



Bicultural Identities and Sense of Belonging Among Spanish-English Bilingual Immigrants in Nebraska

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Background

Studies on bilingualism and identity are abundant, yet there is a significant gap regarding the long-term effects of bilingualism on individuals. Most research focuses on school-age children and teenagers and documents their integration into the larger English-speaking community and their struggles with maintaining their heritage language in that environment. However, there is limited work on the experiences of adults and their sense of identity. Additionally, most existing studies are based in metropolitan areas such as New York and California, where there is higher language vitality and support for minority languages. As such, there is a need to explore the experiences of Spanish-English bilinguals in non-metropolitan areas, such as Nebraska, where there is lower vitality for Spanish.

Introduction

This project addressed the gap in language and identity literature by focusing on generation 1.5 of Spanish-speaking immigrants. These are individuals who arrived in the United States before the age of fifteen and learned English as a second language. Generation 1.5 was chosen as they often stand at a crossroads between the larger, English-speaking culture, and the smaller, Spanish-speaking culture. They are often marginalized, not belonging fully to one culture or the other. This study examined their sense of belonging to their parents' cultural group to understand the lasting effects of learning English as a second language (L2) in their sociocultural lives in Nebraska.

Research Questions:

1. How does learning English as a second language impact feelings of belongingness to their family's culture of origin among generation 1.5 Spanish-speaking immigrants in Nebraska?
2. How does the functional separation of English and Spanish in various social settings impact their sense of identity within their family and the broader community?
3. Do participants report a change in their perception of belongingness according to language choice, interlocutor, and social setting?

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Methods

Participant Recruitment:

Participants were initially identified through the researcher's social network. Following each interview, they were asked to refer others who may fit the criteria, utilizing snowball sampling. Recruitment materials, including consent forms, were provided in both English and Spanish to ensure comprehension.

Interview Settings:

Interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop, the university library, or via Zoom, depending on participant preference. Participants could also suggest another location of their choice. Each interview was approximately one hour.

Language of Interviews:

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, English, or a combination of both, based on participant preference. An attempt was made to conduct the entire interview in Spanish to measure participants' proficiency and comfort in speaking and understanding Spanish.

Two-instrument questionnaire used to collect data:

- Instrument #1: Seventeen questions designed to gather comprehensive background information, including age, place of birth, migration history, language proficiency, family background, language acquisition process, education level, and occupation.
- Instrument #2: Twenty-nine questions aimed at answering the three research questions. The questions assess perceived proficiency and comfort in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing in both Spanish and English and explore participants' experiences with language use in various social settings.

“One doesn't have to know how to speak Spanish 100%, but I would say you do need to be able to understand it... Yes, there are Latinos who don't know Spanish, but like there's something missing there... if you don't know the language, you can't understand certain things... certain experiences through language.”

Results

Research Question 1:

- Learning English enhances participants' social and professional integration into broader community yet, connection to family's culture remains strong. Participants maintain strong cultural ties through family interactions and cultural practices, indicating resilient cultural identity.
- Some participants feel their Spanish language skills are not as strong as they could or should be. Nonetheless, they maintain a connection to parents' culture of origin through cultural practices and an understanding they won't have same level of knowledge as someone born and raised in country of origin.

Research Question 2:

- There is clear functional separation between the use of Spanish and English. Spanish is used predominantly in familial settings while English is primarily used in academic and labor settings. This separation reinforces a language hierarchy.

Research Question 3:

- Participants' language choice and use significantly influence perception of belongingness. They adapt their language based on social settings and interlocutors, with Spanish reinforcing cultural connections and English facilitating broader social integration.
- Participants expressed they would feel bad if they were unable to speak their heritage language as it is crucial for connecting with parents and relatives abroad.

Conclusions

- Learning English as L2 significantly enhances ability of generation 1.5 individuals in Nebraska to integrate into broader societal contexts, such as academic and professional environments, without diminishing cultural identity.
- Individuals maintain strong cultural ties through family interactions and cultural practices.
- Spanish is predominantly used in familial settings, especially at home, while English is reserved for academic and professional contexts.
- Regardless of perceived proficiency in Spanish, participants emphasized it remains the primary language for family communication.
- Interlocutors play crucial role in defining language choice as participants adapt language based on with whom they are speaking.