

Maintenance of the Heritage Language: Examination of its Effects on Psychological Status, Family Relations, and Language Development in Children and Adolescents

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to review the literature on maintenance of the heritage language (HL) and its multiple benefits across academic, linguistic, and psychological outcomes. We hope to reduce the fears of immigrant parents regarding use of their native language in the home and inform professionals across disciplines such as speech-language pathology, education, and psychology of the tremendous benefits of HL maintenance. Use of the HL is often abandoned after children begin formal schooling due to peer pressure, biases against minority languages, or parental fears that exposure to two languages is somehow harmful or confusing. The overriding argument in this review is that use of the HL benefits individuals and families as a whole, which in turn assists in a child's overall success both in and out of academic settings. Speech-language, education, and psychology based professionals should promote parent and child use of the HL, as well as incorporate it into therapy/teaching/counseling when appropriate. In addition, the authors will provide a theoretical framework for facilitation of maintenance of the heritage language and provide suggestions for parents.

Keywords: Bilingualism, immigrant families, native language use.

BENEFITS OF BILINGUALISM

Recent research has demonstrated the benefits of being bilingual in regards to increased inhibitory control [1], accelerated acquisition of metalinguistic skills [2], its social advantages [3], higher educational attainment (for those that are also English proficient) [4] and the delay of dementia symptoms [5, 6]. Unfortunately, many immigrant families continue to opt for an English-speaking home rather than attempt the daunting task of keeping their home a heritage language (HL) environment against the wishes of their children (and at times professionals). Immigrant families often adopt the use of the majority language in their home due to child refusal to speak the HL, (faulty) advice given to parents by a professional, parental fears regarding language confusion [7] or families succumbing to social biases regarding minority languages. In this article we will discuss how maintenance of the HL can only increase the likelihood of positive parent-child relationship [8-12] and academic performance [2, 13-15], as well as decrease the likelihood that a child will engage in drug and alcohol use [16]. Evidence for benefits of the use of the HL in education, psychological therapy, and speech-language therapy are discussed.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Parental language input is especially important in the years before formal schooling, when parents provide children with the foundations for their first language and can greatly enhance their language learning by positive verbal responses to their actions and interests. Language learning is most successful when a parent responds to a child's interest and they assign meaning to a child's communication attempts, even before true words are produced [17]. In a case where parents are communicating with their young children in a language for which they have not gained a high level of proficiency, children will not receive the quality input they require to form a good basis for language learning or to build the foundations for successful parent-child communication. This type of input is especially important for children with developmental delays. For example, children with fragile X syndrome showed an increase in receptive and expressive outcomes related to parental responsiveness [18] and parents who produced utterances related to their children's current interest facilitated vocabulary learning in children with autism [19]. Many families think that once their child is diagnosed with a developmental delay, it is time to change to an English only household; however, research shows that bilingualism is not detrimental to children with language delays [20, 21]. Bilingual children with Down Syndrome demonstrate equivalent language skills to their monolingual peers with Down Syndrome [21]. In addition, many immigrant families fall

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into lower socio-economic (SES) strata, placing them at an increased risk for having homes with less overall verbal language [22]. The use of a parent's native language to communicate with their children could assist in overcoming this SES risk and support a family in providing higher quality and a greater quantity of language input for their children.

Parent-child communication can often suffer as a child begins adolescence and their teenage years, even in monolingual homes. However, maintenance of the HL appears to improve parent-adolescent relationships in families from both Latin American and Asian backgrounds [23]. If the parent and child do not speak the same language the relationship can often deteriorate to the extent of violent interactions [11]. Children who grow up in communities that have strong oral story-telling traditions will fail to benefit from the cultural importance and moral teaching of their families oral traditions if they are not fluent in the HL [24]. Multiple studies have demonstrated poorer adjustment of children from homes where the heritage language was not maintained [9, 10]. One study examined both youth and parent heritage and English language proficiencies as they related to academic and social outcomes in Chinese-American families [10]. Mothers that were highly proficient in Chinese had children that performed higher on math achievement tests and demonstrated less depressive symptoms; however, this was only true for families where the children were also fluent in Chinese. Chinese children living in Australia were provided with questionnaires regarding their use of the heritage language [25]. Those who used and preferred to use their heritage language also reported a more 'cohesive' family unit and less negative feelings towards their families. This indicates that while many families are choosing to speak the majority language in the home, they actually have available to them an untapped resource for potential academic and psychological benefits in their own HL.

In addition to assisting in forming strong parent-child relationships, the HL also allows a child to form a true cultural and self-identity [12]. This was shown to be especially true for Mexican-American adolescents [13]. Proficiency in the HL allows communication between multiple generations of a family, in addition to allowing the formation of social skills and relationships with other speakers of the HL [7, 26].

HL AS IT RELATES TO LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

General language development milestones are met within the same timeline for both bilingual and

monolingual children. For example, bilingual and monolingual children both begin babbling at approximately 27 weeks [27, 28] and produce their first words and word combinations at approximately 12 months of age [29]. Their total vocabulary (first and second languages combined) is equal to that of monolingual children [30]. Although exposure to the HL is often provided by only one parent, children with two native Spanish speaking parents were found to make the greatest gains in bilingual vocabulary by 48 months, although their English vocabularies were not as big as monolingual English-speaking children [32]. Use of English as well as Spanish was a positive predictor of a child's English vocabulary growth; however, only for children who had at least one native English speaking parent. These findings again demonstrate that children benefit more from parents speaking to them in their native language, whatever that language may be. At least two studies have suggested that better bilingual outcomes usually include access to not only parental models, but to models of the HL in the community as well [31, 32].

Use of two languages for vocabulary instruction has also proved worthwhile [33]. Two groups of students were provided with vocabulary instruction in either only English or both English and Spanish. The students in the bilingual instruction group received better post-test English and Spanish vocabulary scores. Bilingual children have also shown more rapid vocabulary learning when words are presented in their native language first [34]. Providing instruction in the first language will allow a child to build a better foundation that they can build upon for their English language learning [35].

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Although the myth of two languages being detrimental to a child's development remains prevalent, current research on bilinguals' academic performance (across disciplines) would tell us otherwise. Higher reading and writing skills in the HL is a positive predictor of general school effort for Mexican adolescents [13], while early bilingualism along with bilingual education was shown to have a positive effect on a child's mathematical creativity [14]. Children from homes where Spanish as a HL was maintained throughout the school years outperformed students from households that switched to English on measures such as Spanish reading vocabulary, GPA, and mathematical skills [15]. Bilingual students also demonstrate better self-control, interpersonal skills, and

lower levels of behavior problems than their monolingual peers [36], all of which are skills imperative to academic success.

PSYCHOLOGICAL STATUS

Immigrants and refugees often arrive in a new country with a feeling of loss and sadness; however, allowing them to maintain (and improve on) their language and traditions can improve the mental well-being of many newly arriving families [37, 38]. In fact, this is not only true for adults, but children who maintained higher levels of HL proficiency demonstrated fewer depressive symptoms (at least for foreign born youth)[10]. One study looked at various measures of emotional well-being and found that Latino children who spoke a language other than English were adjusting as well as or better than their monolingual English speaking peers [36]. Fluent bilingual children also demonstrated less internalizing behavior problems than their monolingual peers.

Research has established that maintenance of the HL can assist children and adults in their emotional development, but the opposite is true for those who due to exposure to a second language begin to suffer attrition (loss) of their first language [39]. Many speakers have reported difficulty expressing their emotions in their first language after the shift to majority language dominance [39]. In addition, all languages have different ways of expressing emotions, and having families where the children and parents are expressing their emotions in different manners can certainly cause a problem in family communication.

Lastly, HL maintenance appears to act as a defensive mechanism for dangerous behaviors in adolescents and teens. One study demonstrated that girls who had higher levels of HL maintenance were less likely to be victims of sexual assault [40]. It could be that maintenance of the HL results from close family ties and may limit a female child's social experiences as well as provide her with a higher level of emotional support and guidance from her elders. Another study gave young Mexican-origin youths a questionnaire regarding their beliefs/behaviors regarding drug and alcohol use [16]. Results from the questionnaires revealed that girls who maintained their HL demonstrated less 'pro-drug' beliefs and behaviors (but not boys). Pro-drug behaviors included things like, believing that it was acceptable for someone their age to do drugs. In addition, boys and girls who maintained their HL had lower rates of recent alcohol use than their

more assimilated peers. Similarly, the authors suggested that this may be due to their stronger ties to the family and community.

As a psychological professional, it would be important to take into account which language is a bilingual's first or preferred language. One study demonstrated that when psychological testing was administered in both of a bilinguals' languages, the results were quite different [41]. Participants demonstrated higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide potential when assessed in their native language, indicating that symptoms may be overlooked if patients are only assessed in their second language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ADVICE FOR PARENTS

According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis in order to acquire a second language, one must be motivated and the input must be meaningful [42]. In addition, the person learning the language must identify with the people speaking the language. Although this theory was posited in regards to second language learning, it can be assumed that once English becomes the dominant language of school-aged children, any additional learning in their heritage language may be acquired as though it was a second language. Given that children may begin to identify more with their American counterparts and the American people they see in the media, they become less able to identify with their family members who speak a different language and may carry different cultural values. The question then becomes, how can families facilitate learning of the heritage language while children are bombarded by American media and American values that may differ greatly to their own family's values.

A few tips offered by Ana Roca in her chapter "Heritage language maintenance and development: An agenda for action" are; that parents provide exposure to a variety of people that speak different languages and educate their children regarding the benefits of being multilingual [43]. Parents should seek out community centers or meetup groups where people of their own culture or other minority cultures interact in a positive manner that will be appealing to their child. Exposing children to literature, poems, and songs from their own culture may also allow children an insight into the more cultural aspects of their heritage language, allowing them to feel more connected. Immigrant children as well as their peers could benefit from parents visiting and participating in classroom activities

so that their children's peers are aware of and learn to respect cultural differences. Lastly, parents should feel confident providing reading/writing instruction in the home in their native language will assist a child in learning to read and write in English. Multiple studies have shown that literacy instruction in the first language will only help the child's reading and writing achievement in English [44, 45].

SUMMARIZING THE RESEARCH

With so much research demonstrating the benefits of bilingualism, many families are still choosing to abandon their heritage language for the majority language under pressure from their children or false fears regarding the potential harm of bilingual language acquisition. In this article past research was used to establish that bilingual children are afforded larger overall vocabularies, greater mathematical skills, and often times better behavioral tendencies in the school environment. In regards to use of the HL in the home environment, families and children that maintain their use of the HL show closer relationships even through the teenage years. In fact, teenagers who have acquired and retained their HL use in their home are at less risk than their attrited/assimilated peers for future sexual violence or drug and alcohol use. Sustaining the use of the HL in the home and in the community can provide a child with a better sense of ethnic identity and a feeling of belonging to their linguistic community. Research from the fields of speech-language pathology, education, and psychological literature all agree that use of the HL in providing services can offer a huge benefit to bilingual individuals. It is recommended that all professionals when encountering families where the parents are not English dominant, that they implore parents to maintain use of the HL with their children. Parents should be reminded that it is quantity and quality that are most important for language development; therefore use of their dominant language will better serve them and their children.

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