Parental Language Learning Beliefs and Practices
in Young Children’s Second Language Acquisition and Bilingual Development:
Case Studies of Mexican Heritage Families in California and Arizona

By

Lyn Scott

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Committee in charge:

Professor Bruce Fuller, Chair
Professor Claire Kramsch
Professor Alex Saragoza

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Abstract

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We know that young children acquire language through everyday interactions. But little is known empirically about the salience and influence of parents’ beliefs and explicit strategies, relative to tacit language socialization, especially among parents who consider bilingual language development. This thesis digs deeply into three contrasting Mexican American households to observe the extent to which mothers articulate language goals and beliefs, and then act from them. Parents’ beliefs about how languages are learned influence their young children’s first and second language development by parents’ management of family routines, daily activities, and language practices. Parents’ language learning beliefs emerge from understandings they have of their past language experiences and their response to the current environment where their children are growing. Parents express their language learning beliefs in relationship to language practices that occur within the context of their family, community life, and their children’s schools. The basic components of Language Policy Theory—beliefs, practices, and management—are useful when considering the importance of parents’ influence over their children’s first and second language learning, but language policy also must be theorized in the local contexts where children are growing and learning. Ecocultural Theory is useful in situating Language Policy Theory in the historical, cultural, and environmental context where bilingual parenting occurs in order to understand how parental language learning beliefs, coupled with family routines and daily activity choices, influence the language learning opportunities of young children. This thesis presents findings of case studies of three first-generation Mexican American mothers and their young children who participated in a twenty-four family ethnographic study of child-rearing practices in Mexican heritage families. From the twenty-four mothers in the initial study who were the primary care-givers for their pre-kindergarten age child, emic parental beliefs about language development, childhood bilingualism, and features of the local environment emerged. In response to the local context, the mothers consciously served as facilitators, teachers, or role models for their children’s bilingual development through their explicit practices. In case studies, mothers expressed and exemplified variation in bilingual parenting intentions with one mother seeing herself as learning to be bilingual from her children, another mother learning to be bilingual with
her children, and another mother explicitly teaching her children to be bilingual. Parental language learning beliefs, family language practices, and parents’ management of children’s daily activities have implications for children attaining the language learning goals which their parents have for them and also have implications for teachers of second language learners.
For my mother Evelyn (1921-2001), who gave me half her name and all her care

and

For my bilingual students as they begin parenting their children
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Chapter One
Introduction

This study of Mexican American families contributes to the literature on parenting and second language acquisition (SLA), enriching our understanding of parental influence on the bilingual language development of the youngest of second language learners. I focus on illuminating the role played by explicit language goals and beliefs relative to implicit language socialization inside Mexican American families. My study considers theories relevant to the parenting of bilingual children, specifically the role which a mother’s SLA beliefs, practices, and management play in her young child’s second language learning. Much of the research literature concerning parenting and a parent’s critical influence in his or her child’s learning focuses on the parent’s background, self-efficacy, education, income, and child-rearing beliefs (Goodnow, 2011; Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000; Holloway, 2000; Bandura, 1997). Yet we know little about variation in parents’ explicit beliefs and goal-directed practices as a factor in young children’s SLA because research often emphasizes a second language learner’s individual motivation, cognitive learning style, or personal beliefs about learning a second language (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Horwitz, 1999; Ellis, 1994, Wong Fillmore 1979) and not that of his or her mother. In this study the primary caregiver for each child was his or her mother. A mother is considered more than part of her child’s learning environment; she is seen as a key actor who manages the daily routines and activities in that environment, profoundly influencing her child’s first and second language development.

In this thesis, the introductory chapter lays out an overview of the current literature in the fields of parenting and SLA and presents the problems which this research addresses. In chapter two I review research literature and methodological tools pertinent to my study and pose focal research questions emerging from gaps in the research literature at the intersection of parenting and SLA theories. In chapter three I detail the methods used and describe the study participants. Chapters four, five, and six detail my core findings. In chapter four I document the broad landscape of mothers’ emic language learning beliefs concerning their children’s bilingual development. In chapter five I present language practices observed within families’ daily life. In chapter six I consider language learning beliefs and practices in the specific context where they occur and are managed. In chapter seven I discuss implications of this thesis for parents, educators, and policymakers invested in the education and parenting of bilingual children and finally suggest further lines of inquiry.

The study began with in-depth research work with twenty-four families of Mexican heritage living in the U.S.-Mexico border states of California and Arizona and later focused upon case studies of three first-generation Mexican American mothers parenting bilingual children. In the course of conducting field research of Mexican American family life and parenting in this U.S.-Mexico border region, it became apparent that it was uniformly impossible to avoid observations or discussions of the bilingual development of the young children in the family.

Throughout the study the mothers’ emic perspectives emerged in their beliefs about their young children’s second language learning and in their reflections about their practices of parenting bilingual children. That is, language socialization was not only
occurring thru implicit activities and tacit modeling. Mothers were also articulating discrete beliefs and goals as they confronted daily demands that called for knowledge of Spanish and English.

My contribution is to present research findings about parental SLA beliefs and practices to parents of young children learning a second language, teachers of second language learners, school administrators, educational policymakers, and SLA practitioners. A better understanding of issues critical to young second language learners adds to SLA research’s considerable literature about learners older than young children.

Two theoretical frameworks critically inform my research focus. First, I draw on ecocultural theory to understand the array of historical, cultural, temporal, and environmental factors contributing to the parenting of bilingual children. Second, I consider language policy theory to understand mothers’ beliefs, practices, and management of language in the home, community, institutions, and society. These theoretical frameworks intersect at the critical juncture of understanding how diverse parental language beliefs and practices impact the bilingual development of young children where they live and grow.

Children develop within a cultural community that surrounds them and that provides meaning to their daily lives, routines, and social activities. From a “child’s eye view” stepping stones appear in the form of predictable daily activities and routines, which form a pathway for their development. The metaphor of a pathway through life emphasizes human development in its cultural context (Weisner, 2002), blending psychocultural models with activity models emphasizing the family setting (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). The resulting ecological/cultural or ecocultural perspective—my first theoretical framework—theorizes human development, not as the child floating alone in development, but rather stepping along a pathway immersed with routines and activities within the surrounding cultural community (Weisner, 2002).

The metaphor of the ecology of the individual organism in its environment is imported from the biological sciences into both research in child development and SLA. In child development research, Bronfenbrenner (1986) critically examined the influence of external environments on the functioning of families in their environment or family domain. Understanding external as well as internal influences that affect the capacity of families to foster the healthy development of their children is key to this perspective. Within this ecological tradition Dasen (2003) and Harkness (2002) emphasize cultural models or the cultural structuring of child development in a developmental niche (Super & Harkness, 1986). While the child’s developmental niche is the location for the child’s growth, ecocultural theory offers an orientation for understanding the social activities and cognitive demands that advance the child’s learning and making of meaning.

The developmental niche of young children offers a frame for understanding variability within and among the various families in this study and links directly to ecocultural theory. An array of tensions, interactions, hybrid outcomes, and accommodations comprise the processes in this larger space interacting with children in their developmental niche. The dynamic of acculturation offers a possible explanation for this diversity and variability among families. Cultural models of parenting should not be seen as static, but rather adaptive to the situation and variable within the group.

Understanding cross-cultural variability in systems of parental beliefs about young children’s SLA is important in order to recognize alternative perspectives on what
constitutes successful learning. An individual’s—or in this case a mother’s—cultural ideas about successful learners are referred to as ethnotheories (Harkness & Super, 1996) in parenting research. There can be variation among individuals of similar backgrounds, and ethnotheories are not static, yet understanding the nature of the variability is the focus. We have just known very little about the extent to which mothers articulate language related beliefs and goals in bilingual settings and their direct role in shaping children’s everyday activities.

In SLA research, the metaphor of ecology, an ecological perspective in SLA, offers a way of conceptualizing language learning in its social cultural context (van Lier, 2004). Meaning is emergent, operating on multiple timescales and dependent on the situation (Lemke, 2002). It is contextual and historically contingent. Individuals reflect at every step of the way as they do language. Beliefs exist although they may not be explicitly expressed. Through the lens of an ecology of language, features of young children’s second language development can be seen as an incorporation of their life experience in the social and physical world.

My second theoretical line, Bernard Spolsky’s (2004) language policy theory, derives from the triad of language beliefs, language practices, and language management which speech communities, either groups or individuals, employ in their daily routines and endeavors. Language policy theory extends well beyond written statements of policy and includes de facto language policies and practices (Shohamy, 2006) which may or may not be explicit. The explicit and tacit language beliefs and ideologies of individuals or groups, their practices, and their management and planning decisions regarding language use constitute a group or individual’s language policy.

Thus, in this thesis I analyze a mother’s emic beliefs about the first and second language development of her young child in relationship to her language practices with the child and her management of the child’s social environment. By triangulating direct ethnographic observation of family life, video-tapes of family activities, and audio and video-taped interviews with mothers, I am able to consider language learning beliefs and practices in context or within their ecology.

Viewing the relationship among parental SLA beliefs and practices in specific contexts—through a contextual approach of SLA (Barcelos, 2003)—illuminates factors contributing to young children’s SLA. Mexican American mothers’ beliefs about SLA and their language practices are embedded in the varying contexts where they live in California and Arizona and raise their children. For example, in these states, as in most parts of the U.S., most Mexican heritage children attend preschools and elementary schools where English is prevalent as the medium of instruction and central to institutional life (Attinasi, 1998). Laws emanating from approved statewide propositions such as California Proposition 227 (1998) and Arizona Proposition 203 (2000) require elementary school instruction in English with few exceptions for Spanish medium instruction. Additionally, only a small percentage of preschools offer monolingual instruction in Spanish. In this reality, young children who grow up speaking Spanish as their first language at home generally continue learning in English environments when at school (Gifford & Valdés, 2006). Even outside of schools, English is ever present in most areas of community life including, public events, youth culture, communication within bureaucracy, and the mass media (Baker, 2000).
What is not well understood in this environment is the impact that variation in parents’ SLA beliefs, language practices, and context has on how young children acquire a second language. Young children cannot be understood as individual learners separate from their developmental niche, nor can parents be seen as a monolith, uniformly structuring their children’s activities and learning environments where first and second languages are acquired.

While optimizing the SLA of young children is a resounding goal of all participants in this study, it is critical to document prominent concerns, challenges, preferences, and beliefs that primary caregivers, in these cases Mexican American mothers, express about their young children’s second language learning as a first step to understanding the congruence of these beliefs with practices and daily routines in a child’s life. Finally appreciating diverse contexts where heterogeneous parental SLA beliefs and language practices are in play can orient parents and practitioners as they accompany young children along their bilingual pathway.
Chapter Two
Review of Research Literature & Analytical Tools

This chapter presents research literature relevant to understanding the social ecology of family life where daily routines and activities provide the structure for children’s development and language acquisition. The predictable patterns that children experience within their family include the languages that they speak in all its forms. Parenting decisions may be explicit or tacit but they have a profound impact on the language development of children. The tandem lines of research on which I focus—ecocultural and language policy theories—differ in the extent to which they differentiate tacit versus explicit beliefs and goals related to bilingual language development. This will lead to my research questions highlighting what is not empirically known.

Ecocultural Theory of Human Development

An ecocultural perspective of human development focuses attention on the cultural context where human development occurs (Weisner, 2005). Children develop within the activities and settings nearest to the family domain. Daily routines and events within the family provide the predictable patterns along their developmental pathway while the cultural community surrounding them offers meaning to daily family endeavors. As children step along a pathway through their childhood they are immersed in routines and activities within the surrounding cultural community.

An ecocultural perspective has as its units of analysis the settings, activities, practices and contexts that individuals experience in daily life. Examples of features which are particularly important for children’s development across human cultures include family subsistence and work cycles, child care and school work, health and demographic characteristics, the role of women and girls in the society, role of fathers and brothers, division of labor by age and sex, children’s play and play groups, and threats to safety, to name a few (Weisner, 2002).

Ecocultural theory draws on Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological theory of human development that the child is a ‘changing organism in a changing environment’ (Rogoff, 2003, p. 44) in order to offer a conceptual framework for investigating young children’s social and cognitive competencies across cultural groups or differing social settings, especially between home and school. Cognitive demands placed on children are situated in their daily routines, and what they learn emerges out of social participation in ongoing and predictable activities that present cognitive requirements within a particular context (Wertsch, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978).

Ecocultural theory is primarily a setting-level model which considers the environment in which families must adapt to changing or static economic and environmental norms. Other theoretical approaches, such as dyadic studies, which emphasizes the primacy of the mother-child dyad, or acculturation theory with large structural forces at play, are complementary in considering human development. What is focal for ecocultural theory and matters foremost in a child’s socialization and well-being are the activities and settings that children participate in routinely—day in and day out. Ecocultural theory considers the variation among families around the world in terms of home situations and the manner in which families adapt to economic or other resource and environmental conditions. These lead families to diverse ethnotheories of child-
rearing (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Harkness, 2002) among cultural communities and even within a cultural community. Yet how diverse families organize children’s routine activities inside the home (Weisner, 2005) contributes to the child’s cognitive processing and understanding of how to be a socially competent member in the local setting inside the home (Shweder et al., 1998; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

Ecocultural theory appreciates the persistence of parenting practices over generations, but it also recognizes parents’ dynamic adjustments to new surroundings (Harkness & Super, 1996; Weisner, 2002), such as those adjustments mediated via explicit language goals and beliefs. For example, Spanish-speaking Mexican American parents new to California and Arizona might rely on their adolescent children’s bilingual skills to negotiate novel contexts where English is demanded, momentarily ceding control of parental authority in order to gain information through their child, and adapting to the current situation. Their language learning beliefs and the behavioral scripts that emerge out of these situations may become routine as the child becomes the relied upon family member to encounter an English-speaking bureaucracy (Fuligni, 1997; Tudge, 2008).

In order to capture an immigrant parent’s emerging language learning beliefs which blend heritage forms of child-rearing, past language experiences, and novel forms, then we might see some ambivalence or uncertainty as parents discover how to serve their children’s language needs in the home while at the same time balancing economic demands, political forces, and the institutional interests of their child’s school. Parents are determining how best to be purposeful in their parenting practices by drawing from their heritage practices at the same time that they are responding to a novel context and integrating ideas about how to prepare their young children for school and life outside the home. At the same time, children themselves are bringing home dissonant behavioral norms from preschool or school, teachers are introducing new activities and cognitive demands, and the popular media are delivering more individualistic, expressive, and egalitarian norms (Livas-Dlott et al, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008).

Finally, because ecocultural theory focuses on more settings and activities near to the family, structural conditions within the larger society or economy beyond the family’s daily routines and activities are considered only in terms of how they might influence the setting and daily activities within the family, or how they might impact the developmental niche and psychocultural world of family members (Weisner, 2002). Structural conditions require changes in policy and need a policy level analysis, but ecocultural units of analysis help in identifying levers that are potentially changeable within the setting such as people’s practices and their utilization of available resources.

**Language Policy Theory of a Speech Community**

A second frame that informs my study is that the parenting of bilingual children requires parents to establish norms governing how language is allocated within the family domain and to evaluate their children’s activities with respect to language (King & Fogle, 2006). Even if parents do not have explicit rules for managing language practices in the family, they may have tacit traditions and practices that implicitly govern multilingual interactions and the use of different languages in the home. For example, Mexican heritage families draw upon their own family’s history when considering the varieties of English or Spanish which their young children are developing (Garcia, 2001).
In every social unit, Spolsky (2004) articulates that there is a unique language policy of the social unit expressed in “the way you speak (practices), the way you think you should speak (beliefs), and the way you think other people should speak” (management) (p. 217). Together, the three dimensions: language beliefs, language practices, and language management comprise a de facto language policy present in every social unit or domain. In this sense, language policy encompasses more than official, formal, governmental policies toward language and includes the unwritten, informal traditions within the family, school (i.e., language education policy), government institution (courts, bureaucracy) or public spaces such as parks, markets, or neighborhoods (community groups, religious centers).

**Language learning beliefs and ideology.** Within the U.S. society, there is a range of beliefs about language learning that impact family language beliefs, such as whether everyone should learn English. Some beliefs are highly contested, such as whether freedom of speech and civil rights includes the freedom to learn and use any language (Spolsky, 2004). Even general usage of the term bilingual is fraught with difficulty (Baker, 2000; Garcia, 2005; Valdés, 1996). Does bilingual refer only to a person who actively speaks and reads two languages equally? Or, a person who speaks one language proficiently and is learning and improving daily in a second language? Or understands but never uses a second language? Or a passive bilingual who speaks two languages but can read only one or neither? Or a person who can speak, understand, read, and write one language, but only understand and read another?

Language beliefs at the individual level both originate from and shape an individual’s practices and management of language. Some beliefs may originate from personal experiences, while others are based upon scientific research, folklore, popular media, and myth. Examining the composition and origins of an individual’s language beliefs can reveal a complex set of notions that may be shared with others.

Today’s parents can get a seemingly infinite number of ideas from the popular press including supposedly expert advice which seems to substantiate any idea. Incorrect notions that seem valid enough to the lay person are taken as truths rather than myths. Myths, by definition, do have a grain of truth to them, thus making them seem dangerously plausible or happily feasible. Unfortunately scientific research has not always found its way into the mainstream press to discredit myths (Scovel, 2000) and scholars are not often savvy debaters who can challenge media-reported ‘junk’ or ‘pseudoscience’ (p. 114) with holistic representations of scientific research.

As a result, many are left with the perception that the research results in the field of linguistics and education do not support bilingualism. They may want their children to learn the majority language only. Unfortunately, doing this at the expense of the minority language deprives children of their family’s heritage culture and denies them the resource of their home language in learning the additional majority language (Crawford, 2000; Hakuta, 1986). In this context, myths live easily.

The inferiority of a bilingual is an example of a myth that research has disproved. From the 1900s through the early 1960s, the intellectual capabilities of bilingual individuals were believed inferior to monolinguals. Peal and Lambert (1962) dispelled this myth in their studies which actually found that bilinguals’ performed significantly higher on all verbal and nonverbal IQ tests when matched for age, sex, and socio-economic status with monolinguals. This was the first time that the notion of a language
handicap for bilinguals was replaced with the notion of a language asset for bilinguals. A re-examination of other earlier influential research revealed that rural bilinguals with less access to education had been paired with urban monolinguals with greater educational opportunities. When each group was paired with others from similar parental education and socio-economic backgrounds, the bilinguals fared better. Thus, being bilingual is not the source of the inferiority, rather the co-existence of the minority language with poverty, unemployment, less political power, and less education is.

Thus, some parents and educators believe that there is an intrinsic value in knowing more than one language because of the awareness it provides into another world view and way of thinking, as well as gaining an appreciation of another culture and acceptance of linguistic diversity. Saunders (1988) writes that the decision to raise his three children bilingually although he is an English speaker in an English speaking country was like a musician who might teach his or her children to play instruments. Parents of children in two-way immersion programs that teach in the majority and minority languages often characterize their children as having an appreciation for linguistic diversity beyond tolerance (Baker, 2004).

Mexican heritage mothers’ beliefs about their child’s language may include notions that any language has a correct form. As a result, various aspects of languages may be assigned value and prestige. Mothers may also have a range of beliefs about their children’s use of English or Spanish with a core which is a shared ethnotheory of SLA.

For example, Spanish speaking or bilingual households may express beliefs about the value of the using Spanish within the family to maintain family ties. Or, they may value English or Spanish within the larger community because of its instrumental value in employment. Monolingual mothers may also project their own aspirations of bilingualism or memories of learning a second language through their response to their child’s Spanish and English language development. Any disjuncture between language beliefs and practices would impact children’s bilingual development in some fashion.

Language practices and behaviors. Language practices are the linguistic behavior of individuals which include routinely selected patterns of use from a language. In the U.S. sociolinguistic context, language practices remain English dominant with pockets of multilingualism due to on-going immigration (Spolsky, 2004). Practices are what people actually do, not what they think should be done which is ideology. Language practices impact children’s language development as they are imbedded in daily activities and routines.

For example, daily activities that involve talking with children in a way that values their contributions and connects vocabulary with objects, gestures, or illustrations all aid in children’s concrete language development (Baker, 2000). Children receive language from television passively. Similar passive activities, including those which bombard children with language or simply try to extract information from them, may increase total exposure to a language, but they may not encourage active development of the language.

In one often cited research account, a German speaking father in Australia routinely participated in outings with his children which enriched their contact with German and strengthened their connection with him. Their language practice and enjoyment in conversing in German created a rich, stimulating and pleasurable array of activities, which motivated the children to speak German (Döpke, 1992).
In many Mexican American homes regular visits by family members or others who speak the target language also offer activities rich in language practices. In communities where more than one language is spoken family members may engage in codeswitching. Young children also participate in this language practice from an early age (Ervin-Tripp & Reyes, 2005; Zentella, 1997).

**Language management and planning.** To find the real language policy of a social unit, one must look into the people’s language practices, beliefs, and management within that unit as a written language policy may not exist. Conscious language management is explicit. Deliberate language planning may try to shape, change, promote, or eradicate language practices within the social unit. Language management is any specific action in order to influence or intervene in current language practice. Within the family monolingual or bilingual parents try to manage their children’s language by restricting vulgar or impolite language use, correct language perceived as bad, or expect age appropriate conversations. In essence, language management is “an attempt to modify the values or practices of someone else” or explicitly confirm existing situations (Spolsky, 2004, p. 186). It is generally less than successful because it runs counter to practice and it may be contested.

At the national domain of U.S. society, language management is explicit only in the publication of official documents, legal identification, etc. and in some “civil rights driven programs to assure access to education and federal services for all and the language of health policies” (Spolsky, 2004, p. 186). Otherwise, informal social rules govern expected and accepted social norms about language use and languages used within the larger society.

Some researchers began to shift their emphasis from how a young child becomes bilingual to how one can make a young child bilingual (Döpke, 1992). This shift focuses research on the parents of successful bilingual children and the activities of successful bilingual children. Parents often contrast their improved parenting approaches of their bilingual child with the approaches of other family members who have not been successful in supporting their children to become active users of two languages.

Some bilinguals grow up in a privileged or elite bilingual situation where developing proficiency in two prestigious languages is part of the family culture. Parents may have managed their child’s bilingualism from infancy (Valdés, 2003) by hiring bilingual nannies only available to the wealthy (Döpke, 1992) or enrolled their children in prestigious bilingual schools.

King and Fogle (2006) found that a sample group of middle class parents in Washington, D.C. also considered a child’s bilingual development as signs of good parenting. This was similar to traditional upper class families’ or highly educated parents’ facilitation of elite bilingualism among their children. For many parents among these groups, nurturing children’s language acquisition in one or more languages may just seem to be parenting that comes natural or the obvious. What varied was the middle class parents’ treatment of expert advice, advice in the popular media, and other relatives’ advice to manage their children’s bilingual development. While parents considered advice from popular literature and experts, they also rejected the advice if it did not match with their experiences and language learning beliefs.

In most U.S. families, largely informal rules and accepted norms are used by parents and family members to manage language use. In many cases the primary care-
giver of a young child would be hard-pressed to articulate either the practices or the language learning beliefs that he or she holds, seeing them as a natural part of parenting. Even for parents who can explicitly state their language policy in the family domain, their expressed language learning beliefs and management may not always correspond with their observed practices.

**Research Questions**

To better understand the role which a mother’s beliefs, practices, and management plays in her young child’s SLA, I asked: (1) What beliefs, including assumptions, myths, and thoughts, do Mexican American mothers in this study express about their children’s language learning in Spanish and English? (2) To what extent do language practices in the child’s environment advance mothers’ beliefs about language learning? (3) What contextual factors help to explain if mothers structure, or not, daily activities in accordance with in their beliefs about their children’s language learning and their strategies for structuring daily routines? I examine mothers’ language learning beliefs and language practices situated within daily activities across a diverse range of Mexican American families and show how variation in the context of family life and parenting beliefs impact young children’s bilingual development. This thesis offers a descriptive landscape of expressed parental language learning beliefs and situates these beliefs in relationship to on-going routines and practices which young children experience while learning a second language.
Chapter Three
Methodology

This chapter presents the study’s two phases and describes the study procedures and participants. First, I detail the procedures pertaining to the recruitment and eligibility of participants, the observation and recording of family life, and the coding and analyses of field notes and recordings. Finally, I conclude with a description of the families who participated in the phases of the study. Phase one of the study included 24 Mexican heritage mothers of preschool children and their families. Fourteen of the families lived in northern California and ten lived in central Arizona, see Table 1. Phase two of the study included three of the 24 mothers from the original sample; two mothers from California and one from Arizona.

Procedures

Recruitment and eligibility of participants. Researchers recruited mothers who were the primary caregivers for their children through community organizations and at preschools, churches, markets, and libraries. Researchers introduced mothers to the project by posting flyers at preschools, community organizations, laundromats, grocery stores, churches, and libraries across a range of inner-city and suburban neighborhoods populated by Latinos. Women who reported interest or responded to the flyer received a home visit in which researchers detailed the project and requested consent for their participation.

Given the study’s interest in the early socialization of Mexican American children, the sample was limited to mothers with at least one parent who was born in Mexico, and with a child who was age-eligible to enter kindergarten the school year following recruitment. Families of Mexican heritage, who were either first- or second-generation U.S. residents participated in phase one of the study and three of these families participated in the second phase of case studies. Each mother received a modest gift if she agreed to participate in the study.

Sample size. The sample size for this study included 24 Mexican American mothers and their 4-year-old children. Previous family ethnographies indicate that this size sample is sufficient to allow for in-depth home observations over time, while being sensitive to variable patterns among families (Weisner et al, 2001). For example, the UCLA Latino Home-School Study drew a sample of 32 families and the Children of Six Cultures averages around 24 children per country-site (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

Our observing and recording family life. During the study’s first phase home visits were conducted across the Arizona and California sites by nine researchers. Each family was matched with a researcher who followed the same family throughout the 14-month period. The researcher visited the family a minimum of 12 times for between two and six hours each visit. During the video-taping, an additional researcher joined with the originally matched researcher in order to assist with the video-taping and to maintain continuity with the families. In the second phase I conducted three follow-up home visits and interviews with each of the three participating families.

Researchers. In each of the phases Spanish-speaking or bilingual families were assigned a bilingual researcher, and English-speaking families were assigned bilingual or monolingual English-speaking researchers. Phase one had nine researchers. I was the
bilingual researcher in phase two. In order to establish trust and ensure thorough knowledge of the family context we became regular features of the home developing a level of comfort within the family for family members to speak freely in natural conversations.

**Participant observation.** In both phases the researchers conducted participant observation with the mother and child dyad and whoever else may have been present with the mother and child drawing on methods employed by family ethnographers (Livas-Dlott et al., 2010; Tudge, 2008). In phase one the researchers took a broad focus on the mother’s socialization strategies and teaching behaviors in the home and keeping children’s competencies prior to entering kindergarten in mind. In phase two I focused on language use and behaviors in the family.

The researcher always started the visit with the participating family in the home and observed interactions while engaged in whatever was occurring in the household (or later location). During the visits, mothers were asked to follow their daily activities with their child. Observations most often occurred in the home, but at times, for example, the researcher may have joined the mother-child dyad at an outdoor game, on a shopping trip, to the park, to visit grandparents, or to pick-up siblings at school. Mothers and children were very receptive to the researchers as they became integrated in the family’s typical activities.

**Field notes.** After each visit, the researcher wrote copious field notes containing information about the mother and child’s interactions, the mother’s comments and thoughts, and the child’s activities in various home and family settings observed during the visit. The researcher described in detail each activity in which the focal child was engaged, how the child was participating (including oral language and task engagement participation), the actors present in the setting, and the substance and tone of social interactions. Field notes focused primarily on the focal child’s actions, utterances, and engagements with activities; however other family members were included in the notes in so far as they interacted with the target child. Researchers also wrote the mother’s utterances pertaining to guiding the child’s behavior, disciplining the child, encouraging task engagement, or redirecting the child’s actions.

**Taped interviews.** In both phases, researchers taped interviews with the mothers. Over the course of the home visits in phase one, researchers conducted three audio-taped semi-structured interviews in part, to obtain in-depth data on each mother’s family history, family structure, daily routines, work and immigration history, school interaction, demographic attributes, socialization goals, and reported parenting practices and beliefs.

In the first phase researchers also video-taped interviews in addition to scenes from family life on a typical day in three of the families, two residing in California and one in Arizona. In the typical day selected the mother followed the daily family routine, interacted with children, worked at home, and travelled about town. Mothers also were interviewed about their daily routines, language use, and family life. In the second phase, I audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with the mothers to record the mothers’ reflections about language practices in the family and thoughts about those practices.

**My coding and analyses of field notes and recordings.** While data analysis is an on-going process, I followed a series of intentional steps to prepare the data for coding and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Drawing from an ecocultural frame for understanding language practices in the home, I first considered the total inventory of
parental language learning beliefs and language practices detailed in the data to understand prevalent beliefs in context.

Field notes, transcribed interviews, and recordings from phases one and two were then considered for etic themes regarding the mother’s language practices. I aimed to understand the mothers’ most frequently observed language practices and expressed language learning beliefs. I next identified prevalent themes and grouped beliefs and practices within these themes. A set of emic themes, informed by earlier literature about the language practices of families, was identified to further guide the coding process and linked to concrete examples in the data for each belief or practice. Together, the synthesis of the literature review and ethnographic findings provided the structure for the landscape of the mother’s language learning beliefs and practices detailed in chapters four and five.

Finally, the detailed landscape of language learning beliefs and practices gleaned from the data collected in the first phase informed the semi-structured interviews of the mothers who participated in the second phase. These mothers are the exemplars detailed in case studies in chapter six.

Participants

**Twenty-four families in phase one.** The focal mothers who participated in the study were born in Mexico or were the daughters of immigrant parents from Mexico. All of the mothers lived with their families in urbanized areas of northern California and central Arizona throughout the study. When the study began each mother was the primary caregiver for her children. Each mother had from one to five children and may or may not have been working outside the home. Fathers, other children, and extended family members living in the households occasionally provided information recorded in the fieldnotes and video recordings of home life (Livas et al., 2010).

**Description of the families.** Approximately two-thirds (17) of the mothers were first-generation residents of the U.S. (born in Mexico) and one-third (7) were born in the U.S. as shown in Table 1. Fourteen of the mothers were not employed outside the home. Fourteen of the mothers completed high school or more education in the U.S. or Mexico. The mean age of mothers equaled 31 years at entry to the study. Overall, the 24 mothers reported higher levels of school attainment, compared with other samples of first- or second-generation parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Multiple indicators of diversity among these women were apparent in terms of their education, social class, and home language. Home language varied: 14 mothers spoke only Spanish, six were Spanish-English bilingual, and four spoke only English. More than two-thirds (17) of the children were attending a preschool center. The mean age of focal children equaled 4.3 years at entry into the study.

**First-generation mothers.** Nearly every first-generation mother in the study, except for one, was Spanish-dominant. One representative mother, for example, understood some English, but preferred to communicate in Spanish. At her older daughter’s school she was pleased that she could participate in Spanish-speaking parent meetings. Another Spanish-dominant mother, relied on the school to help her daughter learn English, but she asked her daughter to tell visitors the English vocabulary she
Table 1. Characteristics of Participating Mexican American Families (n=24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count of family cases</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State of residence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona (Phoenix-Tempe)</td>
<td>10  (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California (Bay Area)</td>
<td>14  (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother’s generation in the U.S.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First generation</td>
<td>17  (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second generation</td>
<td>7   (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother’s school attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school or less</td>
<td>10  (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or more</td>
<td>14  (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed outside the home</td>
<td>14  (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part- or full-time</td>
<td>10  (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home language</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish only</td>
<td>14  (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish and English</td>
<td>6   (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English only</td>
<td>4   (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender of focal child</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12  (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12  (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focal child attends a preschool center</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17  (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7   (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household income in 2005, estimated by mother to nearest $10,000.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>$39,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation (SD)</td>
<td>(26,230)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>$20,000 to $30,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

learned. A third mother said that outside of the home her children could speak English, but at home the language was Spanish so that she could understand.

First-generation mothers were also less likely to have obtained a high school diploma either in Mexico or the U.S. Ten of the studies 17 first-generation mothers had only primary or middle-school education. Some of the communities of mothers’ origin in Mexico had only primary schooling for six years limiting mothers’ access to formal
education in these instances. Several mothers were continuing to study in the U.S., some in English as a second language and a few in job training.

Second-generation mothers. All of the second-generation mothers in the study graduated from U.S. high schools. They were also dominant in English. A few of the second-generation mothers married men who were Spanish-dominant, first-generation immigrants. These mothers reported that their husband’s Spanish use in the family communication influenced their child’s bilingual interactions. In one household the father was born in Central America and grew up in a Spanish-dominant home both there and in Texas while the mother was born and raised in a bilingual household in California. Their intention was for each parent to be a language model for their daughters; the father the Spanish model and the mother the English model.

The children of second-generation mothers were all in preschool at the time of the study. Some of the mothers reported that they had attended preschool as well, but 100 percent of them had enrolled their child in preschool for at least their pre-kindergarten year. Ten out of the 17 children of first-generation mothers were enrolled in preschool. One first-generation mother, for example, had not enrolled her four-year old son in preschool because it was not available near their home although she had been able to enroll an older child in preschool and felt that that experience helped the older child learn more English prior to kindergarten. By language-dominant group, all of the English-dominant mothers had enrolled their child in preschool. One English-dominant, first-generation mother, was content that her four-year old daughter was attending a bilingual preschool.

Three mothers in phase two case studies. The three mothers selected as case studies are each first-generation mothers. To preserve the mother and child’s anonymity all names used in this study are pseudonyms. The mothers and their families lived in urban areas in U.S. border states with Mexico throughout the study. Each mother attended primary school in Mexico and was raised by monolingual, Spanish-speaking parents. The mothers had occasional paid, part-time employment outside the home at various times throughout the longitudinal study. All of the mothers had older children attending U.S. schools where English was used for at least part of the instruction, and all the mothers reported speaking Spanish with their children in some daily activities inside the home. Every case study mother expressed the goal that her children would grow up bilingual.

Blanca. Blanca lived with her husband and five children in a one-story ranch-style home in central Arizona. They rented out one of the bedrooms in the home to her husband’s brother and his family. Each family lived and prepared meals separately although children shared some daily free-play activities with their cousins. Blanca worked intermittently, part-time throughout the study. When she was working, her children who were not at school stayed at home with an aunt. Her children were born 2-3 years apart with the eldest being a daughter followed by a son, daughter, son, and baby daughter. Her husband worked outdoors for hourly wages and usually left home before dawn while the rest of the family was sleeping. After returning home for a mid-afternoon meal, he sometimes worked a second job in the late afternoon and early evening. The couple was raised in the same town in Mexico in the mountains of Guerrero state.

Lilia. Lilia lived with her husband and two children in a low-rise, two-story apartment in northern California. Their daughter started attending a bilingual preschool
shortly after the study began. Her younger child attended the same preschool in his pre-kindergarten year. Their extended family visited occasionally on Sundays for children’s birthday parties or other events, but daily activities and family routines were among the four members of the immediate family. Lilia and her husband grew up in Mexico in the state of Jalisco, each the child of monolingual, Spanish-speaking parents. She joined him in the U.S. a short time after he joined his cousins who had been in the area for many years. Lilia worked part-time at a neighborhood grocery store primarily selling products from Mexico. She used Spanish in her work, though she occasionally communicated with English-speaking customers. She only worked for a few hours each week when her husband was not working at his full-time job. Before moving to the U.S. Lilia worked in a preschool which she enjoyed very much. The family maintained Spanish as their home language although at times the home language includes English activities from school or the popular media.

**Luz.** Luz lives with her four daughters in a single-family, ranch-style home in a suburban northern California community. Her youngest daughter was the focal child for the study. Her daughters were born 3-4 years apart allowing Luz to dedicate time every day to her youngest daughter at the time while the older girls were in school and the youngest was a growing newborn, infant, and toddler. She and her husband at the time bought their home because they could afford it on his salary and because it was located within the eligibility area of the school Luz hoped her daughters would attend. When the oldest daughter was selected in the lottery to attend the language immersion program at the school, Luz was relieved because all her daughters would be able to attend the program and they did. Luz, now separated, met the girl’s father when they attended the local high school. He is a fourth-generation Mexican American who was raised monolingually in English by bilingual parents. He sees his daughters regularly on alternate weekends. Luz did not speak English until coming to the U.S. with her mother and two sisters when she was an adolescent. Luz, her mother, and her sisters continued speaking Spanish among themselves even after the girls learned English at school. The death of Luz’s father just before leaving Mexico was a sad event in Luz’s life.

With the emic perspectives of Mexican heritage parents in mind I analyzed field notes, interview notes, and recording transcriptions for parental beliefs about children’s first and second language development. The beliefs emerged in the context of family life, filled with everyday routines and children’s daily activities. In chapter four I present this spectrum of beliefs, assumptions, myths, and thoughts that Mexican American mothers expressed about their children’s language development in Spanish and English.
Chapter Four
A Landscape of Parental Language Learning Beliefs

First and second generation Mexican American mothers in the study expressed a range of beliefs about their young children’s language learning, giving prominence to certain beliefs emanating from their experiences in the California and Arizona communities where they live. In this region people speak many languages, both English and Spanish, and every day discussions that parents share in their homes, neighborhoods, schools, and communities reflect this language diversity.

Raising children in this region means that families share certain experiences because of the social and physical environment. Children continue to grow in their home environment and possibly in a preschool, daycare, or school environment as well. Yet, experiences within these environments are not uniform. While mothers in this study all discussed the bilingual features of the environment, not all mothers shared the same beliefs about the importance of bilingualism or the pathways for children to develop their first and possibly second language.

The language learning beliefs that mothers expressed in this study encompass ideas about children’s language development in one or more languages and thoughts about contexts and activities which support, hinder, or have no impact on children’s language learning. In this chapter I describe and document the range of language learning beliefs which emerged informally during conversations and observations of daily life in these Mexican American homes at the time of the data collection and in the particular context of each family. Finding the origins of the language learning beliefs parents expressed in the data is beyond the scope of my current thesis but worthy of future analysis. Also the beliefs which parents expressed may or may not be consistent with current scientific research in language learning, yet they offer us parents’ own perspectives on their young children’s language learning.

Parental Beliefs about Language Development

Within these families living in California and Arizona, the domains of 1) children’s first language development and 2) children’s second language and bilingual development were prominent in the beliefs that parents expressed about their young children’s language learning. Table 2 lists by domain each belief mentioned twice or more in the data from the 24 families. Parental beliefs about language development heavily concerned second language and bilingual development. Beliefs about first language development occurred throughout the data but the variety of beliefs expressed about first language development are fewer as well as the total number of instances of first language development in comparison to those of second language and bilingual development.

First language development. In this study parents expressed the belief that it is a parent’s responsibility in raising a child to be concerned about his or her child’s language development. Xenia, Paulino’s mother, was concerned about her son’s language development because he mostly responded in English even though the home language was Spanish. In Xenia’s case she was not only concerned, but she said an expert advised her to keep speaking Spanish to Paulino even when he responded in English.
Table 2. Parental Language Learning Beliefs in Language Development Domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain/expressed belief:</th>
<th>Total instances per domain</th>
<th>Instances per belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Language Development</strong></td>
<td>55 (30%)</td>
<td>15 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Parents need to be concerned about a child’s language development.</td>
<td>12 (6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A child should develop the home language first.</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A child’s unease to speak Spanish is a language development concern.</td>
<td>7 (4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It takes effort for a child to maintain Spanish proficiency.</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A child learns pronunciation from adults.</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A Spanish-dominant parents’ baby who first speaks English is of concern.</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A Spanish dominant child will forget Spanish over time.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A child's Spanish must be good if others understand him or her.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Language and Bilingual Development</strong></td>
<td>129 (70%)</td>
<td>27 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Parents need to be concerned about their child’s bilingual development.</td>
<td>24 (13%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Being bilingual is positive.</td>
<td>23 (12%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Being bilingual is important.</td>
<td>17 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bilingualism offers opportunities.</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A bilingual child’s languages develop equally.</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A bilingual child recognizes when Spanish is being spoken.</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A bilingual child transfers knowledge from one language to another.</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A bilingual child should have easy, quick recall in either language.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bilingualism is to blame if a bilingual child does not know a word.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A bilingual child learns slower because of bilingualism.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Mixing languages impacts language learning.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Becoming bilingual is difficult for a child.</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• A child’s silence shows a language deficiency.
• Parents are at fault if a child fails to become bilingual.
• Parents lack the knowledge to help their child learn a second language.
• An English dominant child is capable of learning a second language.

A common parent perspective was that very young children were expected to speak the home language first. Thus, many parents commented that children should learn Spanish as their first language, if the dominant home language is Spanish. Alicia, Marcos’ mother, said that Spanish was the only language spoken in the home and that is what she and Marcos spoke. Lilía, Samantha’s mother, wanted her daughter to focus on Spanish since it was the family’s home language. Luisa, Jacob’s mother, wanted her children to learn lots of languages including Chinese, but first they need to learn their home language, Spanish. Maricruz, Hailey’s mother, believed that while children are learning their first language it would be hard to learn a second language. She said that even though her daughter Hailey’s cousins were bilingual, Hailey’s home language was English and it would be too hard for her to learn Spanish as a second language while she was still learning to speak English.

A child’s home language was not synonymous with a child’s perceived strongest language. Xenia was concerned about her son’s language development but was hesitant to accept advice that her son should focus on his perceived strongest language, English, before learning the family’s home language, Spanish. He learned a significant amount of English vocabulary from his older, school-aged, bilingual siblings even though Spanish was the dominant home language and he seems to lack adequate Spanish vocabulary.

A child’s unease in speaking Spanish took on various forms for parents including discomfort, embarrassment, or shyness. Parents believed that a child showing embarrassment to speak Spanish in public or community settings was a hindrance to a child’s language development. Similarly, it was believed that showing embarrassment or being shy to speak Spanish at school hinders a child’s language learning. Luz encouraged her daughter Macey to speak Spanish, on the occasions that Luz had visited the Spanish immersion preschool class, Macey did not want to speak Spanish. Luz was not sure whether it was because she was shy or embarrassed in front of her mother, but Luz was certain that it was impacted her development of Spanish language skills.

In English dominant America, maintaining Spanish as a first language was believed to be difficult by some parents. Lilía, Samantha’s mother, held the belief that maintaining Spanish proficiency required effort by parents and their children. She said that without dedicated efforts from parents too many Spanish-speaking children lose their Spanish overtime. She did not want this fate to befall her own children, including her older child, Samantha.

On two occasions in the study mothers said that a child learns pronunciation from adults. One mother believed that parents and teachers, not siblings and peers, teach children pronunciation in Spanish at home or English at school. Blanca said that her son speaks just like his father. She felt that her oldest daughter had learned to pronounce
English like others in Arizona from her preschool teachers. Her son Jose did not attend preschool but learned pronunciation from his kindergarten teacher.

Regarding infants and toddlers, a couple of mothers expressed the belief that if parents are Spanish dominant, then their young child who speaks first in English has a speaking problem. Xenia mentioned that her son Paulino first started speaking in English, rather than Spanish. She thought it was quite strange because she and her husband only speak Spanish. She thought Paulino had a speech problem, but the speech therapist said that Paulino was speaking English which the parents could not understand.

Parents viewed a child’s Spanish proficiency as being good if others could understand the child. In order to register her son in preschool, Luisa had to answer questions about her son’s language. Among the questions given privilege by the preschool were whether you as the parent understand your child and whether other people understand your child. Although she did not clearly understand her son, she said that others had commented that they could understand him.

**Second language and bilingual development.** While a child’s language development was cause for parental concern and commentary, a deeper analysis of the data reveals that the Mexican American parents in this study expressed far more beliefs relating to the domain of language development in a second language than the domain of first language development. Researchers recorded two parental beliefs concerning a child’s second language or bilingual development for every belief expressed about a child’s first language development.

Beliefs about children’s bilingual development were also more intense than expressing the belief that they as parents should be concerned about their children’s second language development. Being bilingual was largely seen as positive, important, and useful. Omar, Lili’s father, said that he wants to encourage his daughter to use both languages because “it opens a lot of doors, more opportunity” (field notes). Luisa, Jacob’s mother wanted her son to not only maintain Spanish as his first language but become multi-lingual, attending schools where other languages are taught. When Maria Fernanda, Andres’ mother, thought about her young son’s bilingual development, she reflected on the phases that his older adolescent siblings were going through. She articulated to researchers the importance that she perceived in raising all her children bilingual.

Parents held the belief that bilingual children’s skills in both languages develop equally. Parents expressed this belief on nine occasions. Blanca said that unlike herself, who was too old to learn another language, her children had grown up bilingual with the same abilities in both languages. In math she said that her son Jose had the same difficulties whether learning in Spanish or English. Lilia believed that she had limited her daughter by not allowing her to develop both languages equally, as was normal among children in the neighborhood. Lilia said that she was not willing to place her daughter in the English-only classes as other parents in the neighborhood had done with their bilingual children. Lilia was determined that her son would develop both languages equally. She planned for him to go to an English-only school and have Spanish-only at home so that he would develop both Spanish and English equally.

Other parents commented that bilingualism does not necessarily develop equally in every occasion, though the possibility is present. For one mother, Maria Fernanda, both languages developed in tandem. She lamented that her daughter’s English writing
skills were lagging behind her superior Spanish writing skills. Yet, the mother was confident that the Spanish skills were the foundation for her daughter to build English literacy skills.

Maria Fernanda believes that her daughter’s strength in Spanish literacy should transfer to English literacy. Her notions about the capacity of bilingual learners also include the idea that a child transfers knowledge from one language to another or that a concept learned in one language does not have to be re-learned in another language.

Several parents expressed the belief that children exposed to English and Spanish know when Spanish is being spoken, though in some case their beliefs were shifting. Luz said that she initially believed that a child knows what language is being spoken. Her oldest daughter came home crying from the language immersion school soon after she started classes there. Her daughter said that she did not understand anything that the teacher was saying. Luz explained that the teacher was speaking Spanish and asked her daughter “Don’t you recognize it?” Her daughter did not recognize it as Spanish.

On three instances parents held the expectation that a bilingual child should have easy, quick recall in either language, appropriate to age. Two mothers felt that bilingualism was to blame when a child could not quickly recall a word that the child was expected to know in his or her first language.

Mixing Spanish and English in oral speech was expressed negatively by a few parents. Luz said that she does it frequently though she thinks that it is probably not a good thing for her young daughters. She was less certain of it being negative or positive for older children. She said that she did it regularly with her own adult sisters as well as her adolescent daughters. It was just their way of speaking.

A couple of mothers expressed the belief that a bilingual child learns slower because of bilingualism. Maria Fernanda said that her daughter’s academic challenges were due to the fact that she is learning both Spanish and English. Her concern was not that her daughter would not ultimately achieve her academic goals but that they would be met at a slower pace than if she spoke only one language.

While many parents expressed the belief that being bilingual is positive or important for their child, a couple of parents felt that becoming bilingual is difficult for their young children. In both instances these parents holding this belief were raising their daughters in homes with both English and Spanish as home languages. Omar said that it was difficult for his daughter Lili to develop her Spanish even though that was the goal of the extended family.

For Maricruz, Hailey’s mother, the effort required to promote her children’s bilingual development was too great. Maricruz’s parents, also Hailey’s grandparents, were first generation Mexican Americans who raised Maricruz and her sister bilingually. Now Maricruz and her sister are both mothers, confronting issues of raising their third generation Mexican American children bilingually. Maricruz said that while her sister was able to raise her children bilingually it was hard. Maricruz preferred to raise Hailey with one language first even though she knew that her daughter could probably learn two languages.

A child’s silence was of concern to parents because they felt that it shows uncertainty in the second language or not knowing either language well. Larissa said that her school-aged son did not talk to others in his class and looked withdrawn. She believed that he had not learned enough English to participate in the class. The teacher
told her that he is not learning the letters and numbers. This surprised Larissa because when he had a different teacher he was learning letters and numbers with her. When Larissa observed in the classroom she found that her son behaved differently and was silent. Because of her belief that her son’s silence showed he was not learning English, she said that she was going to have the father speak more English to their son.

Mariana, blamed herself when her bilingual son forgot certain words on his Spanish test. Her sense of blame illustrates, on an individual level, what others expressed generally as the belief that it is the parents’ fault if their child is not bilingual. In Mariana’s case, she expressed disappointment that she did not prepare her son very well. She said that she did not push him very hard when he resisted participating in Spanish language activities that she wanted to do with him.

While Mariana expressed the belief that a parent is able to help his or her children learn a second language, other parents contended that parents lack the knowledge to help their child learn a second language and should focus only on the child’s development of the first language. Alicia’s son Marcos knew all of his colors in English as well as Spanish. That made Alicia smile. Marcos was learning in English and in his home language of Spanish at his preschool. Alicia was glad that he was learning how to do his numbers and colors in Spanish because at least she could help him in Spanish.

Luz was confident that her daughters would learn Spanish at school as well as their dominant language of English. Similarly Maricruz was confident that not only Spanish dominant children can learn a second language, but that English dominant children are capable of learning a second language. Both mothers expressed the belief that children speaking the majority language of English can also learned a minority language.

While the language learning beliefs in Table 2 are listed by domain, parents conversations reveal that their language learning beliefs are not de-contextualized, but rather are situated in the moments and environments where they live, have connections, or have had experiences. Presently, Mexican American families in California and Arizona live in an environment where the need for bilingual parenting emerges from the current setting. Parents relate this need to their previous experiences and times in the U.S. or their heritage communities in Mexico as their children learn and grow within their developmental niche in their home, school, or community.

Parental Beliefs About Language Development in Various Settings

Young children in the study spent their days, as most children in Arizona and California, in their homes, neighborhoods, and sometimes in schools or day care. Parents often reflected on family life and their community in comparison how and where they grew up. The expressed concerns, aspirations for their children, and beliefs about what their children were learning and experiencing. Parents’ language learning beliefs were situated in these settings. Though not all focal children were attending preschool, nearly all of the parents in the study had some familiarity with schools or preschools through an older child attending school or conversations with extended family, friends, and neighbors.

In Table 3 I present findings from the 24 families of parents’ language learning beliefs within the home, school, or community. The table lists the number of instances which each belief is found twice or more in the data and the total number of instances in
Table 3. Parental Language Learning Beliefs in Various Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting/</th>
<th>Instances per setting</th>
<th>Instances per expressed belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Life</strong></td>
<td>24 (26%)</td>
<td>13 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Expressed parental belief:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Keeping Spanish as the primary language at home helps a child’s language learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Parent interaction with a child supports a child’s language development.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Latinos talk differently to their children than do other groups.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
<td>56 (61%)</td>
<td>17 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The school environment differs from the home environment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- School attendance supports language learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dual-language immersion program participation supports language learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bilingual class placement supports language learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A parent should know if an English-only or bilingual class is better for his or her child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A parent’s school-involvement supports a child’s language learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A non-English speaking child will be withdrawn in class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A non-English speaking child should be retained in grade until proficient in English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- English ability does not equal academic ability nor does academic ability equal English ability.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The U.S. educational system is unequal across and within schools.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td>12 (13%)</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In the U.S. which is English dominant the focus of a child should be on English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- English-speaking adults are English teaching experts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In the U.S. a child will become proficient in English regardless of other languages spoken.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In the U.S. it is difficult for an English dominant child to learn Spanish.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
each setting. Each setting offers an opportunity to understand the situated nature of parental beliefs about young children’s language learning.

**Parental language learning beliefs in family life.** Many beliefs parents expressed about their children’s language learning were situated in family life or the home. Over half of the belief instances observed regarded the parental belief that keeping Spanish as the home language supports children’s language learning. Lilia said that she and her husband made a strong decision to use only Spanish in their home in California. She knew several friends who were not as dedicated to this, as she and her husband were, but it was important for them so that her children could always communicate with their grandparents. The few exceptions the family has are when they have English-speaking visitors or their daughter has to do English homework.

Several parents expressed the belief that their interactions with their children at home support their children’s language development. A couple of mothers expressed this as a parent being a child’s first teacher. Blanca, Jose’s mom, said that she spent more time with him when her other children were in school. Now that she is working more hours she worries that she does not have adequate time to interact with Jose’s younger sister who is a toddler. Luz planned to spend four years at home with each of her daughters before they went off to kindergarten or preschool. As each daughter started school she always had the next baby with her at home. Giving the newborn this dedicated interaction while the older sisters were in school was a good foundation for their language development, she believed.

Some parents held the belief that different ethnic groups speak differently to their children and this impacts children’s learning favorably or unfavorably. One mother, Rosa, worried that the way she and other Latinos talked to their children was negatively impacting their children’s learning and would cause them to become dependent adults. When her son’s speech pathologist gave examples of how Latinos talk to their children, she recognized that she spoke to her children in this way.

**Parental language learning beliefs in school.** Another focal setting where parental language learning beliefs were situated was the school. Many parents expressed the belief that the school environment differs markedly from the home environment. School attendance was viewed as impacting their child’s language learning favorably or unfavorably. For families with Spanish as the home language, parents and children strongly associated learning English and other non-Spanish forms of communication with schools. Andrea’s niece was already in Kindergarten and now spoke English. She brought English books home to share with Andrea’s daughter Jackie. Jackie enjoyed having English books read to her just like her cousin who already spoke English. Andrea said that her daughter would love to learn English.

Christina’s son Ricardo associated sign language with school. Her older daughter was learning sign language at school and then taught it to Ricardo. Ricardo would often use his hands to communicate with his family members just like his sister learned at school.

In the current time of this study, parents often discussed the pros and cons of monolingual English medium classes (English-only) and bilingual Spanish-English classes. Several parents expressed the belief that a bilingual class and bilingual teacher supported a child’s language learning as did attendance in an immersion program. For
families who spoke English at home, dual-language immersion programs were strongly associated with successful second language learning in Spanish. Luz said that she was very happy when her oldest daughter won the lottery for admittance into the Spanish immersion program in her community. This meant that all of her children would then get sibling preference for attending the program. With her fourth daughter now in the bilingual preschool class at the same school as the dual-immersion program, she said that she loved the program and the school because she really wants them to speak Spanish as well as English.

Luz also held the belief that being in a bilingual preschool class would support her second language learning. She was happy that Macey’s preschool teacher recently received permission to make the pre-kindergarten class bilingual and use Spanish and English on alternate days. She felt that Macey was getting a head-start with this change in curriculum. Now Macey would be attending always be in a Spanish-English school from preschool through eighth grade.

Maria Fernanda held the same belief as Luz regarding the support that a bilingual school provides to language learning. Her concern was that her children’s school was bilingual only through the third grade. She felt that her children needed continued support in both languages well beyond third grade.

A few parents conveyed the belief that as parents they should know if a bilingual or English-only class would be better for their child. Other parents conveyed a range of opinions, including uncertainty, about bilingual vs. monolingual instruction. Lilia expressed the belief that a bilingual program would best support her daughter’s bilingual development, but she noted that most of her extended family had warned her against placing her in a Spanish language classroom.

Initially, Xenia was unsure if she should choose a bilingual or monolingual English-only class for her older daughter when she began her educational experience in a U.S. school. She shared the belief of other parents that a Spanish dominant child would have limited understanding in a monolingual English-only class. Xenia’s daughter began in a monolingual English-medium first grade class. Xenia said that her daughter did not understand anything that was going on in the class.

Through Xenia’s school involvement she spent time in the classroom. The teacher commented on how smart her daughter was because she was able to do the math work. Xenia told the teacher that of course she expected this because her daughter was six and had already completed first grade in Mexico.

Xenia attended a meeting for parents of English learners and spoke with a district official at the meeting. Afterwards she decided to place her daughter in a bilingual class rather than an English-only class. Due to the environment that Xenia’s family encountered in California, she came to form a belief regarding how placement in a bilingual rather than an English-only class would support her child’s bilingual development.

Xenia’s experience exemplifies the belief expressed by parents that parental school-involvement is influential in a child’s language learning. Xenia felt that for children to succeed, parents need to maintain involvement in their children’s education. Had she not become involved in parent meetings or classroom activities, she would not have considered a bilingual placement option for her daughter.
Two parents believed that non-English speaking children will become withdrawn pupils in the English-only classes. Larissa’s son had become withdrawn in his class even though Larissa noticed that he had been very active in the previous class. Larissa believed that it was because he did not have enough English to understand the teachers in the English-only class.

Retention in the same grade was the best option for a non-English speaking child to learn in an English-only class according to the belief of two parents. Blanca and her husband had considered this for their son Jose, but the teacher persuaded them that his English has improved considerably during the kindergarten year. Their older children learned English in a bilingual class but because of changes in state law, this possibility was not available for Jose.

Other parents held the belief that English language proficiency did not equal academic ability. Larissa knew that her son was able to learn letters and numbers in a dual language preschool class, but he did not show this ability to his English-speaking teachers in a monolingual, English-medium pre-kindergarten class. Similarly, Xenia knew that her child’s academic abilities were on par with her child’s same-aged classmates because she had completed the same grade in a Spanish-medium classroom in Mexico. Now in the U.S. her child was unable to demonstrate her knowledge in an English-only class. Only in math did being an English learner not limit her ability to show her academic knowledge.

The educational system being uneven across and within schools was mentioned by some parents as a potential hazard for children’s learning. Two parents expressed the belief that the child’s language learning was impacted by parents’ access to the school that their children attended or the laws in place governing the instruction that their children could receive. Xenia believed that not all teachers and administrators were equally concerned about children. She also believed that some schools were unable to involve parents because Spanish-speaking parents could not always communicate with English-speaking teachers and administrators. In these cases she noted that parents feel afraid to come in and talk to teachers because there is a language barrier.

**Parental language learning beliefs in the community.** Within the setting of the larger community, a few parents expressed the belief that in the United States, which is English dominant, the focus of a child should be on English. Macey’s father had adamantly opposed his daughters’ receiving instruction in Spanish at school. His experience had been English-only instruction and that had helped him, he felt. While Lilia’s older child had always been in bilingual classes since preschool, she felt that it might be time to try something different with her son. Because of the anti-immigrant rhetoric at the moment in the U.S., she thought that it might be best to choose English-only instruction for the future of her young son.

A couple of parents in the study utilized any English-speaker as an English teaching expert for her child. Andrea always prepared her daughter Jackie to receive English-speaking visitors in the house. Andrea knew that her daughter loved to learn English and when an English-speaking visitor was available to teach her daughter she was happy. Abran’s father even conveyed to older children in the neighborhood that their English-speaking visitors were teaching English to Abran.

Several parents held the belief that in the U.S. a child will become proficient in English regardless of speaking other languages. Even though Lilia’s family was
concerned by her daughter being primarily taught in Spanish, she was sure that her daughter Samantha would eventually learn English growing up in California.

The same was not true for thoughts expressed by two parents regarding an English-dominant child learning Spanish in the U.S. They held the belief that it is difficult for an English-dominant child to learn Spanish. Maricruz knew that it would be difficult, but not impossible for her child to learn Spanish as a second language. Mariana and Luz held the belief that their children would learn Spanish as a second language at their elementary schools though it was not assured. Luz had originally believed that attendance in a language immersion school would prepare children for success in high school Spanish. She was very disappointed that this was not the case with her oldest daughter, who was failing her advanced placement high school Spanish class. She did not blame the school but rather blamed her daughter. Luz told her that it was very insulting and that there was no excuse for her poor grade in the class. Luz replied that many challenges existed preventing an English-dominant child from learning Spanish.

Mothers expressed many beliefs about the language learning of their young children, but they also articulated hopes and challenges. On some occasions tacit beliefs were noted by observers, but as the findings in this chapter showed, mothers were thoughtful, expressive, and explicit in their beliefs. They weighed new information that became available to them. And, they were thoughtful and vocal in assessing the environment where their children were learning and growing.

Their language learning beliefs were found in the language domains where young children learn and develop, including first and second language development, yet their beliefs were situated in the time and place where their children were living and growing. Beliefs were grounded in the environment and settings where young children grew and learned—in homes, communities, and eventually schools.

To better understand parental language learning beliefs in the context of language practices, in the following chapter I look within everyday language practices that occurred in the homes, schools, and communities of Mexican American families in this study. The language practices and their associated language learning belief give contours to the landscape of parents’ language learning beliefs and permit consideration of the extent that mothers structured, or not, the daily activities of their children in ways that advance their beliefs about language learning.
Chapter Five
Parental Roles in Shaping Language Practices

Language use and language learning filled children’s daily activities. Many parents in this study were explicit in articulating language practices and activities which furthered particular language learning beliefs that they held regarding their children’s first language and bilingual development. In this chapter I present language practice findings and the associated parental language learning beliefs. Some parents were explicit in expressing their language learning belief connected to their language practice while other beliefs were tacit or not apparent. I also present language practices which emanated from a particular setting or context. In some cases I found tacit language learning beliefs behind these situated language practices, and I found language practices that contradicted mothers’ language learning beliefs. I endeavored to confirm or clarify these etic beliefs in subsequent interviews with mothers.

Language Practices and Beliefs in Family Routines and Daily Activities

Language practices impacting young children often arose from a particular setting or context like interactions with visitors or attendance at school. Yet some language practices were decontextualized and constructed by the parent to enhance the child’s learning. Common themes that emerged in understanding the language practices were that parents used language practices to be, at times, role models, teachers, or facilitators for their children. Table 4 lists the following parental roles with instances of noted language practices and language learning beliefs.

Table 4. Parental Role in Child’s Language Learning; Practices and Associated Beliefs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental role/ Language Practice — Language Learning Belief</th>
<th>Total instances per role</th>
<th>Instances per language practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent as Role Model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent learning second language (L2) — validates child’s L2 learning</td>
<td>27 (19%)</td>
<td>7 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent speaking the L2 — validates child’s L2 learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent and child learning L2 together — supports language learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent using Spanish when angry — associates Spanish with emotion</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent persisting in speaking Spanish when child responds in English — child will defer to parent’s power</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent laughing at child language — humorous</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**One Parent, One Language**
- associating a language with a person supports language learning
- Parent intentionally validating the language — gives language value & importance

**Parent as Teacher**
- Parent teaching the child — languages can be taught
- Parent re-enforcing vocabulary — language learned via word knowledge
- Parent reading aloud books — oral language supports language learning
- Parent explaining what is going on in L1 — scaffolds second language learning
- Parent insistent child speaks Spanish in presence of other Spanish speakers — instills respect for Spanish speakers
- Parent insistent child produce more Spanish — practice builds language learning
- Parent talking about how language works — language awareness builds bilingualism
- Parent giving child the word s/he is missing — child should focus on meaning not form
- Parent explicitly telling child when language studying occurs — being explicit supports language learning
- Parent having children sit quietly — quiet focus supports language learning

**Parent as Facilitator**
- Placing child in English-only, bilingual, or immersion class — classroom language environment supports language learning
- Having grandparent visit or care for child — target language contact supports language learning
- Having child say aloud what s/he knows — reciting knowledge supports language learning
- Having siblings use the target language — sibling talk supports language learning
- Encouraging child friendships with speakers of the target language
  —target language contact supports language learning
- Encouraging child to talk to classmates
  —peer talk supports language learning
- Having bilingual classmates translate for monolingual child
  —peer talk supports language learning
- Using alternate language each day
  —time on task builds bilingualism
- Child teaching grandparent ESL
  —teaching re-enforces new knowledge
- Switching child from bilingual to English-only class
  —confuses child and hinders language learning
- Parent seeking out teacher conference
  —Parent-teacher communication supports language learning
- A child uninterested in language learning
  —should not be pushed by parent
- Parent and child visiting library
  —validate reading books/bilingual books
- Providing child computer program access
  —computers support language learning
- A child watching television
  —television supports language learning
- Repeating movie in alternate language
  —scaffolds language learning
- Family travel where target language spoken
  —validates language and learning purpose
- Attending bilingual events with family
  —validates language and learning purpose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 (3%) Encouraging child friendships with speakers of the target</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (2%) Encouraging child to talk to classmates</td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Having bilingual classmates translate for monolingual child</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Using alternate language each day</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Child teaching grandparent ESL</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Switching child from bilingual to English-only class</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Parent seeking out teacher conference</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) A child uninterested in language learning</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Parent and child visiting library</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Repeating movie in alternate language</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Family travel where target language spoken</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1%) Attending bilingual events with family</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parent as role model.** Mexican American parents in this study were role models for their children’s language learning. Several mothers were learning English as a second language (ESL) in order to validate their children’s English learning. When Samantha, Lilia’s daughter, started kindergarten, Lilia enrolled in English classes. Larissa also said that she took ESL to show her child the importance of learning English. Both mothers’ language practice was rooted in the belief that they needed to show their children the need to be proficient in English.

As children encountered more English in school, some mothers and fathers who usually spoke Spanish to their children were now likely to speak more English with their
children. The tacit belief is that any increased use of English promotes English acquisition. This time-on-task language learning belief gives precedence to the normal pattern of parents speaking Spanish with their children. In the case of Larissa’s son, he did not seem to understand the English-speaking teacher adequately. Larissa decided to have her husband speak more English with their son to support his English language learning.

Carla said that she originally took ESL classes for work, but she remained in her ESL program to support her child’s learning. English was something that they both needed to work on and they could do this together. Larissa said that she and her daughter Marlina often study English together. Sometimes it is a favorite storybook, and sometimes it is through Marlina’s dramatic play which she invites her mother Larissa to join. In each of these practices, the underlying belief expressed by the mothers is that joint ESL learning supports young children’s English language acquisition. These parents modeled the importance of English and gave validity to their children learning to speak the language.

A language practice used by a few bilingual mothers was to use Spanish when they were angry or were disciplining their child. Luz’s oldest daughter cried and complained to her mother that she didn’t understand her kindergarten teacher. Luz explained that it was Spanish and said “Don’t you recognize it?” (field notes). Her daughter replied “It’s what you speak when you are mad.” No parent explicitly expressed the belief that this promoted language learning, rather it was a practice that tacitly attached strong emotions to Spanish language use.

Parents persisted in speaking Spanish as the home language even when their child responded in English based on the belief that persistence in speaking Spanish would benefit their child’s Spanish and bilingualism. Lilia and her husband both stated that they keep speaking the home language of Spanish with their son or daughter even if the child responds in English. They have the tacit belief that their persistence will eventually benefit their child’s language learning when their child defers to the power of the parent.

A couple of parents expressed finding their child’s way of speaking humorous or playfully teasing their children for mixing or alternating languages or code-switching. Omar, Lili’s father, said that 80 percent of the time he talks to her in Spanish and she responds in English which made him laugh. Blanca, Jose’s mother, laughed and teased her son when he spoke in Spanish and included English phrases that she did not understand. The tacit belief is that certain forms of speaking or using languages is funny or less valid.

Associating a loved one with a language was also a frequent method of validating one or more languages. Known as One Parent, One Language or more commonly as OPOL, the belief is that a child learns best by having one parent speak one language and the other parent speak the other language. Luz and her husband initially used this approach with their daughters. Luz was the Spanish-speaking parent and her husband was the English-speaking parent. For Rocio, she was her daughter Lili’s English-speaking parent and Lili’s father was the Spanish-speaking role model.

Parents explicitly and intentionally validated the target language, whether Spanish or English, in a variety of ways. The belief was that children need to feel the worth of each language in order to desire to speak both languages. Validation included using a language at designated times for high value conversations or to accomplish a high valued
priority. Oquitzin attended the dual language preschool that his grandfather founded. His grandfather also wrote and published bilingual songs which he sang for his grandson. Mariana often played the songs on tape in the car to support Oquitzin’s Spanish language learning.

**Parent as teacher.** Parents, serving as their children’s first teachers, taught their children through intentional language practices whether in the first or second language. Blanca taught her son Jose math which he had not completed in school. She was unable to read the English materials from the school but she was able to teach him math words and oral memory aides in Spanish.

Other parents taught their children vocabulary or re-enforced vocabulary that had not been mastered. Xenia’s older daughter told her mother that Paulino’s vocabulary was much more developed in English than in Spanish even though Spanish was their home language. For example his mother asked him in Spanish to bring a cup <taza> from the other room, but he did not understand the Spanish word <taza> and asked his older sister to translate for him. Xenia said that she is now trying to re-enforce Spanish words with him to support his language learning.

To prepare Jackie for Kindergarten, her mother Andrea had her say English words with their Spanish meaning. Andrea held the belief that saying words aloud promoted language learning in the second language. Jackie would list the vocabulary that she knew in English to visitors. She said “pelota se dice ball” <peloto means ball> and “libro se dice book” <libro means book> (field notes). Andrea was confident that her daughter would do a good job in kindergarten because she was catching a lot of words in her second language.

Mothers frequently read books aloud or had older children read books to their younger siblings. Several mothers said that reading aloud to children was beneficial for their language development. Daniela, Benjamin’s mother, needed books in Spanish, their home language, so she bought or checked them out. She also had her older son check out English books from the school library to read to the family. She said that Benjamin was learning a lot of words from the books.

Parents used the child’s dominant language to explain concepts being presented in the second language. Omar said that he tries to encourage his daughter Lili to speak Spanish but sometimes he just explains things to her in English because it is her dominant language, and he thinks she gets it better. Her daycare providers use mostly Spanish.

Inside and outside the home parents attempted to instill respect for Spanish in the presence of other Spanish speakers. Amelia taught her son Marcos to be respectful through Spanish. She said that she always reminded him to use only the Spanish language around Spanish-speakers. The tacit belief may be more focused on respecting other adults by not using English if the adults were not believed to be as competent in English.

Parents also encouraged their children to produce more Spanish in conversations. Luz said she wanted her daughters to speak Spanish whenever possible because it would support their bilingual development. The more Spanish the better.

Another explicit language learning belief expressed by two parents was that children must have conversations about the language, its pronunciation, and its rules, whether Spanish or English. They felt that children would master the target language if they had ample conversations about the language. With regards to proper pronunciation,
Cristina felt it was beneficial for her son Roberto to understand that parents and teachers in Mexico teach children how to pronounce words in Spanish. For Mexican people who are living in the U.S. and now learning English it is sometimes hard for them to pronounce words in English because they are still learning.

At times, parents would give their child an English word that the child was lacking in the belief that the child should focus on the meaning of the conversation and not get caught up in the missing word. Rocio said that her daughter Lili would be speaking Spanish and get stuck on a word and switch to English. If Rocio gave her the word she was missing, then she was more likely to keep practicing Spanish.

As their child’s teachers, a couple parents expressed in the study that they found it helpful to be explicit in telling their child when it was practice time for language learning. The tacit belief was that if a child knows that it is time to practice a language then they will be more attentive to learning the language. Lilia said that her daughter was generally more attentive to practice and academic learning, but her son would only respond to what she wanted to teach him if she were explicit in what she was trying to achieve.

Parents encouraged their children to sit quietly with the belief that they would learn better. At the library Lilia and the other mothers brought their sons and daughters for the story time. The Spanish-speaking librarian was absent and the other librarian only spoke English and read books in English. The children were sitting down quietly, prepared to listen to the story. Lilia said that during the English story, the children became very restless, yet they were expected to sit quietly and listen so they could learn.

**Parent as facilitator.** Parents facilitated their children’s language learning by structuring language practices which they believed would benefit their child’s language learning.

Choosing a school or a class was the most obvious activity that parents used to structure their child’s daily activities and routines. Parents placed their children in either bilingual or monolingual English-only classes. The language learning belief was that children learn better in one class environment or the other. Some parents, like Luz, arranged for their children to attend dual-immersion programs with the belief that their child would grow up bilingual. In some cases parents even started earlier by having their children attend an immersion preschool. A bilingual class offered activity settings in both languages while Spanish immersion programs emphasized activities promoting Spanish language maintenance for Spanish-dominant children and Spanish L2 development for English-dominant children.

Several parents expressed the belief that children’s interactions with their grandparents are beneficial for children’s language learning. When Luz’s daughters were younger she asked her mother to serve as a monolingual Spanish-speaker so that her daughters would have to focus on and produce Spanish. Similarly, having grandparents provide childcare or playing with their grandchild was considered useful for stimulating language and communication. Lilia was preparing for her parent’s visit from Mexico and she expressed the expectation that her children would be forced to communicate in the Spanish with their grandparents.

Having visitors in the home also stimulated language practices and conversation. Andrea expected her daughter Jackie to tell the visitor what she had learned in English. Her tacit language learning belief was that having her daughter recite what she knows is beneficial for learning the target language.
Parents involved siblings in promoting the use of Spanish because of the belief that siblings speaking Spanish would influence the younger siblings. Blanca and her husband regularly reminded their older children to speak Spanish, the home language, with Jose and his younger sister. Blanca said that the children could speak in English at school but when they were in the home, they needed to use Spanish so everyone in the family could participate and learn.

Parents also encouraged child friendships with speakers of the target language, with the belief that having contact with the target language improves children’s language skills. Carla, Michelle’s mother, said that there was a monolingual English speaking child in Michelle’s play group at the park. His mother brought him to play because she wanted him to start learning Spanish and she wanted to learn Spanish. Michelle used to speak English to him but Carla and the other mother asked Michelle to speak only Spanish to him so he will be able to understand Spanish. So, Michelle started to speak Spanish to him.

A few mothers commented on similar language practices among their children’s peers, but their expressed belief was that children learn languages through peer interactions. Thus, the practice of children talking to other children was associated with this belief. Luz was happy that her daughter and her daughter’s best friend were in the same class at school. They both speak English and can support each other in the dual language immersion program. Larissa, another mother, expressed the belief that there are limitations though. Her children recently arrived in the U.S. and were having difficulties in school without helpful classmates to ease their transition to the classroom. She said that her children’s classmates did not want to speak Spanish even though they were able to speak it. It was causing her children to have low grades even though they used to be on the academic honor roll back in Mexico.

For Larissa’s children, on another occasion, bilingual classmates offered to help to translate or clue-in their monolingual classmates. This was welcomed by Larissa because she held the belief that if a bilingual child clues in a monolingual child, the monolingual child will learn from that experience.

The language practice of parent and child using the same language one day and the other language the next day was believed to be a beneficial model for language learning. The tacit language learning belief is that both languages should be used equally, in full day increments, by both parent and child or teacher and students. Luz used this alternating days bilingual model with her daughters, following their dual language immersion program’s alternating day language schedule. Luz visited her daughter Macey’s classroom on a Spanish day during the time for sharing. Macey had brought a toy to share which she said spoke English but because it was a Spanish day the teacher asked her to explain the toy in Spanish.

Some parents facilitated having their children serve as ESL tutors for their grandparents. Parents believed this to be helpful in language learning because in having the child teach or explain a word to the grandparent, the child comes to know the word or phrase better. Rocio facilitated having her mother-in-law and her daughter to speak English together. Lili, the granddaughter, is English dominant and her grandmother is Spanish dominant. Rocio encouraged her mother-in-law to use English more often and learn from Lili.
And once a child was in a bilingual class, two mothers expressed the concern for the language learning of a child switching from a bilingual to a monolingual class. They held the belief that inconsistency in bilingual and monolingual classroom attendance over the school years would be detrimental to their child’s bilingual development. Xenia held the belief that children who switch between bilingual and monolingual classes are hindered in their bilingual development. She said that it must be confusing for children. One of her friends had mentioned that her children were slow learners, but Xenia thought they were probably ok. It was just that going back and forth between bilingual and monolingual English classes so many times hindered their bilingual development.

Parents discussed meetings with their children’s teachers throughout the study. Two mothers said that they had requested a parent-teacher conference because of their concern with their child’s language learning. Xenia reported that she met with the teacher because her daughter was not learning enough English to understand the teacher in the classroom. She felt that the meeting was successful because the teacher would be more aware of her daughter’s needs to learn English.

The belief that parents should not push their child if he or she is not into learning a new language was expressed by two mothers. Mariana’s son who was English-dominant did not want to participate in activities when she spoke Spanish with him, so she did not push him further. She had wanted him to be in a bilingual program, but unfortunately he did not have the capacity in Spanish to attend a bilingual class.

Listening to children’s songs was believed to support language learning. Casandra, Aaron’s mother, said that he understood some of the English even though his dominant language was Spanish. He had hand gestures for the songs and would talk about the songs with his classmate at preschool. Mariana played children’s songs on tape for her son to sing-along with and practice Spanish when they were travelling by car.

Parents sought to facilitate their children’s language learning by visiting the local library or using the library as a resource. Most families in the study visited the library. Two mothers said that it benefited their children’s language learning. Lilia took her daughter Samantha to story time at the library because the librarians would read books in Spanish and English on most occasions. Lilia liked the librarians to discuss the English stories in Spanish before reading them in English. Daniela, Benjamin’s mother, involved her older son in bringing home English books from the school library that he could read to the Benjamin.

Several parents expressed the belief that computers, television, and movies support a child’s language development at home. Andrea said that Jackie had been picking up English words watching a children’s television program. Omar, Lili’s father, said that he had learned English from television programs and books that his father had in their home where they lived in Texas. Another parent, Xenia also believed that her daughter’s language learning would be supported by having a computer at home. The computer did not have sound but it did have programs to help with language learning and literacy skills.

One mother believed that using photographs would best support a child’s language learning as it had supported her learning. She described an audio-lingual approach with the teacher or parent first showing a photo of a crab and then saying the word crab followed by a child saying the word crab. Her belief was that this sequence could be repeated many times to support learning.
Parents repeated a movie on DVD in the alternate language the second time through because it was considered beneficial for language development. Magdalena, Alberto’s mother, said that her son had seen a particular movie so many times but he still loved watching it. English was their home language, but when his siblings got tired of watching it in English she would change it to Spanish for them to watch. Magdalena said she that she liked having them watch it in Spanish because then they could pick up words that they usually did not hear.

Family travel to places where people speak the target language was a way to facilitate children’s language development and validate the target language. Elena planned to travel to Spain with her son Liam. She said that it would help them improve their Spanish. She would take a writing course and Liam would hear people in the neighborhoods speaking Spanish. Lilia and her son spent two months in Mexico with her son. She said that it was great for her son’s Spanish because he spoke it there all the time.

Lilia and her family often travelled within California to visit Spanish-speaking extended family. They also attended bilingual events as a family. She told us this was helpful for her children because they heard people outside of their home and school communicating bilingually. Her underlying belief is that validation of the target language supports language learning.

In this chapter, we see language practices and their associated language belief situated in the environment where they occurred. Mexican American families did not have uniform language practices or uniform beliefs associated with the practices. Yet, the setting and current environment shaped the spectrum language practices that occurred in daily activities and routines for their children.

Mothers consciously thought about their children’s language learning in this environment and challenged previous assumptions and practices. They actively took on roles to support their children’s language learning. They discussed whether a bilingual or English-only class was best for their child. They sought out meetings with teachers to inform teachers of their children’s needs. They reflected with others about bilingualism and language learning. They evaluated their practices. And, as the findings in this chapter showed mothers were thoughtfully mulling their language practices and beliefs in order to promote the language learning of their children. In the following chapter, I examine the research data for contextual factors that might help to explain differences among mothers in their strategies for structuring young children’s daily activities and routines. Building from the findings of family language practices and parental beliefs, I situate language policy in the context where families live and children grow.
Chapter Six
Parenting Bilingual Children in Context

In hearing the stories of parents raising bilingual children, I encountered a variety of parental goals and beliefs regarding bilingualism. Parents express diverse thoughts about the incremental steps or holistic environment needed for their children’s bilingual development. Plus, children are reaching for the goals of bilingualism that their parents have for them in schools and in a society that offer them limited information and promote bilingualism unevenly. This generates an atmosphere where parental beliefs about bilingual development and findings in academic research of childhood bilingualism are not uniformly in agreement.

In this chapter I examine the heterogeneous contexts where Mexican heritage mothers are raising their bilingual children. I present the findings through exemplars of the mothers’ emic perspective which emerged throughout the data collection. Not all mothers share the same SLA beliefs just as not all parents share the same background characteristics with regards to bilingual parenting. The language skills of the mothers vary from monolingual in Spanish to bilingual in Spanish and English. Exemplars include Blanca, a monolingual Spanish-speaking mother parenting her five children with her husband and extended family; Lilia, herself a Spanish dominant English learner, raising her children with her husband; and Luz, a bilingual mother raising her four daughters. The following exemplars document the heterogeneous experiences, possibilities, and challenges that mothers of bilingual children bring to their parenting role and practices.

Blanca—A Spanish-monolingual Mother Parenting Bilingual Children

Blanca, mother of five, saw herself as learning English from her bilingual children. She lived with her husband and children in a predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood filled with ranch style homes near corner strip shopping malls. She and her husband grew up monolingual, speaking Spanish with their parents and peers in the mountains of Guerrero state in Mexico. In her childhood and adolescence, she had minimal contact with languages other than her native Spanish. The primary school curriculum included a few basic lessons in English as a foreign language, and occasionally she observed travelers speaking indigenous languages as they passed through her village going to and coming from their distant villages.

Blanca’s parents also grew up in monolingual Spanish speaking households, so raising bilingual children was not a parenting consideration. Yet for Blanca and her husband, their daily routines in the USA were filled with Spanish and English bilingual practices as were those of their children. To function as a monolingual Spanish speaker in a bilingual environment necessitated reliance on others and patiently organizing one’s daily life with predictable routines and endeavors to limit English encounters unless a translator was present.

When Blanca first came to the U.S., she often relied on a bilingual niece when visiting monolingual English-speaking doctors or government offices. The niece attended a local high school and often accompanied family members needing the assistance of a bilingual. Blanca would avoid encounters with monolingual English-speakers unless the niece was available to accompany her. Within a few months of
arriving in the U.S., Blanca had established routines that allowed her to function in her neighborhood and workplace. The occasional assistance of her bilingual niece enabled her to live as a functional monolingual Spanish-speaker in her U.S. community.

By the time of the study Blanca was well-accustomed to her community, and she self-reported that she was better able to follow some general ideas of conversations in English than before, yet she was not able to function independently in English encounters. During the study though, she relied on her adolescent daughter and son to interpret for her in monolingual English encounters. Monolingual parents’ use of their bilingual children as the expert interpreters is common in many bilingual settings. Children’s interpretations are often the monolingual parents’ best alternative for understanding complex medical, governmental, or legal conversations.

For example, at a parent-teacher conference her eldest daughter accompanied Blanca and her husband to the conference with their 7 year-old son Jose’s teacher. Prior to the meeting the parents had been complaining to each other that the teacher was not sending home enough daily homework for Jose to do. The parents had not seen the notes from the teacher written in English which Jose had carried home in his backpack along with many other school flyers in English announcing various school events. The teacher’s note alerting the parents that Jose was not completing his homework was lost among the other English flyers. The daughter had not told her parents that the teacher had been sending home notes, but when they all got home from the conference the daughter immediately went to Jose’s backpack for the note and showed it to the parents. She explained that it was easier to show her parents the note later than translate during the conference what the teacher said about the note. Blanca said that she knew that the teacher had said something about a homework note, but she did not understand that it was in the backpack or that it was about the missing homework.

Though Blanca still lacks the bilingual capabilities to interact in English independently, she said that she was learning English from her children. For example, her son Jose explained his second grade mathematics homework to her in English. The homework involved regrouping numbers with sums between 11 and 19. She monitored his homework as he completed each problem then checked his answers as he read the problems aloud. She repeated the numbers in English after him, and he repeated the number when he felt she was not understandable though he never offered feedback on her pronunciation. She explained that she had mastered numbers up to ten in English many years ago, but that she had to read or write numbers over ten to communicate with shopkeepers in English.

Blanca said she was motivated to learn English because her children were showing more preference to speak in English. They often spoke to her in English, but she told them that she did not understand, so they had to say it again. She did not mind that they spoke among themselves in English because they could use whatever language they prefer. However she knew that they were growing and would soon be adults and if she wanted to talk to them she would need to speak English. That was just how it was.

The eldest daughter and son and the middle child, a daughter, only spoke Spanish until they went to Kindergarten. They started learning English in school though their first few years of school were in bilingual classes with Spanish-speaking classmates and a Spanish-speaking teacher. They spoke English among themselves and at school except with newcomer classmates who primarily spoke Spanish and were limited in English.
Jose, the fourth child, was the first to attend preschool, which was in English. Blanca said that he did not learn much English and only wanted to use the toys to play with the other Spanish-speaking boys. In the English-only Kindergarten the teacher forced him to speak English, according to Blanca.

The youngest daughter was the only child to grow up bilingual simultaneously. The other children became bilingual sequentially, having first learned and used Spanish as infants and young children before learning English in school. The youngest daughter knew as much English as Spanish according to the eldest daughter and the eldest daughter spoke to her intentionally in English. The eldest daughter gave her the English nickname “Candy,” translating her given name from Spanish. Blanca was O.K. with this she said. She wished that her older children could have learned English even sooner than they did. She said that it also helped her youngest child because she could communicate with other young children speaking Spanish or English. In the future she will understand her English-speaking teachers in preschool or school without being fearful during the first weeks and months of immersion in English.

When Blanca’s children were not in school they usually stayed at home. Their father explained that they had everything that they needed at home. If they wanted someone to talk to or play with, they had each other. The parents always expected the older child to help the younger child. The eldest daughter explained that her mother scolded them when they bickered with each other and did not work together to resolve issues or do homework or housework. Whichever child was the oldest present in an activity was expected to show leadership. The same expectation went for interpreting for the parents.

On one occasion a police car with two officers was at the neighbors’ house on a sunny afternoon. The children had told their mother about the officers’ presence, and every so often they monitored the situation out of the side window. Blanca and her children continued with their afternoon activities of homework, cooking, cleaning, and playing. Jose announced that one officer was heading to their house and the other children ran to the window to look outside through the gap in the curtains. When the officer knocked at the door, Blanca motioned for her eldest daughter to answer the door. Blanca stayed in the background, watching around the corner as the partially opened door revealed an English-speaking police officer. The younger children crowded around their eldest sister standing at the door. The police officer asked routine questions in English, whether she lived here, if she knew the neighbors, if she knew anything about a burglary next door, if her dogs would have barked if someone had been in the neighbors’ backyard. She responded to the officer’s questions, and then he departed. (He also suggested that she should have a peep hole installed in the door, though the gap in the curtains offered a much better view of their front porch!)

After the officer departed the mother quickly questioned the daughter about the conversation with the officer and what had happened next door. The ensuing bilingual family discussion followed a pattern which I observed on many occasions. On this occasion the topic was the burglary next door, but the context was bilingual children negotiating the sharing of information with their monolingual mother.

The eldest daughter began by recounting to her mother in Spanish the police officer’s story of the burglary--first, that someone had broken into the house next door. Jose interjected that the burglar broke a window to get in. With overlapping speech, the
second sister glanced to Jose to confirm in English that the officer said it was the little bathroom window. Jose continued to his mother in Spanish that the burglar crawled in through the little bathroom window.

Next, the sister said in Spanish that the officer wondered if we heard the dogs barking next door at any time. The mother said that those dogs are always barking. Jose said in English to his sister that the neighbors’ dogs bark, but they never bite. This started a momentary exchange among the siblings in English. The mother listened to a few quick exchanges and then interjected What? in Spanish which pulled the conversation back into Spanish as the eldest daughter said in Spanish that even if the dogs were barking they probably would not have bitten the burglar.

The discussion continued in a similar fashion as the mother asked, What items were stolen? When did they find out? Which neighbor reported it? And the children remembered items that went missing from their own yard recently. In each occasion the children’s bilingual discussion revolved around accommodating their mother’s preference or need to hear the information in Spanish. Jose and his middle sister conferred in English as was their custom, but with their mother they were obligated to speak Spanish, lest she be excluded from the discussion.

At the conclusion of the exchange, the mother asked what the officer said as he was leaving. The eldest sister said in Spanish that he told us to put a peep hole in the door. The mother chuckled, why did we need one tiny peep hole when several of us can look through gaps in the front window’s curtains to see who is outside without ever having anyone know that they were being watched? An appropriate juxtaposition of fact—that reality was not always as it appeared on first glance.

Blanca and her family showed us that even though the family’s de facto language policy might not be overtly stated in each activity, the her language expectations were widely known by all family members. Blanca and her husband responded to their environment by managing a household that maintains Spanish at home and utilizes their children as bilingual interpreters with the school and broader society. Consciously the parents determined that their home provides the setting for their children to learn and grow. In this setting the children had clear boundaries for the development of Spanish and English, and Blanca geared their routines and daily activities to this end.

Blanca was also aware that her children’s contact with school and settings outside the home brings new information and values into the home. She and her husband were thoughtful as to the extent which they permitted open access to these outside influences. In the case of English, Blanca knew that English was present and that her children will become bilingual. She saw this as an opportunity for herself to learn English as well from her children.

**Lilia—A Mother Becoming Bilingual with Her Children**

Lilia, mother of two, is joining her children on their pathway as they all become bilingual together. She enjoyed the opportunities to learn alongside her children as every day held new learning experiences. Whether the family was helping an English-speaking neighbor or telephoning Spanish-speaking grandparents in Mexico, everyone was participating in routines and daily activities that fit the family’s current reality.

Before their first child was born, Lilia joined her childhood sweetheart who was already living in California. At first they lived with his cousins, whom she knew from
their hometown in Jalisco state of Mexico. His extended family had been living and working in either California or Mexico for decades and were frequently crossing the border. Because of their work, a few of the cousins were bilingual, but most were Spanish-dominant. She was grateful that the cousins oriented them to life in California, but she and her husband were happy when they could move to their own home nearby.

Lilia and her husband did not have definite plans for where they would be living and working long-term, but the home where they lived during the study was a comfortable size and in a convenient location for their growing family at the moment. It had two bedrooms, a bathroom, living room, and kitchen. The living room was large enough for the young children to play indoors or for adults to watch the latest telenovela soap operas from Mexico, and the kitchen had a table large enough for the family to enjoy meals together or for Lilia to help her daughter with homework.

The low-rise, multi-family apartment building where they lived provided a safe haven from the urban neighborhood among families from various backgrounds, speaking English, Spanish, and other languages. An African American grandmother kept a watchful eye over the side yard, two university students practiced their Spanish with Lilia and other neighbors on the walkway connecting the apartments, and a single white mother and her three children joined Lilia and her children at the neighborhood mini-park from time-to-time. The neighborhood had traditionally served black, white and Latino working-class families, but in recent years gentrification was raising the housing prices for new homebuyers and new apartment dwellers not covered by rent control.

The extended family of Lilia and her husband visited occasionally, usually on Sundays for a barbeque or child’s birthday party. Even though some of the older children in the extended family were bilingual, most visitors were Spanish-dominant. Lilia said that most family members preferred activities and the language which they grew up with in Mexico. Sometimes other Mexican American families in the neighborhood joined in, especially for children’s parties.

Children were often the focus of family activities, like they were on Sundays in Mexico when her extended family got together at her grandparents. Lilia thought that sometimes children got too much attention in the U.S. Some Mexican American parents were spoiling their children with too many gifts. She did not agree with some of the decisions that her extended family made regarding their children. Not only did the children have too many toys to play with and take care of, children were losing respect for their parents and grandparents. Many children were not learning Spanish well enough to communicate with grandparents.

As an assistant preschool teacher in Mexico, Lilia had learned the importance of children respecting precious resources like toys, games, and school supplies. She felt that respecting objects was an extension of respecting people. If children were disrespectful to their environment, this would extend to the people in their environment like their parents or grandparents. At the preschool in Mexico the children had a lesson in English every day. It was known as the bilingual preschool. Children could speak in English with teachers when they were learning, but the teachers were very careful to make sure children knew that Spanish was the respectful way to speak to other adults and their family members outside of English class.

Lilia wanted to learn English in California, because it would give her better job possibilities back in Mexico—even within the preschool where she had been an assistant.
She worked part-time now at a neighborhood grocery store which sold products mostly from Mexico. Her work schedule matched the hours that her husband was not working and could care for their children. Her employer had offered everyone free English classes, but she was not really that motivated and stopped going because she would prefer to be with her children.

Lilia felt that preschools in Mexico were much better than in the U.S. Thus, she preferred to care for her children at home. When her older child was four she was eligible for either of the two preschools a block in either direction from their home, but Lilia opted to keep her at home. Even though the preschools had Spanish-speaking assistant teachers, Lilia felt that keeping her daughter at home would be especially better for her Spanish. Lilia’s relatives in the area had sent their children to the neighborhood preschools and schools, and now their children could not speak Spanish very well.

A few months before her daughter was to enter kindergarten, Lilia made the decision to enroll her daughter in a Spanish immersion preschool, a ten-minute bus ride from their home. The preschool was well-respected in the community and enrolled children of all socio-economic levels from Spanish-speaking homes as well as English-speaking homes. The best part was that attending the preschool for even a few months guaranteed that Lilia’s daughter could continue in the Spanish immersion after-school program the following year when her daughter was in kindergarten.

Lilia had considered the schools where her children would attend very carefully. Even though her neighborhood school had a two-way immersion program which brought Spanish-speaking and English-speaking children together, she would not consider having her children attend school there. She felt that her neighbors’ children were not getting a good education at the school. Plus, she found the children at the school disrespectful and even Spanish-speaking Latino children there spoke in English with their Spanish-speaking neighbors. She always counseled her children to speak respectfully to any adult and respectfully meant in Spanish to their grandparents, parents, or any other Spanish-speaking adults or neighbors.

Starting in kindergarten Lilia’s daughter attended the school across town and rode the school bus every day. Then after school she rode the school bus to the Spanish immersion after-school program. Lilia was very pleased with her daughter’s teachers at the school. She was in the bilingual program at the school and all of the other children in the program were Latino. The teachers taught mostly in Spanish in kindergarten, first and second grades with some lessons in English. Lilia’s extended family did not agree with Lilia’s decision to put her daughter in a bilingual class, but Lilia was not worried. She held the belief that children in California will learn English regardless. But, if they did not learn Spanish well, they would lose it.

When her daughter first came home from school, Lilia and her husband noticed that she liked to practice the English words that she learned at school. Lilia learned several new words and songs in English. Lilia liked learning the new English songs with her daughter and could imagine using them one day back in the Mexican preschool where she used to teach.

However, one day her daughter was very upset at something her little brother did while they were playing, and she yelled words in English at him. Lilia and her husband had noticed that her daughter was using more English words when playing with her baby brother, but they had been unconcerned. Lilia asked her daughter in Spanish what she
said to her little brother, and she said that she did not know. After that she and her husband decided that their children should only use Spanish in the home because Spanish was their home language. Lilia and her husband had never had to make rules like that before, until then.

Lilia began to think more about her children’s college education and attended a workshop, conducted in Spanish for Latino families. The private workshop gave parents ideas of the experiences that their children would need inside and outside of school to be prepared for college. On her living room wall, Lilia proudly displaced the certificate of completion that she received at the end of the workshop. She said it made her realize that in order to understand the experiences that her children needed to prepare for college in English; she would have to learn English with them.

When her daughter entered third grade, the family homework routine became more complex. Previously all homework had been in Spanish, and any English homework was completed by her daughter at the afterschool program. Now, she had more homework and most days she still had English homework to complete when the after-school program ended.

So, just as Lilia had when her daughter brought home the Spanish homework from the earlier grades, mother and daughter sat at the kitchen table to do homework together. One of the homework routines was daily reading in English. Reading aloud in English was granted a special exception from the Spanish-only home language rule in the household. The compromise that Lilia made was that her daughter would read a page aloud in English and then explain it to her mother in Spanish. Lilia said that she understood most of the stories in English, but if not, her daughter’s explanation in Spanish would help her.

Lila’s daughter brought home a story that students were reading in the third grade. Lilia had never heard of the story, but her daughter enjoyed the characters and the story. Her daughter kept her mother abreast of the story line in Spanish and talked about the characters that she enjoyed. On one occasion, one of the characters was telling on another. As her daughter explained the page she had just read she came to the word tattle-tale. She had no idea what the word meant. She said that she had not heard the word before (though nowadays she might have heard the more popular word snitch from her classmates). Lilia asked her to continue explaining the word in Spanish, using both open and close-end questions like How did it make them feel? and Is it good or bad? Finally, Lilia asked her daughter if it was <chismosa> (tattle-tale). Her daughter said she didn’t know so Lilia explained in Spanish that chismosa means a person who tells on another person when he really does not need to. Her daughter nodded as said yeah, chismosa, and Lilia repeated, sí, tattle-tale.

Both Lilia and Blanca were thoughtful about their children’s language learning and bilingual development. Yet, each took a different approach to managing their children’s learning environment. Blanca set the expectations and maintained them through her parenting practices. She was conscious that her family had a set of expectations that might be different from others. Lilia actively managed her children’s language learning environment and also actively participated in that language learning environment.

Lilia was vocal in explaining how she thought about language development and how she organized her children’s learning in preschool, school, and at home. She was
mulled over whether to try a new school for her preschool son. She was aware that the larger environment outside her home was overwhelmingly in English and would impact her home and the home language of her children. She knew that she had to take active steps to her assure that her children would develop Spanish as well as English. In the data from the initial study, even without a focus on language, Lilia’s voice was consistent—she needed to actively parent her bilingual children in this environment with language practices at home that promoted that goal.

Lilia chose to learn English alongside her children. She consciously and thoughtfully joined her children on their bilingual pathway. As new information was available to her, she considered it and incorporated it into her family’s daily activities and routines. She did not manage her children’s language learning in a de-contextualized setting. She parented her children bilingually, choosing the appropriate opportunities present in her local setting.

**Luz—A Bilingual Mother Parenting Bilingual Children**

When Luz was 12, her mother brought her and her two younger sisters to live in California. Luz’s father had died, and her mother thought they should be nearer their uncles. After a short stay in one uncle’s home they moved to an apartment across the street from the girls’ school.

Their new home and new school were in an English and Spanish speaking community where many people were of Mexican heritage. As in Mexico, Spanish continued to be the girls’ primary language. It was the language they used with the owner of the corner store where they shopped, the parishioners of the church they attended regularly, and the friends and relatives of her mother whose homes they visited on weekends. English was now growing in importance in their daily lives through school, but in the home the girls knew that it was an unwritten rule that when their mother entered the apartment after a hard day’s work or week’s work, Spanish should be used exclusively. Then was not the time to try out the new English words that their teachers and friends were using in school.

Fifteen years later, when Luz was pregnant with her first daughter, she knew that she wanted her to speak Spanish. Living in California she knew that her child would of course learn English, but she also wanted her to know the Spanish language and culture from their Mexican heritage. She counted her mother and her sisters among the Spanish speakers in her baby daughter’s life.

By now, Luz was bilingual, using Spanish, or English, or both with ease in her daily life, depending on the situation. With her husband she spoke English because it was the only language he knew. Her mother now knew some English for basic, strained conversations with employers or for English speaking encounters, but among her mother and sisters they used Spanish as they had always done together.

When her mother visited the baby, Luz heard her speaking English to the baby. Astonished, she asked her why she was speaking English to the baby. She said that she felt the baby wouldn’t understand her. Luz told her, but she’s a baby! From her upbringing she assumed that her mother would be just as vigilant in speaking Spanish with her grandchildren as she had been with her own daughters. She did not expect that she would have to contend with her mother speaking English with her newborn daughter as yet another English speaking activity for the newborn.
The grandmother treated her newborn granddaughter as an American born English speaker, just like her son-in-law. Luz met her husband in high school and their relationship had always been in English because that was the only language that he spoke. His great-grandparents were born in Mexico and moved to California where they raised his grandparents in Spanish speaking homes. His parents grew up bilingual, but they raised him to be an English-speaking American as post-war assimilation pressures were widespread. He was connected to the community’s Mexican heritage but no longer to the Spanish language. Luz’s bilingual in-laws questioned her intentions to raise her daughters as bilinguals encouraging her to do as they had done.

Luz adopted an OPOL, one parent-one language, approach to bilingual parenting with her husband speaking English with the baby and herself speaking Spanish with the baby. When she needed childcare outside her extended family, she sought out Spanish speaking caregivers. This was rare though, as Luz’s two younger sisters and her mother were the most common caregivers when she and her husband needed assistance.

Even though Luz had just given birth for the first time, she did not feel like a new mother. Ever since she had arrived with her mother and two younger sisters at age twelve, she had to assume the role of mother for her two younger sisters while her mother worked long hours away from the home. She cooked for her sisters, monitored their homework, and was the leader whom everyone turned to for direction among the sisters. Over time she and her sisters developed a command of English, but they continued communicating among themselves primarily in Spanish. English was useful though, possibly as a way to keep their teenage conversations secret from their mother.

Writing English notes with their mother’s copied signature to excuse themselves for times when they cut their high school classes was not as successful though. They didn’t count on her getting a call from a Spanish-speaking counselor at the high school. Their mother followed through with her one previous warning that they would be sent back to Mexico if they stepped out of line again, and when they did, she put them on a bus to their grandparent’s house in Mexico at Easter time. They didn’t return until the start of the next school year.

They knew that their mother enforced her household and family rules, and she followed through on all threats. They learned to comply and not question the rules or push the limits. In this atmosphere, they knew that Spanish was the language of their household and interactions with their mother. Period.

Luz considered her parenting style diverging from her mother’s in several critical aspects. While whatever her mother said was undisputable, she reasoned more with her daughters to explain household rules or parental decisions. Luz’s children were permitted to ask why? of her directions or decisions. She allowed them to test-the-limits which caused her to re-think how stern she should be at times.

She realized that this also allowed her daughters to test-the-limits of her commitment to communicate with them primarily in Spanish as they grew up. Whenever her sisters were their caregivers, they would quickly switch into English, even though she had admonished her sisters to use Spanish with their nieces. Luz’s sisters’ children only speak English. She said that they did not see bilingualism as having the importance that she gave it and they took the easy road leaving their children monolingual in English.

When Luz’s first daughter was an infant she saw a flyer seeking mothers and children for a Spanish-speaking playgroup. They met weekly in different parks and
public places. It was, in effect, her first support group for parents who wanted their children to grow up using Spanish.

Through this network, Luz heard about Meadowbrook School (pseudonym), a bilingual public school in her city. Meadowbrook was a magnet school for any children in the city. Spanish was the medium of instruction for the students who came from roughly 1/3 Spanish-speaking homes, 1/3 English speaking homes, and 1/3 bilingual homes. It was often referred to as an immersion, or Spanish immersion school. Waiting lists were long for transfer students to the school and there was a lottery each year to select the entering kindergarteners. Siblings were given preference to attend the school, so when the oldest child was selected the other children in the family were certain to have a place in the school.

Luz was determined to have her children at the school. She saw it as a necessary support to ensure that her children would grow up with the ability to speak Spanish. How could she raise a child whom she could not communicate with in her mother tongue? she wondered. While their daughter was still in the playgroup, Luz and her husband decided to buy a house. They were not currently living in the school district where Meadowbrook was located, and her one requirement to the real estate agent helping them was to find a house that they could afford located in that school district.

Luz’s second daughter was born when the first daughter was a four year old preschooler. A third daughter would come four years later, and Macey, the fourth and youngest daughter 3 1/2 years after that. With each addition to the family, the difficulties in maintaining the Spanish speaking environment that Luz envisioned grew harder. Now, the sibling sisters would speak to each other in English. The second, third, and fourth daughters were each successively exposed to more English. Meadowbrook School continued to be relied upon as a Spanish focused activity setting for the older daughters and increasingly for the family as Luz herself began to commit more time to the school as a room parent, volunteer, and Parent-Teacher Association officer.

After nine years of Spanish immersion at Meadowbrook, Luz’s oldest daughter continued to the high school where most of her classmates attended. The high school did not have a similar Spanish medium of instruction program, but it allowed the students to advance to higher level Spanish classes. The family quickly learned that Spanish as a foreign language in high school is different from an elementary Spanish immersion model of instruction. Luz was incredulous that her daughter was failing high school Spanish, and she held her daughter responsible.

Luz had always conveyed the importance of their family’s Mexican heritage to her daughters. The life of their grandfather, Luz’s papa, was often used to illustrate the pride of their heritage. He was a small businessman and respected radio broadcaster in their hometown and rural region of Mexico. His untimely death when Luz was a pre-teenager was the force which caused her mother to move the family to California nearer to Luz’s uncles. On his business card, which Luz treasures and preserves until this day, are the seven words he lived by: vive, ama, aprende, piensa, da, rie, intenta (live, love, learn, think, give, laugh, try). The symbol of his business livelihood was a dove taking flight from his over-sized broadcaster’s microphone.

Luz conveyed her strong sense of respect for her father and even tattooed the symbol of the dove taking flight from the broadcaster’s microphone on her right shoulder. She shared this with her friends and family, with one exception, she never let her mother
know. She did not want to risk her mother disapproving of her having a tattoo. Possibly her mother knew, but it was best to leave it unsaid as not forcing her mother to admit that she knew and condoned it.

In the oldest daughter’s second year of college, she started working at a store frequented by many monolingual Spanish speakers. She expressed to Luz the good fortune that being bilingual had had on her getting the part-time college job. Long forgotten was her failing grade in high school Spanish, and now Spanish was seen as a valuable part of her daughter’s life.

The environment where Luz was parenting her daughters shared many features with the environment where Blanca and Lilia were parenting their bilingual children. All consciously talked about the issues of bilingualism and talked about their desires for their children to grow up bilingual, however each mother was different in her individual relationship to being bilingual. Lilia and Blanca were becoming bilingual, yet they remained Spanish-dominant. This required their children to explain English words and events in Spanish. The mothers consciously talked about these activities and its purpose within the family.

Luz was already bilingual so she had a different set of personal circumstances to consider when parenting her bilingual children. She knew from the time her first daughter was born that she would need assistance from those around her if her daughter were to grow up bilingual. She sought out a language immersion school for her daughters, even buying a home in a location that would keep her daughters eligible for the school. She also sought out bilingual play groups and her family members to provide daily activities in Spanish for her daughters.

And, Luz was conscious when her family members did not live up to her language expectations. She contemplated the family’s language practices and her personal language learning beliefs and management. She compared her daughters’ bilingualism with that of her sisters’ children. Plus, she celebrated her daughters’ bilingual achievements with them and supported them over their language learning hurdles. Yet, even her proudest moments could come with expected twists causing her to reflect, reconsider, and consciously adapt her language beliefs and practices.

Luz recounted to me the day that she learned that her oldest daughter had gotten a tattoo. They discussed everything together, and she could not imagine that her daughter would do something so permanent without consulting her. Her daughter had already shown her friends, aunts, and younger sisters before her. And a tattoo, what would Luz’s mother think? Her granddaughter was not even 20 years old. Luz went to her mother’s home to tell her. She worried what her mother—her daughter’s grandmother—would think. And, what her mother would think of Luz as a mother. The grandmother gasped and sighed and shook her head when hearing the news. Her granddaughter was so young to be permanently marked. What about her future? she asked.

Later, when Luz and her oldest daughter went to visit the grandmother, Luz was full of nervous concern. When they entered the apartment the grandmother opened her arms wide with a big smile and said in Spanish to her granddaughter, show me your tattoo, my child. From shoulder to shoulder in two-inch black letters were the tattooed words:

VIVE AMA APRENDE PIENSA DA RIE INTENTA
Chapter Seven
Discussion and Implications

This study advances language policy theory by situating language policy in the local context, in this case the setting where Mexican American mothers and fathers are parenting their bilingual children. The findings also advance ecocultural theory with a more empirically informed argument. In this case, data showed that mothers of similar backgrounds still arrived at bilingual parenting with heterogeneous beliefs and experiences which influence their young children’s language learning. Mothers consciously discussed and reflected upon their language learning beliefs, language practices, and management of language in their family as they parented their bilingual children.

Ecocultural theory provided a framework for understanding the differing circumstances, histories, experiences, and beliefs that create variation among Latino families in general and among first-generation, Spanish-speaking Mexican American mothers in particular. The data in this study suggest that within the cultural and contemporary contexts where Mexican American mothers raise their children they vocalize explicit, complex, and contested conceptions of language policy in the home.

Each mother in the case studies took a different language management approach to parenting her bilingual children even though on the surface each would appear to fall into the same homogenous group of Spanish-speaking, first-generation urban Latino mothers. While some tacit, culturally reproduced beliefs and practices were noted in this acculturating setting, what is impressive is that the commonality for these mothers was their conscious, explicit discussion of the bilingual issues facing their children and families which lead them to actively and thoughtfully manage the daily activities and routines where their children acquire language.

Luz, herself bilingual, looked to the school to provide her daughters a rich, Spanish language environment in addition to the Spanish and English bilingual environment that she managed at home. She infused her daughters’ daily activities with purpose in being bilingual and speaking Spanish as well as their community’s predominance of speaking English. She modeled bilingual practices and taught her daughters to become bilingual.

Similarly, Lilia strongly believed in the importance of her children speaking both Spanish and English. In parenting bilingual children she could not reflect on her own parents’ experiences because they parented her only in Spanish. She followed their examples in managing a home environment that maintained a high level of respect for appropriate Spanish usage and a high level of respect for Spanish speakers, especially for the oldest members of the family. Yet, homework coming from school or cues from popular media were two areas that challenged and penetrated home language policies. Lilia used her daughter’s homework as an activity where she and her daughter were learning together. Lilia’s expressed goal to become bilingual with her children occurred as they negotiated meaning together, arriving at a shared meaning of being a tattle tale and its equivalent word in Spanish. If Lilia were fully bilingual, she would not have the possibility to provide her daughter with the same learning situation. Thus, Luz, who was bilingual, could not realistically give her daughters the same learning situation. Luz was
required to consider her environment, situation, and goals when managing her daughters learning environment.

While Luz and Lilia vocalized very strategic decisions about their language management, Blanca was less vocal in her decisions but still responded to the environment, activities, and behaviors of her family’s situation. She was learning English from her children as the need arose, but she relied on her children to interpret the broader, English-dominant community where they lived.

Yet, Blanca’s needs provided her children’s Spanish language development with a purpose directly connected to their daily activities and routines. To maintain their strong connections within the family, the children might occasionally interact among themselves bilingually but with their parents meaningful conversations were in Spanish. English was the language of school and Spanish the language of the home. This difference could be seen in how the children played school. Blanca’s children used English when playing school as school was a clearly defined English activity under the political situation where they lived and their parent’s allowance that the children were free to speak any language they choose. For Lilia’s children, playing school was a bilingual affair as her older child apprenticed her young son into the activities of school. Commands might have been in English, but explanations and follow-up questions were in Spanish. In Luz’s bilingual home, school was in Spanish with dolls speaking homework like the teacher and children completing Spanish homework at the kitchen table.

A variety of parental beliefs and associated practices emerged from the environment that mothers, the primary caregivers for their young children in these examples, were managing while parenting their children bilingually. Mothers’ parenting of bilingual children occurred as their children grew along a pathway of daily activities and family routines. Beliefs about language learning might vary but they fell along a range expressed by mothers. Language practices might also differ but they have underlying beliefs that may be expressed or tacit. Features of parenting bilingual children might need to change because of the parent’s bilingual abilities, or the child’s birth order, or the one parent-one language strategy employed by the parents, or demands from schools, or political restrictions in the community, or even because or not of the mother being able to refer back to her own mother’s parenting monolingually or bilingually.

As seen in the case studies, each mother approached bilingual parenting from a different position. Intertwining theories such as ecocultural theory and language policy theory offer us a way to understand how the local environment offer possibilities to parents’ needs to manage the language use and practices in their homes.

The methodology used for this study allowed us to examine naturally occurring instances of Mexican American mothers’ beliefs about language learning and language practices in contemporary California and Arizona. It also allowed us to focus on the variety of perspectives which arose in the midst of raising bilingual children.

The findings paint a detailed portrait where Mexican American mothers were not a homogenous group but rather expressed a heterogeneity of language learning beliefs that emerged from mothers’ experiences, children’s curiosities, and the environment where young children were growing and learning. While heterogeneity abounds, the similarities for Mexican Americans living in this region was that seldom was a family unconnected to issues of bilingualism and bilingual parenting. At every corner and in
every activity mothers had to consciously consider the environment where their children were growing and they, as parents, were parenting bilinguals.

In analyzing the data to answer my research questions, I have presented a range of beliefs that Mexican American mothers expressed. Their beliefs originated in the local environment where these families lived. The language practices found within the families’ everyday activities and routines had associated beliefs, some tacit but most often explicitly connected to a mother’s language learning goals for her young child. Mothers consciously discussed, contemplated, and mulled over the management of language practices in family life that was necessary to promote their vision of bilingualism for their bilingual children.

The implications for researchers are that strongly situating language policy theory in a local setting allowed us to understand the contextual factors that explain how the Mexican American mothers in these case studies consciously structured daily activities in accordance with in their beliefs about their children’s language. The findings support and empirically advance the postulate of ecocultural theorists that we cannot rely on static or homogeneous classifications of parents’ language socialization practices, as emphasized by earlier theoretical perspectives, including the literature on cultural models (Holloway & Fuller, 1997; Lowe & Weisner, 2004; Tudge, 2008). The findings in this study show significant variability among Mexican American mothers with regards to language policy, yet a great similarity exists with regards to their consciously, discussing and acting from their language beliefs in this acculturating setting. They are not simply culturally reproducing tacit models of parenting, they are explicit and purposeful. Further research is needed to understand the tacit beliefs that exist and their influence on young bilingual learners.

The implications for parents of bilingual children include that each family must understand its set of circumstances, experiences, history, and beliefs in raising a bilingual child. No standard model of parenting bilingual children is available to families who might appear similar from the outside. What was effective with the oldest child may not be effective with a younger sibling. Parents’ monolingualism or bilingualism varies. Thus, just like the Mexican American mothers in this study, parents raising bilingual children must consciously consider multiple factors when managing the daily activities of their bilingual children. Parents must consider the setting where their children are growing in their developmental niche alongside the parents own beliefs about language learning and language practices. Further research is needed among second generation mothers who are parenting bilingual children in close contact with their own mothers to understand how bilingual parenting strategies are transferred from one generation to the next.

Additional avenues for research which the results of from this study open include the need to empirically understand the language policy of monolingual English speaking mothers seeking to parent bilingual children in this setting. Much effort is given by parents of young children with mixed success. Some parents seek to recapture a lost heritage language. Other monolingual English-speaking parents seek to give their child a second language early in life for a future economic advantage. What are the language learning beliefs and practices of parents who are monolingual speakers of the society’s dominant language? How do these parents structure the daily activities of their young children to advance the bilingual goals they have for their young children? This is
especially needed due to the currency presently given to young children learning a foreign language in preschools and elementary schools in this region.

Finally, the findings from this study urgently call upon parents, educators, policymakers and researchers to join together to develop networks for effectively sharing and exchanging information about parenting bilingual children. This will involve research that recognizes the heterogeneity of parents’ practices, backgrounds, and goals, while being informed by parents’ conscious parenting intentions and goals. All parties need to have access to effective parenting strategies that include input from parents as well as educators and researchers. From within the current political, economic, and social environment, all stakeholders need both scientifically based information on parenting young bilinguals and practical knowledge grounded in family life and originating from parents’ voices. When we succeed in developing these networks, information on parenting bilingual children will reverberate well beyond the university research classroom or the family living room, offering significantly more young children the opportunity to grow up bilingual.
References


UCLA Latino Home-School Study webpage retrieved December 1, 2011, from (http://cultureandhealth.ucla.edu/latinohsproj/Sample_Methods.html)


