech communities have successfully utilized.

Subtractive Vs. Additive Bilingualism

Wallace Lambert (1981) first made the distinction between subtractive and additive bilingualism, noting that learning a second language can either lead to bilingualism or monolingualism as the home language erodes. Therefore, subtractive bilingualism refers to the learning of the dominant language, which replaces the home language (Lambert, 1981; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Additive bilingualism, on the other hand, would indicate a process in which the home language is maintained as the dominant language is learned. This approach and attitude allows children, not only to learn and develop proficiency in the home language, but to appreciate their parents and their roles in society (Cummins, 1994; Lambert, 1981). Lambert stressed that "mainstreamers" (majority group members) must first recognize the two faces of bilingualism – subtractive and additive. There are many effective and researched additive strategies, but perhaps mainstreamers must also embrace the attitude that accompanies the essence of these strategies for which Wilder Penfield once argued, "the bilingual brain is the better brain" (Penfield, 1965).

Family Efforts and Spanish Maintenance

Several researchers have explored effective strategies or approaches that Latino parents use in order to maintain the home language, while still supporting proficiency in English for their children. Schecter & Bayley (2002), who studied the language socialization practices of Mexican-background families living in Texas and California, learned that families in both locales "essentially concur in the view that school is a place to acquire academic competence in the dominant societal language ... the responsibility for Spanish maintenance rests primarily with the family" (p. 188). Ultimately, bilingual immigrant families may differ from one another regarding how outside factors (i.e. school, media, law) affect their children's home language maintenance, but the role of family as vital and central to language maintenance is generally universal. In order to best understand how parents choose strategies to maintain the home language, I explored a variety of qualitative studies that include

Latinos from different regions of North and Central America, and Puerto Rico. Moreover, the studies incorporated Latino families that now reside in various parts of the United States, as well as in Canada.

A study conducted by Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo (2006) focused on Latino immigrant parents' perspectives about their children's bilingualism. These 16 parents (all except one were from Mexico) were involved in their children's education and language use, and employed the following strategies to help their children maintain Spanish: attended community and religious events held in Spanish; prohibited the use of English in the home; frequently visited monolingual Spanish relatives; provided opportunities for reading and writing in Spanish at home. The purposeful strategies in this study, and in others, would unfortunately not suffice in every family. Some parents were forced to remain resolute in the face of relatives who criticized the "Spanish Only" approach in the home, while others cut back significantly on visits to relatives in Mexico due to financial hardship. The low socioeconomic status and lack of English proficiency of all parents forced many to accept any available job opportunity, even if it meant losing time to actively enforce the maintenance of Spanish speaking and culture at home. This challenge resonates with bilingual families all over the United States.

Methodology

Research Setting

This study was conducted during the 2011-2012 school year on the campus and in the neighborhood of a K-8 public charter school in Marin County, approximately 20 minutes outside of San Francisco. The school, where I was one of two first grade teachers, is in a suburban setting, serving approximately 250 students at the time of the study. It is comprised of an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of families (Education Data, 2012), including the following percentages reflecting data at the time of the study: 38% Latino, 31% white, 18% African American, 8% Asian, and 5% two or more races. Also, 26% of the students are English Language Learners, the majority of whom speak Spanish as a native language. As for economic makeup, 53% of students receive free and reduced priced lunch, which is determined by family income.

Participants

The participants were selected from the school's pool of parents of English Language Learners (ELL) and Latino parents of children who are fully English proficient (FEP). Initially, a brief questionnaire in both Spanish and English was distributed to all parents of ELL students (Enstice, 2012, pp.163-165). In order to determine whether or not parents were eligible to participate they had to fulfill the following requirements: 1. Born in a Latin American country 2. Speak Spanish at home with at least one other family member 3. Available and willing to participate in this study 4. Want their children to learn how to speak, read and write

Spanish. Ultimately, all six participants - three males and three females - were parents of students in a first grade class and were born in the following countries: Chile, two from Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. Two participants were also co-researchers who assisted with the following: transcribing selected text in both English and Spanish in order to identify emergent themes, analyze data sets once themes were identified, and organize analysis to align with the research question.

Participatory Action Research

A participatory action research design, with an emphasis on dialogue and narrative, allows for relationship building, questioning, reflecting on personal experiences, and most importantly, planning for action in order to address concerns of home language loss. Five group dialogues took place weekly or biweekly from January through March, 2012. During these meetings, the researcher followed up on previously asked questions, making time for written responses and oral sharing. Given the co-researchers' desire to rely more on dialogue and less on written responses, the latter form of sharing was used sparingly. In addition to group meetings, three individual interviews were conducted to clarify questions and to allow for elaboration. The researcher also attended a meeting with the school's English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC) and two of the participants. Finally, field notes were taken throughout the data collection and analysis period.

Findings

Not surprisingly, participants agreed that their children generally preferred to speak English with their peers, even when the family and the school tried to promote bilingualism. They noted the pervasiveness of English, and parents would need to have a plan if they aspired to home language maintenance. The participants agreed that their six and seven year old children were at an ideal age to either continue maintaining the use of Spanish at home, or to reverse the loss of Spanish. The researchers offered six specific and effective strategies.

Consistent Use of Spanish Only in the Home

Most of the participants had attempted to implement a Spanish Only rule in the home, however they had varying degrees of success with the rule. Some participants' own family members urged them to speak only English in the home, while others who came to the U.S. as children spoke mostly Spanish in their households. Other participants had feared that their children could be unprepared for school if they spoke only Spanish for the first three or four years before entering school. Those who were less strict in enforcing the Spanish Only Rule, which most had attempted, were seeing different results with their children. Henriette and Rubén, a married couple from Nicaragua, were perceived by others as having lots of success with Spanish maintenance. They encouraged others to enforce the Spanish Only rule, but to avoid punishing or criticizing their children when making mistakes.

Visit the Home Country

Some participants had their children visit the home country as a strategy to connect to their family's roots, but also with the intention of maintaining the home language. Nicolás, for example, explained that after becoming more strict about the Spanish Only rule in the house since our first meeting, his daughter "understands a little bit more now and she speaks a little bit more Spanish. She's in Mexico now [visiting a relative with her mom] ... there nobody speaks English so she has to speak Spanish" (Enstice, 2012, p.110). He added that she became more interested in speaking Spanish after visiting with her extended family in Mexico.

Provide Written Homework in Spanish

Although most participants had not provided homework in Spanish to their children, Henriette and Rubén found that this was a very effective strategy. They emphasized the importance of age appropriate workbooks and reading material in Spanish, creating routines, being creative (i.e. offering rewards for homework completion) and persistent, offering praise and encouragement, and making learning fun in Spanish. While only two participants actually utilized this strategy and found it to be effective, all agreed that this would certainly help them reverse the loss of Spanish in the home.

Access to Music, Television, Video, and Print Materials in Spanish

Playing music, watching TV and movies, and reading books in Spanish appealed to all of their children, making this strategy somewhat easier to implement. In some cases their children's prior teachers had asked participants to start speaking and reading in English only at home. Assuming the teacher's advice was in their children's best interest, some participants followed that advice. After learning about the benefits of bilingualism during our dialogues and through their own research, all agreed that the teachers' advice was, in fact, misguided.

Explain the Importance of Bilingualism and Biculturalism

Speaking critically about valuing bilingualism and biculturalism with children helps them understand why parents speak to them in Spanish. Participants discovered that their children seemed to embrace the idea of bilingualism the more they had discussions about it. Explaining that others at work, for example, admired Henriette's bilingual skills provided a real world connection to her son about the benefits of bilingualism. Nicolás and Gloria, a married couple, would speak to their daughter after returning from Mexico. Would it be helpful to be able to speak Spanish to her grandmother and other relatives? They found this to be a catalyst for discussion about bilingualism with their daughter.

Older Children Speak to Younger Siblings in Spanish Only

Participants suggested having a plan in place before the birth of subsequent children. Henriette explained,

"I hear from other parents that when you have a second child, the first one will talk to the little one in English only. And then with the second child it's going to be harder" (Enstice, 2012, p.114). Hence, being proactive and having a plan early would hopefully make home language maintenance with a second child less challenging.

Action in the Community and Recommendations

The co-researchers and participants decided to share "Parent Perspectives on Strategies for Home Language Maintenance for Elementary School Children (Enstice, 2012, p.170) at a school English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC). As this meeting was small in attendance, it was collectively decided to share again at the first ELAC meeting of the following school year. The Assistant Head of School offered to include this document – designed by these researchers - in the school's ELAC Master Plan. Future studies might address home language loss amongst elementary school children within other language groups or geographic locations. Research focusing on the collaboration between elementary school teachers and parents who speak their heritage language at home may generate valuable findings from which parents, teachers and school administrators could benefit.

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