

Chapter 22

Language Loss: Implications for Latinx Cultural Identity

Nilsa J. Thorsos

National University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the phenomenon of heritage language loss (mother tongue) and the implications for English only speakers born in the USA with parents who are first- and second-generation English language learners. Drawing from critical race theory (CRT), first language loss is examined in the perceptions of Americanism, nationalism, citizenship, otherness, and discrimination. In addition, the chapter examines the dynamics of Latinx parents' decision to encourage their children to speak English only and as a result erode their ability to speak their first language (L1) or mother tongue and cultural identity. The author makes the case for language maintenance and assurance of all children learning English, without losing their mother tongue.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you are a second-language learner and a parent of children entering for the first time into public school in the United States of America (USA). Until now, all of your language in your home and former school(s) has been in Spanish, but this new school expects students to use English only (monolingualism). You want your children to succeed, but you may (or may not) have the skills to speak, support, or teach your children in English within the home environment. You face an ethical dilemma on the role your native language will play in your home in the future. You must decide whether to preserve or forego your native language as your means of family communication and learning. Either way, your decision will have life-long implications to your family unit, including the way your family functions and your children's conception of family. The decision will also impact family member's perception of their language status, culture, and identification as Latinx, a term that is inclusive of rapidly shifting gender, racial, and linguistic identities (Ramirez & Zebablay, 2017). Ultimately, this decision will impact their "success" in acculturating into the mainstream culture and language.

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Parents of children entering the school system in the USA will go through a process of acculturation. Intergenerational differences within the family unit may complicate the process of acculturation, as there may be different levels of interaction with each culture (Szapocznik, Santisteban, Kurtines, Perez-Vidal, & Hervis, 1984; Yousef Alzayed, 2015). Berry offers the simple definition of acculturation as the mutual process of change that occurs when two cultural groups come into contact (2001). However, the process of acculturation is more complicated than a mutual process of change. Lawton, Gerdes, and Kapte explain the current theory as,

a linear process in which immigrants lose aspects of their culture of origin as they gain aspects of the host culture, as with previous theories, current theory suggests that acculturation is bidirectional; specifically, identification and involvement with the new culture is independent of identification and involvement with the culture of origin. (2017, p.95)

As a result of the acculturation process and transition to speaking English as the means of family communication, parent's decision to surrender their native language becomes a turning point for the children's ability to succeed in the United States.

Losing the native language has sociolinguistic implications on the family communication and its culture (Zuniga, 2004). Acculturation and assimilation greatly impact English language learners, especially in academic achievement and sense of identity. In this chapter, the author uses a Critical Race Theory (CRT) (DeCuir, & Dixson, 2004) lens to examine circumstances, which impacts Latinx parents' decision-making process to shift from native language (mother tongue) to English monolingualism. Many Spanish-speaking immigrants from Latin-American countries (including Puerto Rico, an American territory) must navigate both American and Latin culture including language. In addition, many immigrants experience the phenomenon of first-language loss beginning with their children and/or successive generations (Seliger, & Vago, 1991).

Many parents say unfortunately children arrive without "instruction manuals" for such complicated problems. Parents are faced with making important educational decisions for their children based on limited or misguided information and resources. In order to make ethical decisions, parents need a strong grounding on the problems they are facing and how their decisions impact the future of their children. These decisions are made within cultural, socio-economic, political, historical, linguistic, philosophical, and educational contexts (Austin, 2016), and parents are driven to make choices in the best interest of their children to obtain a better result in a better life and achievement of the American dream.

The 2010 Census reported nearly 40 million foreign-born immigrants, 13 percent of the total population in the United States (USA). The foreign-born population from Latin America was the largest region-of-birth group, accounting for over half (53 percent) of all foreign born (Census 2010). The author argues that key stakeholders must recognize the educational and economic value of being bilingual and acknowledge the value of Latinx' mother tongue in the globalized 21st century to ensure future generations have a clear understanding of identity and sense of belonging as citizens of the United States.

BACKGROUND

Important factors to understand Latinx parent's decision-making process for their children's education include the process of bilingualism and the role policies, politics and mandates play in the education

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