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Of Possibilities and Limitations: Maternal Self-Perceptions of Agency in Children's Spanish/English Bilingual Development

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary results of an ongoing study of the sociolinguistic experiences of a group of first-generation Latino families attempting to raise their children as Spanish/English bilinguals in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska. Each mother's self-perception of agency in her child's linguistic and academic development was examined, as well as her perceptions of the challenges involved in having her children use Spanish in private and public spaces. Previous studies (Velázquez, 2009; Potowski, 2008; Okita, 2002; Schechter & Bailey, 2002) have pointed to the work of mothers as a key factor in the process of intergenerational transmission or loss of a heritage language. Understanding the motivations and beliefs about this work, held by a group of mothers who are in the process of acquiring English, provides us with insight into one of the main foundations of home language policies and practices. These policies and practices set the basis for Spanish transmission or non-transmission to the children in these households.

Keywords: bilingual education, heritage language, Spanish transmission

Introduction

This article presents preliminary results of an ongoing study on the sociolinguistic experiences of a group of first-generation Latino families attempting to raise their children as Spanish/English bilinguals in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska. Each mother's self-perception of agency in her child's linguistic and academic development is examined, as well as her perceptions of the challenges involved in having her children use Spanish in private and public spaces. Perception of agency, is also what De Hower (1999) calls an impact belief, "The parental belief that parents can exercise some sort of control over their children's linguistic functioning," (83). As this author points out, the best chances for active bilingualism is commonly present in families where parents have a positive impact belief concerning their own role in child's acquisition process.

One of the main arguments put forth in the following pages is that the study of Spanish maintenance and loss in the Midwest matters. For many Latino bilinguals in this region, in particular those of recent arrival, Spanish is not just one of the languages that the history of individual and family experiences is written, but access to social networks that are a source of social capital and resilience is less prevalent (APA, 2012). From a policy perspective, understanding language dynamics in Midwestern Latino households can help to address the needs of children and adolescents growing up in communities that are part of what researchers have identified as, the New Latino Diaspora (Wortham, Murillo & Hamann, 2002). This group represents an increasingly important sector of the student population in the region. Several studies suggest that maintenance of ethnic language skills contributes to academic achievement and successful integration of minority language students because it provides access to social capital, and in psychological terms, because of cognitive transference (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Bankston 2004; Bankston & Zhou, 1995). From a language acquisition perspective, these families allow us to study what happens in immigrant households where parents and children are undergoing

different, but intersecting, processes of linguistic acquisition and loss. More work remains to be done in order to understand the ways that language(s) shape the experience of Latinos in the Midwest (Díaz McConnell & Leclere, 2002). In the case of Lincoln, Nebraska, which is the focus of this article, de Guzmán et al (2001) highlighted the centrality of language in shaping the experience of the respondents to their study of the quality of life for Latino parents and their families. In Nebraska, as in other states in the Midwest, Latinos are, "an increasingly significant part of the political and social fabric" (Rochín & Siles, 1996), and currently make up for the loss of population in many metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties (OLLAS, 2010). Despite these demographic trends, the needs and strengths of Latino families for successful integration to their new communities has been sparsely researched and poorly understood (Raffaelli et al 2005; Carranza, Carlo & de Guzmán, 2000).

One of the major components of the study described here are the parental perceptions of the benefits, costs and viability of intergenerational transmission of Spanish in their families. Speaker perceptions, or speaker beliefs, are part of a larger constellation of subjective processes related to language use that includes: 1) linguistic ideologies; 2) world-views; 3) social stereotypes; 4) language attitudes; and 5) social categorization (Kristiansen, Garret & Coupland, 2005b). These processes are at the core of the ideological frameworks that, as McGroarty (2008) points out, determine choice, evaluation and use of language for all speakers and in all language communities (98). The study described here centers on maternal perceptions of agency. Previous research points to the centrality of the mother in intergenerational minority language transmission (Velázquez, 2009; Potowski & Matts, 2008; Okita, 2001). Other authors, such as González, Moll, & Amanti (2005), highlight the role of women in the formation of household and community networks and funds of knowledge. A succinct discussion of project results, intended for a general audience, is presented in the following pages, along with recommendations on how to inte-

grate these findings into our current understandings of Latino experiences in the Midwest.

Method, Participants, and Community

The results discussed in the following pages are part of a larger study on household language practices and attitudes toward Spanish in a group of first generation Latino families in Nebraska. A detailed discussion of the ways that respondents in this study understood their role in their own children's language development, and what household practices they perceived as conducive to Spanish transmission has been presented elsewhere.

Lincoln, Nebraska, is a community with low vitality for Spanish, and a recent history of Latino settlement. In 2009 only 5% of the city's total population of 247,882 was Latino. In the same year, some 9,955 people over the age of five spoke Spanish at home (U.S. Census Bureau). Nineteen Lincoln households, with at least one child under the age of 18 living at home and two parents who were native speakers of Spanish, participated in this study. The median household size was five. All parents in this study were born outside of the U.S. Fifty-six percent of the children were born in Nebraska, 10% were born in another U.S. location, and 34% were born in their parents' country. Eighty-nine percent of the parents in this study were born in Mexico. In one family, the father was from Mexico and the mother from Guatemala, and one family was from Peru. In nine of these 19 families, the father had lived in the United States between one and 10 years longer than the mother. In two families, the mother had lived in the U.S. between one and three years longer than the father. Two sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with the mother and one child in each household. The first interview took place at the beginning of the study, and the second, five months later. Data was collected on: 1) perceived language competence; 2) perceived role in their children's linguistic development; 3) attitudes to Spanish transmission; 4) maternal understandings of bilingualism; 5) reported patterns of household language use; and 6) family strategies related to maintenance.

Results

As described elsewhere, respondents in this study were asked to identify individuals or institutions on what people or person their children's development of Spanish and English depended upon. For each of these questions, participants were asked to select from the following options: (1) It depends completely on me; (2) on my husband and me; (3) on my children and me; (4) on the whole family; (5) on the school; (6) on the family and the community; and (7) don't know/other. One item on acquisition of English was included because maintenance of the home language and acquisition of the majority language were concurrent processes in these households. A third item, related to academic development, was included as a point of comparison.

Participants were asked to identify activities or practices that they perceived as conducive to Spanish maintenance in their household. Respondents were also asked to name the most difficult aspect regarding their children speaking Spanish in the domains of home, school and community, in an attempt to investigate perceived obstacles to maintenance of Spanish in families.

Contrary to the original expectation that individuals with a greater sense of agency would identify themselves as primarily responsible for their children's bilingual development, 58% of all respondents perceived that fostering their children's use of Spanish depended either on herself, her husband, or on the whole family. For many respondents, the conceptualization of family included extended family members living in their household, in the same city, in other U.S. locations or in their country of origin. Most respondents perceived that agency for their children's Spanish development was located within the home and the family, while perceived agency for their children's English development was located in the school and the community. Results suggest however, that respondents did not perceive these as mutually exclusive. In contrast, slightly more than half of the mothers in this study perceived that their children's academic development depended exclusively on the parents.

Respondents' own report of household prac-

tices identified them as conducive to maintenance, suggests that in these families, the largest share of the task of children's socialization to, and through Spanish, rested largely on the mother's shoulders regardless of whether she worked outside the house or not. All mothers could name concrete activities in which they commonly engaged that, from their perspective, helped their children to maintain Spanish. All but one listed activities performed by their husband that served the same purpose. However, respondents' own recollection of each parents' contribution to maintenance of the family language differed in number and quality. As a group, respondents identified 17 activities they commonly engaged in that helped their children maintain Spanish, and they identified 10 activities for their husbands. Forty seven percent of all activities mentioned, for either parent, were listed as exclusive of the mother. Overall, activities listed as, commonly performed by the mother, showed a greater expenditure of time and effort, as well as planning and arrangement of family schedules. These results do not imply that no other relevant activities took place in these households, or that mothers and fathers did not engage in any of the activities mentioned for the parent of the opposite gender, but point to a division of parenting duties.

To different degrees, all activities identified by respondents as conducive to maintenance, exposed their children to Spanish. Not all of these activities, however, required the children to speak in Spanish. Slightly more than half of all mothers responded that there were no difficult things about making their children use Spanish at home. The responses of the other nine mothers in the study suggested various shifting degrees to English in their households. Overall, results suggested that respondents did not perceive school as a viable space for their children to use Spanish. Regarding children's use of Spanish in the community, eight mothers, or 42% of respondents, perceived no obstacles. Two perceived that a lack of speakers in the city reduced their children's opportunities to speak Spanish outside the home. Three respondents perceived that the main obstacle to their children's use of Spanish resided in their children, not the community.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article has presented preliminary results of an ongoing study of the sociolinguistic experiences of a group of first-generation Latino families attempting to raise their children as Spanish/English bilinguals in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska. The analysis discussed has centered on maternal perceptions of agency in children's linguistic and academic development, as well as reports of household activities perceived by respondents as conducive to children's use of Spanish. Analysis also included perceived challenges involved in children using Spanish in private and public spaces. The main argument made throughout this paper is that the study of patterns of intergenerational maintenance, and loss of Spanish in Midwestern communities, matters not only because of what bilingual Latinos can teach us about language acquisition in the particular context of the region, but for instrumental and policy reasons as well. If bilingualism is understood as a source of social and personal capital, that can benefit both the individual and the community where he or she resides, the study of language dynamics in Latino households, and in particular, of the bilingual development of second generation Latino Nebraskans should matter to those interested in the successful integration of Latinos in the Midwest.

The analysis discussed in the preceding pages centers on maternal perceptions of agency first, because intergenerational transmission is the fundamental precondition for maintenance of a minority language, and second, because mothers play a key role in this transmission process. An important finding regarding these perceptions is that most mothers in this study did not perceive that agency in their children's development of Spanish and English depends exclusively on the child or the mother, but included the father, siblings, extended family members, the school, and the community. This was in contrast with perceptions of agency on their children's academic achievement, which most respondents situated with the parents. While most respondents perceived that agency for their children's Spanish development was located within the home

and the family, and perceived agency for their children's English development was located in the school and the community, results suggested that respondents did not perceive these as mutually exclusive. This is important because it shows that for most mothers in this study, their children's development of Spanish and English were not separate or compartmentalized by domain, but rather, development is an ongoing intersecting process.

Most mothers in this study perceived co-agency for their children's development of English with their children's school, despite the fact that they were learners of English themselves, suggests that they perceived their children's successful acquisition of English as one of their parental duties, regardless of their own level of proficiency. Overall, results suggested that respondents did not perceive the school as a viable space for their children's use of Spanish. This would be expected perhaps, because none of the school-aged children in these 19 families were receiving instruction in Spanish. More data is needed to confirm that mothers conceptualize school as a space for development of reading and writing skills, regardless of the language, or if they interpreted the growing number of Latino students, and school attempts to engage Latino and other language-minority families in the school community, as an implied commitment to help them maintain their family language. An alternative explanation is of course possible, and merits further investigation, as it relates to differences in parental and school expectations about opportunities for bilingual development.

Participants were asked to identify activities or practices that they perceived as conducive to Spanish maintenance in their household. To different degrees, all activities identified by respondents as conducive to maintenance, exposed their children to Spanish. Not all of these activities, however, required the children to speak in Spanish. This is important, because while hearing parents and other adults use the family language is necessary for intergenerational understanding, it is insufficient if children are not presented with enough opportunities to use the language in different contexts and different types

of situations. Finally, respondents' own report of household practices identified them as conducive to family language maintenance suggests, that in these families, the largest share of the task of children's socialization, to and through Spanish, rested largely on the mother's shoulders. Overall, activities listed as commonly performed by the mother, required a greater commitment of time and effort, as well as planning and arrangement of family schedules. This supports previous findings on the centrality of mothers for intergenerational transmission of a family language, and in the case of immigrant households, it suggests that efforts to strengthen the mother and help her develop her own literacy skills, in both languages, might result in strengthening the family unit as a whole, in turn, creating better opportunities for the development of bilingual skills in children.

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