


Chapter 1


The Role of Immigrant Parents in Children's Heritage Language Maintenance and Bilingualism: Insights From Theory and Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the vital role of immigrant parents in maintaining heritage languages and promoting bilingualism in their children by integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical research from linguistics, psychology, education, and sociology. It discusses debates around heritage language terminology and bilingualism, highlighting their complex and variable nature. Using interdisciplinary frameworks and findings from studies on acculturation, language socialization, and home language environments, the chapter investigates how parents act as key agents in HLM. It emphasizes Family Language Policy, particularly Spolsky's model, illustrating how parental beliefs, language practices, and management influence the

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HLM and bilingual development of immigrant children. The chapter reviews research evidence on parents' influence and examines the connection between family-level dynamics and broader sociocultural contexts. Finally, it considers children's agency, as well as peers' and teachers' roles, emphasizing the co-constructive relationship in shaping HLM and bilingualism.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and immigration are two significant societal forces that have profoundly influenced the development of heritage language studies, sparking a growing scholarly interest in heritage language maintenance (Carreira & Kagan, 2018). Specifically, the last two decades have seen a surge in academic work focused on immigrant families and migration worldwide, reflecting a growing awareness of the complexities facing migrant populations (Segal, 2019), particularly in maintaining their linguistic heritage while adapting to dominant languages (Adebayo, 2025; Van Hook & Glick, 2020).

According to the United Nations, there are currently around 281 million international migrants, accounting for 3.6% of the global population (World Migration Report 2024, 2024). Many of these individuals migrate in search of improved educational and economic opportunities, or as refugees, escaping conflict, violence, or environmental disasters (World Migration Report 2022, 2021). Immigrants' primary destination regions include North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Thus, contemporary migration trends have resulted in a marked increase in bi- and multilingual families across the globe, a phenomenon closely linked to the increase in the number of children speaking at home another language than the host language. In the United States, for instance, one in three children lives in a household where the primary language is not English (Uchikoshi et al., 2022). In these linguistically diverse environments, children are exposed to multiple languages from an early age, and raising bi/multilingual children has become increasingly common, driven by the broad linguistic and cultural diversity introduced by globalization and immigration (Ansó Ros et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2015; Hoff, 2018; Weisleder et al., 2024).

This chapter examines the critical role of immigrant parents in maintaining heritage languages and promoting bilingualism, drawing on theoretical perspectives and empirical research to elucidate the dynamics at play in linguistically diverse families. To provide a foundation for this analysis, the chapter first offers a discussion of heritage language and bilingualism, which will serve to contextualize the subsequent exploration of key theoretical perspectives and research findings for the parental role.

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