

Nurturing Spanish-Speaking English Learners to Be Bilinguals in the Rural Midwest----

Challenges and Possible Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from 10 Latino families in rural areas of a Midwestern state, this paper examines home language and home literacy practices of families with school-age English learner (EL) children. Interviews with parents of Spanish-English ELs were analyzed to determine patterns in language use and literacy practices and to identify their needs and challenges in raising bilingual children. Results indicate that while parents overwhelmingly express a desire for their children to be bilingual and biliterate, home, school, and community practices may present barriers in attaining this goal.

Keywords: bilingualism, biliteracy, Spanish-speaking ELs, rural Midwest, home literacy, parental involvement

INTRODUCTION

In response to the rise of globalization, bilingualism and bilingual education have received growing attention. With language as a resource paradigm, bilingualism and biliteracy are believed to be desirable and beneficial outcomes for students, which can bring academic and cognitive advantages, as well as promote cross-cultural understanding and communication (Barac & Bialystok, 2011; Bialystok, Peets, & Moreno, 2014; Garcia, 2009; Gort, 2006; Han, 2012;). Hence, an increasing number of American immigrant families view raising bilingual

children as a critical family goal. In addition, promoting bilingualism and biliteracy allows immigrant parents to maintain their heritage language and culture and pass them along to their children. Yet, research indicates that despite these desires, successfully raising a bilingual child in the United States is difficult to accomplish, as many immigrant families find their children are unable to maintain their heritage language and instead become monolingual English speakers (Schmid, 2013; Wong Fillmore, 2000). What has held back immigrant families in nurturing bilingual children? Previous research has identified some possible factors that can impact bilingual learning: language opportunities and use, parental involvement, parents' beliefs and education, home literacy, and community. Among these, parental support and involvement have been viewed as perhaps the most important factors related to successful bilingual cultivation (Arriagada, 2005; Brown, 2011; Caesar & Nelson, 2014; MacLeod, Pirrie, McCluskey, & Cullen, 2013), largely because first language usage begins at home.

Despite the documented importance of the home environment, nearly all research on the influence of parental and home factors has been largely limited to urban areas that have high immigrant populations (e.g. Johnson, et al., 2016; Vera et al., 2012). Thus, the experiences of English learners (ELs) in Spanish-speaking families in rural areas remain largely unexplored. The rural Midwest draws attention because, as one of the most important agricultural economies in the U.S., it attracts a growing number of Spanish-speaking immigrants who are in need of work. This study focuses on a small, rural Midwest town, which, despite having the largest percentage of ELs in the state, is not well prepared to meet the literacy needs of its growing EL population (Mader, 2016). The literacy practices of rural Midwestern EL students may not be fully distinct from those in other contexts; however, literacy researchers understand that particular literacy practices are shaped by the communities that families inhabit (Bomer &

Maloch, 2012; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). To better understand the biliteracy needs and practices of rural students, it is important to first understand their literacy practices outside of classrooms. Yet, little research has been conducted on Spanish-speaking families in this region, and what the learning environment is like for ELs in small, rural Midwestern communities remains largely unexplored.

Parental Involvement and Bilingualism

Research has examined how parental involvement is associated with children's language development (Carroll, 2013; Tare & Gelman, 2011). Studies have indicated that parents' commitment to the use of the first language at home has great impact on a child's bilingualism (Houwer, 2007; Juan-Garau & Pérez-Vidal, 2001; Park & Sarkar, 2007). Dixon, Zhao, Quiroz, and Shin (2012) find that the communication at home in successful bilingual learners' families is frequently conducted in their first language. Houwer (2007) investigated home language input present in 1,899 families and concluded that when parents both used the L1, children had a better chance of becoming successful bilingual speakers.

However, research on immigrant parents shows that they may suppress the use of the L1 in order to promote English. They tend in most cases to prioritize English learning instead of preserving their native language since English is an essential requirement for a professional career (Brown, 2011; Suarez, 2002). Indeed, many immigrant parents work diligently to further their own acquisition of the language. They believe that speaking English at home will help their children learn English faster (Kouritzin, 2000; Suarez, 2002). Those parents who elect to speak English exclusively at home, however, may contribute directly to their children's loss of their L1. Suarez (2002) reports some Spanish families use '90% English' at home, because they believe the children's "experiences will be more positive if his home language is consistent

with the language of the school” (p. 523). In this sense, immigrant parents can function as agents who suppress L1 use and promote English (Brown, 2011), ultimately forcing Spanish into the background.

In many schools, immigrant children receive a clear message that only English is acceptable and that Spanish is not welcome in the classroom. This results in students feeling that their heritage language is not desired, and they start to feel ashamed of using it (Moses, 2000). In order to adapt to the English-speaking school community, EL students may feel pressure to put more emphasis on English language acquisition while giving up their L1. Given this messaging, parental involvement becomes all the more critical in supporting bilingualism and biliteracy development. Parents need to shoulder the responsibility of protecting their children from total English dominance. Otherwise, if they also appropriate a negative attitude against the use of their L1, then it may be lost totally and children may become English monolingual (Brown, 2011; Wong Fillmore, 2000).

Home Literacy and Bilingualism

Many scholars advocate the primary role of home literacy in affecting the development of literacy skills in both monolingual (van Bergen, van Zuijen, Bishop, & de Jong, 2017; Yeo, Ong, & Ng, 2014) and Spanish–English bilingual (Bitetti & Hammer, 2016; Kremin Arredondo, Hsu, Satterfield, & Kovelman, 2016) populations. Home literacy is important because it lays the foundation for students as they prepare to enter the classroom. Since many immigrant children attend primarily English-only schools, examining the home literacy environment may provide more insight into underlying factors that can determine children’s degrees of bilingualism and biliteracy. In order to understand how school-age ELs develop their

literacy competencies, it is important to get the picture of their home literacy practices and resources.

Home literacy can refer to both the literacy practices that occur between children and other family members, as well as the literacy materials available in the home, such as texts, opportunities, and technological resources (Compton-Lilly, 2017). It is important to consider the range of literacy practices in which ELs engage using different languages and various modalities, including watching television, videos, movies; listening to music and the radio; using computers and smartphones; texting; and doing homework. Looking closely at the languages present in literacy materials, like books, print materials, and educational toys, is critical for gaining an understanding of the opportunities available to generate meaningful interactions between parents and children and support the development of children's literacy skills. (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1998).

Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis

In literacy development among ELs, what is the role and impact that L1 usage has on the literacy skills of the L2? According to the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, L1 literacy provides a valuable foundation for literacy in the L2. Cummins (2000) argues there is a strong correlation between students' L1 and L2 literacy skills when they have the opportunity to develop literacy in both languages. Soltero-González (2009) adds that “children's use of their home language is a source of support for English development and learning” (p.283). Findings from Van Gelderen et al. (2004, 2007) indicate that the L1 does play a role in the development of literacy skills in the L2, and L1 reading skills may be a predictor of L2 reading proficiency. Kremin et al. (2016) also found that “early and systematic biliteracy exposure” at home and through afterschool programs can influence children's L2 reading skills.

Given this research, it is critical to attend to ELs' literacy practices in both L1 and L2 to identify positive factors contributing to literacy acquisition. As mentioned before, more research is needed on home literacy factors impacting English-Spanish bilingual children's language and biliteracy development in rural areas. For example, the timing of children's exposure to each language, the amount and type of input in the two languages, the dominance of one language over another, and the interaction between the two languages may be associated with language and literacy outcomes in ELs. The current study aims to address some of the gaps in the research by exploring parental involvement in home literacy practices of Spanish-English ELs, identifying the available resources in the home and parents' perceptions of raising bilingual children. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1. How do Spanish-speaking parents perceive bilingual education?*
- 2. What are the current home literacy practices and resources of EL students and their families?*
- 3. What challenges and suggestions for schools and communities do parents identify in educating bilingual children?*

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected during interviews with 10 families living in a rural community in the Midwest U.S. Interviewees were parents of students who speak a language other than English at home and were part of a larger study on home and school factors related to the development of bilingualism and biliteracy. All families spoke Spanish, and interviews were conducted in either Spanish (n=5) or English (n=3), depending on the interviewee's preference. Interviews consisted of 28 questions, covering the following topics (see Appendix A for the full list of questions):

- the child's language development history
- current language use within the child's home
- home language and literacy practices
- the interviewees' views on benefits and challenges of bilingualism
- the interviewees' advice and strategies on raising bilingual children
- the interviewees' suggestions to educators and communities related to supporting bilingualism

Interviews were audio recorded, and the interviewers took notes and wrote up a synopsis of the responses immediately after each interview concluded in case there were any technical issues with the recording equipment. The recorded interviews were then condensed into "3-minute summaries," in which the Spanish interviews were also translated into English. These summaries divided the interview into chunks, which captured the main points discussed during each 3-minute period. Researchers were careful to ensure that information pertaining to each of the interview questions was represented in the summaries. Similarly, the synopses prepared by interviewers included information that covered participants' responses to each of the interview questions, so that the two sources were very similar in terms of content.

Eight of the 3-minute summaries and two of the interviewer-reported synopses were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2018). The two synopses were used because the audio recording equipment experienced technical issues during those interviews. Qualitative data analysis conducted via computerized programs like NVivo is being used with increasing frequency in education research because it helps researchers conduct qualitative analysis more methodically by identifying themes across multiple data

sources, including interviews, videos, photos, and websites. Hilal and Alabri (2013) contend that this, in turn, makes qualitative data analysis easier, “may improve the quality of research,” and “yields more professional results” (p. 182).

The data were coded for the following purposes: (a) to capture the participants’ responses to the interview questions, (b) to determine the comparative amount of English and Spanish used in a particular context, and (c) to capture other information about the participants’ language use within the family. The interview question codes corresponded directly with the questions in Appendix A. The language use codes were designed to indicate a spectrum of relative language use, ranging from speaking exclusively either English or Spanish, to using more of one language than the other, to using both languages equally. The codes capturing other language-related information included instances where participants reported a family member’s proficiency in a given language, language use with friends and extended family, use of languages besides English and Spanish, and references to language mixing or switching. These codes were added because they were mentioned in multiple interviews and therefore seemed to capture information about language use that might be relevant to a range of families. Table 1 shows the codes that corresponded to comparative amount of language use and other information about language use.

Table 1
NVivo Codes for Language Use and Other Language Information

Code	Description
<i>Language Use</i>	
Only English	When mentioning language use in only English; can be communication, reading, etc.

More English than Spanish	When mentioning language use in English more than Spanish; can be communication, reading, etc.
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Both English and Spanish	When mentioning language use in both Spanish and English; can be communication, reading, etc.
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More Spanish than English	When mentioning language use in Spanish more than English; can be communication, reading, etc.
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Only Spanish	When mentioning language use in only Spanish; can be communication, reading, etc.
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Other Language Information

Language Proficiency	When talking about language proficiency
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Language use with other family and friends	Language use with neighborhood friends, cousins, other family members, etc.
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Other languages than English and Spanish	When mentioning language use in other languages; can be communication, reading, etc.
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Translanguaging, Code-switching, Mixing, Confusing (etc)	Specific mention of translanguaging, Spanglish, mixing language, confusing language, etc.
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Other comments about languages	Other comments about language use that do not fit into other nodes
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One researcher coded all 10 summaries, with an experienced coder double-coding 20% of the data. Cohen's kappa was calculated to determine reliability across the two coders. The average kappa was .71, indicating substantial reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977).

For each interview summary, the codes corresponding to the interview questions were applied first to ensure that that information for each of those topics was captured within the summaries. Coders then coded all instances where the use of English and/or Spanish was

mentioned using the language use codes. This allowed for patterns of language use in different home contexts to emerge (e.g., only Spanish used with the child at birth, both English and Spanish used for homework, more Spanish than English used when watching television). Finally, the other language codes were used, when relevant, to capture other information about the families' use of or attitudes toward language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed there are gaps between parents' desire for nurturing bilingual children and the actual home literacy practice and available resources. All 10 of the families interviewed expressed a strong desire for raising bilingual children. However, nine out of ten families reported only English is used in some of their home literacy practices; for instance, some children only speak English to their parents or siblings; some families only have English books and home literacy practices such as reading, entertainment, and homework are only conducted in English. In addition, other written materials from outside sources (e.g., schools, stores, community organizations) are also often in English only. Table 2 summarizes interviewees' references to English and/or Spanish use in relationship to home language and literacy materials and practices, demonstrating families' tendencies to use either only English or a mix of English and Spanish in all cases.

Table 2
References to English and/or Spanish in Home Language and Literacy Materials and Practices

	Only English	More English than Spanish	Both English and Spanish	More Spanish than English	Only Spanish
Print Materials	6	3	1	0	0

Reading	9	3	0	0	0
Television/Movies	4	0	5	1	1
Music, Radio	9	2	4	1	1
Computers/Smartphones	6	0	2	0	3
Texting	3	1	2	0	4
School Documents	6	0	5	0	0
Homework	3	0	1	0	1

Parents also expressed concerns that there are not bilingual programs available for their children. One parent mentioned their relatives' children in Chicago are fluent bilingual speakers, which was viewed as a beneficial outcome of local a bilingual program. The parent voiced frustration that no equivalent bilingual programs are available to them locally. However, for some families, even when there is such a program, their immigration status deters them from participating in these programs. This is particularly true in the current social context. Even public school education in general has been affected: news headlines such as *Trump's immigration policies leave empty seats at an Indianapolis school* (McCoy, 2017) are not rare. If some immigrant children are afraid to attend public school, they may be even more nervous about attending the bilingual programs. One parent conveyed this sentiment, saying "families should be informed about bilingual programs," but "some parents are afraid to be involved with these programs due to immigration issues."

The interview data revealed some additional factors that may impede ELs' successful progress toward bilingualism. Six out of ten families used only Spanish when their children were born, and the other four families reported using both English and Spanish at that time. However, the start of school changed this linguistic picture for families, with parents reporting that they began to observe their children using less Spanish, confusing the two languages, becoming more reluctant to use Spanish, and becoming more focused on developing their English skills. Despite the efforts of the parents through strategies like the intentional use of Spanish in the home, parents reported that their children showed a resistance to using and learning Spanish that appears to increase with age. The language choice and language shift of children coincides with their engagement in the English-only immersion school curriculum and the social capital ascribed to English as they seek to fit in with their English-speaking peers. Peer effects on language development and use have been identified as early as Pre-Kindergarten (Mashburn, Justice, Downer, & Pianta, 2009), and a long-standing canon of research has shown that peer influences grow as children enter adolescence (Labov, 1972; Eckert, 2003). Given the combination of social factors and the centrality of English as the key to academic success (Suarez, 2002), it is not surprising that students often show a strong preference for English over their heritage language.

Also, those families interviewed live in an area where the larger community is English-dominant. One parent who moved from Texas asserted that the biggest challenge in raising bilingual children is the pressure of the greater community. Because everything happens in English (school, work, visits to the store, etc), it can be difficult to use Spanish. This presents immigrant children with few opportunities to receive comprehensible language input outside of

their home environment. This lack of bilingual resources within the community might be a common problem in small rural areas that are less diverse than urban communities.

Additionally, some parents believe their lower proficiency in English may be a drawback in nurturing bilingual children. One mother said she knew little English and could not teach differences between Spanish and English to her children, though some research suggests bilingual performance increased “when primary caregivers had lower English proficiency” (Gollan, Starr, & Ferreira, 2015, p. 147). Such a discrepancy needs to be explored further, but it is possible that the concerned parents in this study may lack confidence when participating in their children’s education due to their limited English level.

A final pattern that was observed was a frequent inconsistency between the parents’ reported language ideologies and their language practices within the families with regard to raising bilingual children. While all parents held clearly positive views and expressed a desire to raise bilingual children, their concerns about their children’s academic achievement may have made them deliberately or unintentionally prioritize English in their home literacy practices (Kouritzin, 2000; Suarez, 2002). More observation of their home literacy practices is needed to confirm whether their self-report of language use frequency is accurate or not.

All of these factors present significant challenges for raising bilingual children. The less exposure and use of Spanish, the faster loss of this heritage language. It is certain that these parents must work diligently to maintain their heritage language and raise bilingual children. There are, however, possible scaffolds to support parents in raising bilingual children. First, offering more bilingual programs would draw on the children’s heritage linguistic and culture repertoire. This can complement parents’ individual effort at home, which is critical given

Shibata's (2000) conclusion that "there is a limit to parents' efforts regarding ability, patience, time, and resources in the long term" in personally raising bilingual children (p. 339).

In addition, based on parents' comments, there should also be more Spanish resources within the community to increase children's exposure to Spanish. Moll, Sáez, and Dworin (2001) highlight how children use social processes and heritage cultural resources in the community to develop their bilingual competencies in Spanish and English. As Fishman (2001) warns, to maintain a minority language, the support from both the community and society at large is an essential complement to individual efforts of parents. Society must become more open-minded and tolerant regarding the use of minority languages in order to provide a foundation for developing bilingualism. When bilingualism is valued, young children will be much more likely to favor and use their mother tongue. Finally, both teachers and parents should be supported through bilingual education training program, workshops, and classes to be better equipped with more professional knowledge regarding bilingual education. Only by a collaborative effort across home and school contexts can children maintain their heritage language and be truly bilingual.

In a diverse country like the U.S., bilingualism and biliteracy should be goals for all students, but especially for those with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Educators need to find a way to reach out to the parents and families of these bilingual students. Raising both the awareness of literacy among families and the awareness of the funds of knowledge that the families can provide for the students, we can increase bilingual students' success in school.

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Appendix A

Language and Literacy Family Interview Protocol

I. Language Development History

1. What language(s) did you speak to your child after he/she was born? Why?
2. When your child started to talk, what language did he/she speak? Why?
3. What languages did you child hear and use growing up before starting school?
4. When your child started in school, did you notice any changes in your child's language development in Spanish or English?

II. Home Language(s) Use

1. What language(s) do you use to speak to your children? How do they respond?
2. What language(s) do your children use when speaking to you? How do you respond?
3. What language(s) does your child use with his/her brothers and sisters?

III. Home (Bi)Literacy Practices

1. What print materials do you have at home? (e.g. newspapers, books, magazines, the Bible, notes from school, letters and other mail, family notebooks, phone books, documents, etc.) In what languages?
2. Do you buy books or borrow books from the school or public library for yourself or for your children? In what languages?
3. Do you read any books or other materials together with your children? In what languages?
4. Where do you keep these reading materials? (bookshelf, table, closet).

5. Do you and your children watch television, movies, or other videos at home? In what languages?
6. Do you and your children listen to the radio or music at home or in the car? What languages?
7. Do you or your children use the Internet or social media at home using computers, smartphones or other devices? In what languages?
8. Do you text your children? In what languages?
9. Does the school send home letters or other written documents to you? In what languages? What do you do if you can't read or understand them?
10. Do you help your children with their homework? In what languages?
11. What other activities do you do with your children? In what languages?
12. Give us an example of what a "literacy practice" looks like in your home.

IV. Bilingualism

1. Do you want your child to be fully bilingual (listen and speak) and biliterate (read and write)? Why?
2. Is it hard or easy to raise a child speaking two languages? Why?
3. In what ways does your child/ren serve as a bilingual support to your family?

V. Strategies

1. What are some strategies or methods you use to raise your child bilingually?
2. What advice would you give other parents who want to raise bilingual children?
3. What advice would you give teachers who work with bilingual children?

VI. Challenges, Concerns, and Questions

1. What can the schools or community organizations like [La Plaza] do to support your child's bilingual development?
2. What can be done to help more parents enroll their children in bilingual programs and raise their children bilingually?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of bringing up a bilingual child?