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The role of family and community bicultural socialization in the bilingual proficiency of immigrant young adults



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ABSTRACT

Previous research on acculturation has emphasized the cognitive and emotional benefits of biculturalism and bilingualism for immigrants. Parents, schools, and peers each play an essential role in the development of bilingual proficiency; however, most research has focused on family socialization for heritage language (HL) acquisition and schools' role in English acquisition. This study adopted a bidimensional approach to examine the impact of socialization by both family and community on bilingual proficiency among young adults. We hypothesized that families and community members not only socialize ethnic practices and influence young adults' HL proficiency, but also promote English proficiency simultaneously. Participants included 302 Latino and Asian American young adults from immigrant families ranging in age from 18 to 25 who completed an online survey. Hierarchical regression analyses found that both family and community were significant predictors of heritage language proficiency, however, family, but not community, was a significant predictor of English proficiency. In addition, moderation analyses suggested that these relationships were stronger among Asian Americans than Latinos. These results support the dual role of family cultural socialization for both heritage language and English proficiency and also demonstrate that the community context should not be overlooked by researchers. The present study represents an important step toward understanding the social factors that support bilingualism.

Introduction

The 1965 revision to the Immigrant and Nationality Act (INA) triggered increasing flows of immigrants to the United States, with the majority coming from Latin American and Asian countries (Tsai, Park, Liu, & Lau, 2012). According to the U.S. Census (Colby & Ortman, 2015), Hispanic Americans make up 17.4% of the U.S. population and Asian Americans represent 6.3%. These two groups have become the fastest growing minority groups over the past 25 years, and are projected to represent 28.6% and 11.7% of the U.S. population, respectively, by 2060. In recent decades, acculturation and bilingualism have become recognized as important areas of psychological research due to their relevance for immigrant populations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014), and the consistent flow of new immigrants into the U.S. means that bilingualism will continue to persist and be useful in the coming decades.

Early work on acculturation considered bilingualism to be psychologically stressful (e.g., Park, 1928), however, accumulated evidence refutes those views. Research suggests that bilingualism has a positive impact on intellectual development and subjective well-being (e.g., Berry & Sam, 2016; van de Vijver & Phalet, 2004) and may promote cognitive processes related to managing information such as selective attention, working memory, and planning (e.g., Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Zelazo et al., 2003).

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Unfortunately, bilingual proficiency is not inevitable among Latino and Asian youth, even in locations that have high concentrations of immigrant populations such as Southern California (Rumbaut & Massey, 2013). Bilingual proficiency tends to be most evident among the 1st, 1.5 (those who immigrated before age 5), and 2nd generation (those born in the U.S., with at both parents born outside the U.S.) (Hakuta & D'Andrea, 1992). In fact, by the 2.5 generation (individuals born in the U.S. with one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent), 93% prefer to speak English at home and only 17% report speaking a foreign language well (Rumbaut & Massey, 2013). The phenomenon called subtractive bilingualism refers to the loss of the heritage language due to replacement by the language of the dominant culture (Lambert & Taylor, 1996). Subtractive bilingualism can occur even among youth who immigrate at a young age if parents and others discourage use of the heritage language. On the other hand, additive bilingualism, which is the acquisition of a second language while maintaining the heritage language, is most likely to occur when there is adequate support for both languages (Gathercole, 2016; Lambert & Taylor, 1996).

Although research on bilingualism has given us a great deal of knowledge about the ways in which young children can simultaneously learn two languages and the factors that promote bilingualism in childhood (Nicoladis & Montanari, 2016), there is a need to better understand the factors that can help people to maintain their bilingual fluency into adulthood. The current study examines the dual role of family and community socialization in heritage language and English proficiency among Latino and Asian immigrant young adults. The focus on young adults is important because most research on bilingual proficiency has examined young children, yet the changes in the amount of input can have their most deleterious effects on language loss until after puberty when bilingual proficiency becomes more stable (Montrul, 2016). Thus, by examining young adults, we can better understand the contextual factors associated with their bilingual proficiency among those whose language skills have reached stability, but for whom contextual support is still necessary for language maintenance.

Socioeducational context of bilingual proficiency

Research on bilingual proficiency in early childhood finds that children are able to learn two languages simultaneously or consecutively and that linguistic proficiency in the early years is strongly related to the amount of input received in each language (Gathercole, 2016). Social psychological perspectives of bilingualism highlight the role of the sociocultural context in promoting additive or subtractive bilingualism as children develop (Gardner, 1983; Hakuta, Ferdman, & Diaz, 1987; Lambert & Taylor, 1996). Gardner's socioeducational model provides a theoretical orientation that describes how contextual and individual factors contribute to bilingual proficiency (Gardner, 1983). According to this model, the social milieu in which language learning occurs impacts the speaker's attitudes about the language community and the learning situation. These attitudes, in turn, impact the speaker's motivation and orientation toward learning. Of all the social factors relevant to language input, parents, teachers, peers, and other community members play the essential role in providing social contexts and environments for the acquisition and maintenance of both the heritage language and English (Padilla, 2006; Pearson, 2007). Because the social contexts and attitudes surrounding English and heritage language learning differ, separate consideration of each language is necessary.

Young adults in a diverse, urban setting such as Los Angeles may receive conflicting messages about the relative value of English and their heritage language. In California, support for bilingual education has been inconsistent. In 1998, the passage of Proposition 227 eliminated bilingual education programs for English language learners attending California public schools, while more recently, the passage of Proposition 58 in 2016 has given schools some freedom to provide bilingual and multilingual programs (Ulloa, 2016). To further add to the diversity of language learning options available, a number of schools in California offer dual-language immersion programs that enable native English speakers and English language learners to complete coursework in both English and a second language (Kalb, 2014). For English learners, such programs offer a means of maintaining a heritage language in addition to developing English proficiency. In Southern California, English is the dominant language associated with advantages such as social mobility. The heritage languages of immigrant youth, on the other hand, receive varying support depending on the family and school settings.

According to Gardner's model, integrativeness refers to positive attitudes toward the second language community and integrative motive refers to the learner's motivation to acquire the second language in order to join the community. When institutions such as schools provide consistent support for language learning, motivational factors at the individual level are not likely to be as strongly predictive of proficiency in that language. Gardner's (1983) model would predict that contextual and individual variables would be more strongly related to proficiency for heritage languages than they would for English proficiency in a context such as California because retention of heritage language skills would be largely dependent on the learners' motivation level and support received. In the next sections, we provide closer consideration of the family and community contexts, as these relate to support received and experiences surrounding each language.

Family support for language proficiency

For immigrant youth in the U.S., English is the dominant language and can be acquired through school, media, and peers (Pearson, 2007). When speaking amongst themselves at school, children predominantly use English whether in English-only or dual language programs (Eilers, Oller, & Cobo-Lewis, 2002), and the dominance of the English language helps children to rapidly develop proficiency of in this language, even when it is learned as a second language (Gathercole, 2016).

Exposure to the heritage language, on the other hand, is greatly dependent upon experiences with the family and ethnic community (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2004). Hughes et al. (2006) concept of family ethnic socialization has received attention in recent years since it coherently integrates prior research on nearly all aspects of transmission of cultural practices within the family,

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