

Engaging language and cultural spaces: Latin American parents' reflections on language loss and maintenance in Vancouver

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This qualitative study aims to explore the loss and maintenance of Spanish in Latin American children in Vancouver from the perspective of parents. It focuses on the experiences of children either developing bilingually (Spanish–English) or monolingually (English). The participating families were from Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and had children between the ages of three and seventeen. Drawing on semi-structured interview data, the article highlights the complexity of the issues affecting maintenance and loss of L1 and points to the multifaceted nature of the attendant consequences. The discussion mainly revolves around the issues of cultural identity, the role of family, intergenerational communication and the size of the L1 community.

Cette étude qualitative explore la perspective de parents sur la perte et le maintien de la langue espagnole chez des enfants hispanophones de Vancouver. Cette étude se concentre en particulier sur les expériences de parents latino-américains d'enfants bilingues (espagnol-anglais) ou unilingues (anglais). Les familles ayant participé à cette étude étaient originaires de Colombie, du Guatemala et du Salvador et avaient des enfants âgés de trois à dix-sept ans. À partir d'entrevues semi-dirigées, l'article met en évidence la complexité des facteurs liés à la perte et/ou au maintien de la langue maternelle et expose la nature multiple des conséquences qui en découlent. La discussion touchera principalement aux questions d'identité culturelle, du rôle de la famille, de la communication entre les générations, et de la taille de la communauté latino-américaine.

Introduction

Immigrant parents usually concern themselves with their rapid integration into the host country (Merino, 1983). This implies learning the dominant language as quickly as possible as a means of securing employment, fulfilling their daily needs and establishing themselves as members of the community. It also means encouraging their children to learn the dominant language quickly and well in order to succeed in school, and later, in society in general (Cummins, 2000). Many parents and scholars believe that this is achieved rather effortlessly by

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children, as they are endowed with special language learning abilities (see e.g., Chomsky, 1995; Pinker, 2002), and gladly encourage them to learn the new language quickly, often overlooking the effects on the first language (L1).

Such a perceived blessing — language acquisition ability — does not come without a cost for many children. In the process of learning the dominant language, often their L1 gradually erodes as the L1 loss process begins. If this process gets underway, many “parents often feel that they are losing their children” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999, p. 47) because they are no longer able to fully reach them in the language in which they are most competent. Many children tend to lose their L1 skills as the second language begins to prevail (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Additionally, schools and society also put emphasis on the dominant language (Hakuta, 1986; Portes and Hao, 1998), which causes the children to lose features of their L1.

This article is based on data from interviews with four Latin American families living in Vancouver, Canada. It seeks to address, from the parents’ perspectives, how Latin American families view their experiences with the issue of L1 loss and how they strive to help their children maintain the home language. It describes the many challenges that the families faced and highlights the issues they felt were key to L1 maintenance and loss, what they perceived were the consequences, and the strategies they used in order to promote language and culture transmission. The article first provides a brief overview of the relevant literature. It then describes the participants, discusses the findings, and concludes with implications for research.

Causes and consequences of L1 maintenance and loss

A growing body of research indicates that the factors influencing the maintenance and loss of home languages are varied and complex. These include language attitudes within and outside the home (Hakuta and D’Andrea, 1992; Gibbons and Ramirez, 2004), cultural identity (Cummins, 1984; Schecter, Sharken-Taboada and Bayley, 1996; Schecter and Bayley, 1997; Kouritzin, 1999; Guardado, 2002), social and psychological distance (Schumann, 1978), the pressures and socializing role of schools (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Schecter and Bayley, 1997; Kouritzin, 1999), the role of family (Thomas and Cao, 1999; Tannenbaum and Howie, 2002; Guardado, 2005; Tannenbaum, 2005; Tannenbaum and Berkovich, 2005), and the size and vitality of the ethnolinguistic community (Kravin, 1992; Landry and Allard, 1994). The language and culture attitudes that families espouse have an effect on the home language policies that emerge and the home language practices that are implemented (Hakuta and D’Andrea, 1992; Li, 1999; King, 2000; Guardado, 2005). These practices also affect, and are affected by, the linguistic, cultural and social identities of the family members.

Studies have found that linguistic minorities' ability to successfully maintain the home language in a dominant language environment gives them a stronger identity and sense of self (Schechter *et al.*, 1996; Schechter and Bayley, 1997; Kouritzin, 1999; Guardado, 2002). Pacini-Ketchabaw, Bernhard and Freire (2001), for instance, reported that participating Latin American families saw L1 maintenance as a way to foster Latino identity, as well as family unity and future professional advancement. Likewise, Sakamoto (2001) suggests that cultural awareness and the connection of L1 maintenance and identity are important factors in this process. Schechter and Bayley (1997) found that the L1 was seen by their participating families as "a necessary social resource for maintaining cultural tradition and ethnic identity" (Schechter and Bayley, 2002, p. 79). It could also be hypothesized that a strong L1 identity is one of the most critical factors conducive to L1 maintenance (Guardado, 2005). However, Pease-Alvarez (2002) reported that for some of the parents in her study with a population similar to that of Schechter and Bayley, this was not the case. It appears, then, that cultural identity and L1 maintenance are definitely connected. However, although the degree of attachment to the home culture — and the development of a solid cultural identity — may play an important role in the maintenance of L1 in a dominant language context, the issue is much more complex and the findings are still inconclusive.

Another issue connected to children's perceived language learning ability arises from their school experiences. When linguistic minority children enter school, very often their L1 quickly starts declining, causing their performance on tests of language proficiency to show a bleak picture. At some point during the L2 development, the students' mastery of both languages may be incomplete and teachers often comment that some bilingual minority language children cannot speak either language properly (McLaughlin, Gesi Blanchard and Osanai, 1995). This can lead to linguistic minority children being placed in categories such as semilingualism, also referred to as subtractive bilingualism (Lambert, 1981). Semilingualism, originally used by Hansegard (1975) and popularized more recently by Cummins (1981, 1994) and others (e.g., Pacheco, 1983), refers to deficiency in both first and second languages.

Semilingualism has been subject to much criticism for several reasons (e.g., MacSwan, 2000). First of all, it contains negative connotations because it is based on a deficit model of bilingualism. As such, it highlights failure and underachievement. Additionally, it is a well-known fact in the area of bilingualism that a bilingual is not two monolinguals put together, and that people vary in the way they use languages in different contexts and for different purposes. Consequently, some scholars suggest it may be more useful to limit the notion of semilingualism to extreme cases where severe social, linguistic and communicative deprivation occurs, and view other cases of perceived semilingualism as only temporary phases in the development of languages in bilingual children

(McLaughlin *et al.*, 1995). This understanding may contribute to developing a more positive view of bilingualism and L1 maintenance among minorities. In that vein, Schecter and Bayley (2002) call for a restructuring of the terms of debate, away from those based on a deficit model of bilingualism, and toward those that include a focus on the additive potential of multilingualism and cultural pluralism, thus acknowledging the positive consequences of minority language maintenance as experienced by individuals (Guardado, 2003).

Studies have reported advantages related to future employability as important benefits of being bilingual (Schecter *et al.*, 1996; Schecter and Bayley, 1997; Kouritzin, 1999; Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa and Rodriguez, 1999; Sakamoto, 2001; Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al.*, 2001; Guardado, 2002; Schecter and Bayley, 2002); however, it is within the family domain where most of the benefits seem to have the most important impact, as the development and use of family languages enable members to participate in intergenerational communication, strengthen family ties and facilitate access to family history. Families do play an important role in the development of children's home languages (Li, 1999; Thomas and Cao, 1999; Garcia, 2003). Likewise, families are directly affected by the maintenance or loss of L1s (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Ng and He, 2004). The language use choices that parents and children make have immense consequences for their future ability to communicate well, especially at more complex levels. Thus, L1 loss and maintenance is always destined to have intergenerational communication consequences (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 1999; Thomas and Cao, 1999; Schecter and Bayley, 2002; Garcia, 2003), most often between children and extended family members, especially grandparents.

The above issues have been studied extensively in the United States context in relation to Latin American immigrants. In Canada, however, there is only minimal work focusing specifically on language socialization and Spanish maintenance. Despite what are arguably many general similarities between Canada and the United States, L1 maintenance and loss issues with Spanish-speakers are perceived by immigrants to be different in the Canadian context (Guardado, 2005). This study attempts to address that gap by examining Latin American parents' perspectives on home language maintenance and loss in Vancouver.

The Study

The present article is based on data from an exploratory interview study examining parents' perceptions of causes of Spanish language loss among Latin American children, factors facilitating the maintenance of Spanish, and parents' feelings about their children's loss or maintenance of Spanish. The analysis herein only focuses on factors that are pervasive within each of the families

and attempts to use those family themes as a way of raising questions about the language loss and maintenance issue for Latin Americans in Vancouver. The following guiding question is used: How do the participating families view their experiences with the issue of home language loss and maintenance?

The participants

The criteria for selecting the study participants were for two of the families to have at least one child over the age of six fluent in English and showing considerable deficiency in Spanish and/or being reluctant to speak it. The other two families needed to have at least one child in the same age range that was fluent in both languages. The rationale was to ensure obtaining both L1 loss and maintenance perspectives. Also, based on previous reports that L1 loss tends to begin around the time when children enter the school system (see e.g., Wong Fillmore, 1991), the minimum age of six was chosen, once children have had some school experiences. Based on self-assessments, for the purposes of this article the families are classified as L1 loss families and L1 maintenance families.

The four participating families were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Palys, 2003). Three of the participating families were selected using the former technique. The fourth participant, Lisa, was recruited through snowball sampling, having been referred by one of the other participants. All the participants were asked to select a pseudonym to protect their privacy. In order to help readers better understand the results of this study, a detailed account of the participants' backgrounds, special characteristics and their contexts is provided (see Table 1). The participants were interviewed between July and August, 2001.

The first research participant interviewed, Anthony, was a 43-year-old businessman from El Salvador who had moved to California in 1980 and to Vancouver in 1984. Some years after arriving in Vancouver he had met and married Valeria, also from El Salvador, a financial consultant who spoke Spanish, English and French. At the time of the interview, the family owned a house in a middle class neighbourhood. Both had attended Salvadorian universities prior to immigrating, although neither one had completed their degrees. Their only son, Ricky, was 8 years old and was attending a private school.

The second participant interviewed was Carmen, a 45-year-old immigrant from Colombia who had first moved to Vancouver in 1983. Her daughter, Fay, was born in 1984. They returned to Colombia the same year after Carmen's relationship with Fay's Austrian father ended, but had moved back to Vancouver in 1989 when Fay was 5 years old. Fay had attended private and public elementary schools and, at the time of the study, she seemed to be quite popular in her affluent neighbourhood public secondary school.

The third participants were Joel and Silvia, a middle-aged couple from Guatemala. Joel had been an elementary school teacher in Guatemala and Silvia was a homemaker. At the time of their interview, they were receiving support from BC Benefits (the provincial welfare agency) while Joel attended English classes in the morning and Silvia cared for their three children, aged 3, 8 and 11. This family had moved back and forth between Canada and Guatemala several times during an 11-year period. At the time of the interview, they had been back in Canada for three years. Their children were in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and preferred English to Spanish, despite having had frequent contact with their home culture.

The fourth participant was Lisa, a 33-year-old Salvadorian house-cleaner and mother of three children, Dolores aged 7, Tony aged 9 and Francisco aged 13. She had obtained some university education in El Salvador, where she had worked to support herself from the time she was a teenager. Lisa's family had lived in Vancouver since 1991. Her Guatemalan husband had not had any contact with the children since the couple had separated two years prior to participating in the study. There was no indication that their children had been involved in any extracurricular activities at the time, and in my frequent visits I noticed that they tended to rely heavily on television and video games for entertainment. They spoke English all the time, to Lisa and to one another.

Data collection

Data were collected mainly through semi-structured interviews lasting about one hour with each informant in Spanish and then transcribed and translated into English. Additionally, notes were taken during and after the interviews as well as during the data analysis stages. Subsequently, the interviews were analyzed using standard procedures for analyzing qualitative data, namely inductive approaches, in which the themes and categories emerge from the data rather than being imposed on them prior to collection (Ryan and Bernard, 2003a, 2003b). Three of the interviews were conducted in the families' homes and one in the family business. Except for one, the interviews were conducted with only one parent present and in all cases no children were present. However, in all cases, there were many opportunities, both before and after the interviews, to interact with the children. Almost always, at least one parent was present during those interactions.

Findings

Of the four families, those of Carmen and Anthony were classified as L1 maintenance families, whose children were growing up bilingually, as reported by the parents; those of Joel and Silvia and Lisa were classified as L1 loss families, whose children were losing Spanish, also according to the parents.

Table 1: Summary of family profiles

	Language Maintenance Families		Language Loss Families	
Participants (parents)	Anthony	Valeria	Carmen	Joel
Family status	two-parent		one-parent	two-parent
Number of children	1		1	3
Country of origin	El Salvador		Colombia	Guatemala
Socioeconomic situation	middle class (businessperson)	financial consultant	professional	BC benefits (welfare) recipients
Education in country of origin	advanced university courses		university graduate	high school diploma (normal school)
Length of residence (years)	17		13	8
Place of children's birth	Canada		Canada	Guatemala: 2 Canada: 1
				El Salvador: 1 Guatemala: 1 Canada: 1

After analyzing the interview data from the four participating families, unique themes and characteristics within each family were identified. In this section I report on those themes and provide examples of those characteristics through the voices of the participants. The four themes — (a) the father tongue, (b) creating intimate spaces for cultural practice, (c) living in the spaces between, and (d) a lonely struggle — are reported on in the following section.

The Father Tongue

Anthony was the first parent to be interviewed. He was very passionate about his parental role in general and particularly about his duty to pass on his native tongue and culture to his Vancouver-born, 8-year-old son, Ricky. His reflections revolved around many key issues surrounding the significance of bilingualism for his son and drew from the experiences of acquaintances and abstractions from hypothetical cases. Anthony began his story by addressing his cultural identity, stating that he was very proud of his origin and wanted his son to know where he came from. He also stated that his son, Ricky, was interested in learning about his father's cultural identity and often asked him questions about his background. Anthony claimed that his son was very proud of his cultural background. At one point in the course of the interview, he was commenting generally on the situation of children who do not develop both dominant and home languages. At this juncture, I asked him the following question in order to probe the issue further: "What do you think are the consequences of language loss when those children become adults?" The following quote reflects his perspective on what is lost when a first language is lost:

The consequences that I see for children are that they lose opportunities. Doors close on them. I believe that people who speak several languages have lots of job and business opportunities. Loss of economic opportunities, but also a moral loss. An identity loss. I'm sure that there are a lot of adults who regret that their parents didn't help them maintain their own languages. I've heard many comments. I don't want to be one of those parents. I believe that there's an emotional loss. There are cases of children who cannot communicate with their grandparents because they can't speak the language. That love that only grandparents can provide. That's something that remains in your subconscious mind for as long as you live. That is priceless. Moral values. All that is lost. And that's only an example of what's lost. The culture. The complete identity of the roots of the parents, all that is lost, because of ignorance.

As the above quote shows, Anthony eloquently described why he thought Spanish had to be transmitted, maintained and used, as well as what he thought was usually lost when children do not enjoy the benefit of the continued use of Spanish in the Vancouver context.

The main theme in his comments seemed to allude to a multifaceted loss. He mentioned missed future employment and business opportunities, but most of all, he seemed to emphasize cultural and identity loss, as well as identity contradiction or fragility (for a detailed account of L1 loss effects on identity, see Rodríguez, 1982). He also assigned a vital role to home language maintenance in the transmission of values by stressing the emotional and moral loss (Wong Fillmore, 1991) and other psychological consequences. In particular, he highlighted the crucial socializing role of extended family, especially grandparents, and the unnecessary detrimental effects of missing those priceless teachings. He maintained that the root cause of all this loss was ignorance. Perhaps this was only a catch-all phrase. I have argued elsewhere, however (Guardado, 2005), that cultural knowledge and awareness could play a role in more successful home language transmission practices.

In actual fact, home language was hardly an appropriate term for the environment in which Ricky lived as Spanish was really not the family's home language, in the sense of the language typically used by family members when they are all together with each other. Although both parents were from El Salvador, a Spanish-speaking country, and both had immigrated to Canada as adults and still struggled with the English language, Anthony's wife had shifted to English as the home language almost exclusively. The reasons for such a shift are beyond the scope of this study, as Anthony's wife, Valeria, had not been interviewed, partly due to the initial objectives of the study. When approached, Valeria had politely declined and stated that since the focus of the investigation was on language loss and maintenance, her husband should be the one to be interviewed, since he was the one responsible for their son's development and continued use of Spanish, an interesting point considering the issue of loss was also an important focus of the study.

The following description in Anthony's words refers to his parental involvement with Ricky:

Ever since he was very little he has spoken English with his mom and Spanish with me. He learned both languages simultaneously. From the time he was in the womb, I would speak Spanish to him.

It has often been mentioned in the literature that the home is the last stronghold of the heritage language; however, as Anthony's story reveals, sometimes even the home can become a site of struggle for language maintenance. For Anthony, it was through the *father tongue* that his son was socialized into the cultural practices that he himself had acquired as a child growing up in a much richer L1 environment than Ricky had been exposed to. For this family, English was by and large the home language and it was through this language that the main socialization of the family unit was taking place at this point in their lives.

Creating intimate spaces for cultural practice

Carmen was interviewed next and she was also passionate and articulate about her Vancouver-born, 17-year-old daughter Fay's first language and culture maintenance. She connected the successful continuation of her daughter's Latin American roots and Spanish language with her affective domain and her social, mental and moral development, in some ways evoking Anthony's comments:

At the mental development level, you have the possibility of doing analyses through two cultures, through two different aspects, two different visions, which I believe is very enriching for anyone. When children have a second language, they are able to value other cultures and [value] other kids who speak other languages, besides English.

Carmen seems to have reflected on her daughter's maintenance of the language and culture and identified advantages for speaking two languages, as frequently noted by other scholars (Cummins, 1989; Wong Fillmore, 1991; Garcia, 1995; Kouritzin, 1999). However, she also refers to the benefit of being able to function, think and conduct analyses through two cultural systems (Schechter and Bayley, 2002), enriching the person's worldview and increasing her meaning-making capabilities.

Additionally, to Carmen, the lack of a larger ethnolinguistic community was a big hurdle in transmitting the home language and culture: "In the last 12 years, I have been her main contact with Spanish." She realized that the opportunities for L1 practice provided by the home were limited, given that she was the only parent, but also emphasized the need to take advantage of the few opportunities that the home provides: "It has to be used widely in all aspects of daily life, as if we lived in our own country." She also remarked that having Latin American friends did not provide any advantages in terms of L1 practice because all the children spoke English among themselves.

Despite the absence of a large L1 community in Vancouver, Fay had developed a high level of proficiency in Spanish. Carmen attributed Fay's accomplishments to several factors. In part, she attributed her success to her attachment to the culture through her frequent visits to places associated with the Latin American culture (i.e., Montreal, where Carmen's brother lived with his family; Miami, where they had other relatives). As she stated:

The contact with my maternal family has been very important in maintaining the language. Also the fact that we travel to Miami or other places where there's some kind of connection with Latin America, like a relative that speaks Spanish, had an impact on her language. It was very natural for her to maintain Spanish.

The family thus played a very key role in language maintenance for them. The family had helped expose Fay to language and culture in an important way, and

in some instances, she had been able to almost completely immerse herself in a Latin American-like setting, even in places like Miami or Montreal, just because of her close kinship relationships in those cities. Carmen saw her family as a resource for home language exposure and sources of support for language and cultural maintenance, and as one of the main motivations for striving to achieve those goals. Perhaps Fay also felt attached to her family members, even though all of them lived thousands of miles away, and embraced the home language as a family connection and as a way of having access to them and what they represented. Carmen stated that at least every other year, Fay had the opportunity to visit family in Colombia, Montreal or Miami, in addition to family visits to Vancouver.

However, the special moments that mother and daughter had shared singing children's songs, telling stories and reading books in Spanish were described by Carmen as the most treasured in her heart and the most influential in her daughter's L1 maintenance. One facilitating factor in children's L1 culture and identity development seems to be the use of L1 children's literature and songs. In this regard, Fay's mother stated: "...we would read children's stories in Spanish. We also had children's songs in Spanish from different Latin American countries, which we listened to very frequently." In Fay's case, she had clearly been very attached to her culture, and Carmen believed that it had been one of the most important factors in her daughter's maintenance of the language: "I don't think I can separate the affective aspect from the language, and I definitely think that's what has had the most influence on her language maintenance."

Several factors contributed to Fay's maintenance of the home language and culture. According to her mother, more than anything, the construction of a unique space for mother-daughter interaction, mediated by Spanish language and culture, appeared to have played a crucial role in the development of the language use patterns and identity of this teenager. Additionally, the exposure to appropriate Latin American role models with whom Fay could identify and the ability of her mother to give her opportunities to be in touch with part of her roots, albeit in geographically distant places, also played an important role.

Living in the spaces between

Silvia and Joel became the third family to participate and the only one where both parents were interviewed. The situation of this family was quite unique. At the time of the interview, Silvia and Joel, and their three children, Stephanie aged 3, Diana aged 8 and Arturo aged 11, had moved back to Guatemala, their country of origin, and back again to Canada, twice during an 11-year period. They first came to Canada in 1990 and returned to Guatemala in 1992. They moved back to Vancouver in 1994 and went back to Guatemala in 1997. They had been back in Canada for three years when the study was conducted.

Since both children attending school were in ESL classes, although English was reportedly their dominant language, they may have been at risk of encountering language difficulties in higher grades, especially when the requirements for academic language would become more essential in school. It was disturbing that despite having had frequent, long-term contact with the L1 and first culture (C1), these children were not succeeding in maintaining the high level of Spanish proficiency that their parents had hoped for. The following quote in Silvia's voice illustrates this:

Arturo is in grade 6 and Diana is in Grade 2. Diana is doing well in school, but we have some problems with Arturo. They speak English better than Spanish, but in school they're in ESL classes. When we went to Guatemala to live for four years, they spoke good Spanish, because that's all people spoke there, but now after three years living here, they've lost a lot of it. English is their dominant language now.

The children's language situation seemed to be almost as fluid as the stability of their living situation. Both children were in ESL classes and Arturo, the eldest of the two, was also having some difficulties with school content. The fact that the parents reported that English was the children's dominant language at the time, while also reporting that their Spanish was decaying, points to what has been referred to as semilingualism (Cummins, 1994), which is not a totally uncommon phenomenon, since schools and society generally put emphasis on English, thrusting children into a gradual loss of aspects of their first language. It was worrying that the children in this family were not having a more positive linguistic and school experience at the time, although their parents claimed that their Spanish had evolved to an appropriate level during their then recent two-year stay in Guatemala. Unfortunately, there had been no ESL equivalent in their Guatemalan school to ascertain whether factors similar to the ones described above had also played out in that context, creating similar semilingual circumstances where the children had to inhabit—temporarily or permanently—the spaces between their two languages, despite common myths of children's unproblematic language learning ability.

The central feeling revealed in this interview was a narrative often surrounded by disappointment. Both parents complained that their children would not speak Spanish, and when they did, they spoke it badly:

They speak only English with their friends. They don't have many Hispanic friends, and the ones they have, only speak English with them. At home they speak only English among themselves; they refuse to speak Spanish. We speak only in Spanish and they also respond in Spanish, but in a very deteriorated Spanish.

Additionally, as implied by Anthony and Carmen, one of the main disadvantages for Latin American families attempting to raise bilingual children in Vancouver was the small size of the Latin American population. Silvia and Joel seemed to agree that such a condition was a major factor in their current difficulties in the transmission of a high level of Spanish proficiency to their children. Besides the above theme, Silvia and Joel also described details of their family members' practical daily interaction and explicit socialization both within and outside the home. In contrast to Carmen and Anthony, however, these parents did not talk about issues of identity or moral and social development when asked what they perceived to be the consequences of loss or maintenance. It is unknown whether they chose not to share their views on the issue or simply had not considered it altogether. In response to that question, they briefly referred to the effects on communication with extended family, but privileged the issue of loss of future economic opportunities for their children:

Sometimes we tell them that they have to learn Spanish well, because when they visit the family in the future, how will they communicate? They won't be able to understand each other. However, that's not the most important reason to be bilingual. We think that speaking two languages makes them better. They would have better job opportunities in the future.

An instrumental motivation, such as the one expressed by this family, has often been cited by researchers as one of the most valuable reasons for parents seeking to raise bilingual children (Kouritzin, 1999; Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al.*, 2001). Gardner and Lambert's (1972) original work on motivation also highlighted that point in reference to adults seeking to regain an L1.

Despite this family's frustrations and incomplete success in transmitting the language to their children, these parents understood what it takes to pass on the language and culture to their children. At different points during the interview, they emphasized the need for parents to speak the home language to their children at all times, in all situations of daily life, in order to "inculcate the first language into the children."

A Lonely Struggle

To interview Lisa was to listen to a very frustrated parent. Lisa was a very outspoken parent whose words showed irritation with a number of aspects associated with her children's current home language situation, not only in her own home, but also in the wider Latin American community in Vancouver.

She talked at length about how her own children, Dolores aged 7, Tony aged 9 and Francisco aged 13, had great difficulty understanding and speaking Spanish. She described in much detail how they had significant weaknesses in Spanish in terms of syntax, lexis and pronunciation:

Their Spanish vocabulary is very limited. Much of their pronunciation is also half Spanish and half English. Pronunciation definitely gives them many problems and none of them know how to read or write in Spanish.

She also explained that their understanding of spoken Spanish was very poor and their literacy was nonexistent, and because of that, they refused to speak it and were therefore losing the language. It is unclear, however, whether this was the right cause-effect relationship, as they could have been refusing to speak it due to other factors and been losing it merely due to lack of use. This quote addresses the language use patterns at home:

Right now they speak English all the time. I speak Spanish to them and they respond in English. They understand it, but are reluctant to speak it. Their English is definitely much better than their Spanish.

Lisa's words echo those of Joel and Silvia, whose children had also embraced English as their most used language. Joel and Silvia's children had reportedly made efforts to use Spanish, but had only been able to produce "deteriorated Spanish." Lisa's children, on the other hand, not only refused or were unable to produce any significant amount of Spanish, they had trouble understanding their mother's words, according to her. This situation was exacerbated by several factors, including having only one parent to model the language, having been born and raised in Vancouver without ever having visited the original country of their mother, and also having a circle of so-called Spanish-speaking friends who spoke only English to them. Additionally, Lisa was quite proficient in English, a situation the children seemed to take full advantage of in all home interactions.

As mentioned above, having Latin American friends did not seem to provide any advantages to Lisa's children in terms of L1 practice because they spoke English with them:

They have some Spanish-speaking friends. The problem is that they speak English among themselves, too.

Basically, they only speak Spanish with me, my neighbour and my sister. I believe that the reason they're losing Spanish is because they're outside the house most of the time and all their friends speak English.

Lisa often stated that she felt alone in the struggle to transmit the language, as everyone outside the home spoke English, making it so much more difficult. She expressed frustration at making efforts to foster Spanish at home, only to see the whole community speaking English outside the home, effectively hampering her efforts. She conceded, however, that the children were beginning to show interest in the language, and she thought that offered a glimmer of hope in her lonesome struggle.

Discussion

The previous section described how the participating families viewed their experiences with the issue of home language loss and maintenance. Although many questions still remain, I believe the guiding question has at least helped highlight the complexity of the issues. In general, despite persistent barriers to L1 maintenance, some parents succeed in raising their children bilingually and multilingually while others do not.

First of all, often minority-language families with two parents are unable to pass on the L1 to their children (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Thomas and Cao, 1999; Schecter and Bayley, 2002) while some one-parent families succeed in the same task (Guardado, 2002). Although the exact process that makes this possible is still somewhat unclear, successful L1 maintenance parents take advantage of several resources, consciously or unconsciously, which may enable them to transmit the L1 and C1. Some of these resources seem to include frequent contact with relatives and friends from the C1, relating personal and family anecdotes, telling and reading L1 stories, singing songs, and generally spending time using the L1 with their children, but perhaps more importantly, bonding and creating intimate spaces for their relationships to thrive and solidify.

Folk wisdom suggests that mothers are usually credited with having a critical role in passing on the L1 to children, as they have traditionally been the principal caregivers and also the ones who more commonly nurture children and socialize them into language use. In the case of one of the L1 maintenance parents in this study, it was the father who provided the necessary input for L1 maintenance in his son. For Ricky, Spanish was not a mother tongue, or a mother's tongue (Kouritzin, 2000), but a father tongue, challenging traditional assumptions about gender roles in the home and perceived parenting notions in Latin American countries (see e.g., Jelin, 1991; Dore, 1997).

A common reason for parents to shift to the second language is to accommodate children's preferences for home language use (Thomas and Cao, 1999) or to ensure their children do not experience the difficulties they faced as immigrants and struggling language learners. When this happens, L1 maintenance is most certainly perpetually precluded; however, in the case of Anthony's family, it was only the mother that shifted to English, which still enabled Ricky to have exposure to his parents' L1.

Another issue raised by the parents in this and other studies (Li, 1999; Sakamoto, 2001; Guardado, 2005) is the extent of their cultural awareness and their degree of success in promoting that in their children. Carmen, also an L1 maintenance parent, was very concerned with valuing cultures and languages, not only those in her own life, but the languages and cultures of the people in the community. Respect for culture (Li, 1999) was a common theme in her

reflections of L1 loss and maintenance. This was something she seemed to understand well and talked about it with much passion and interest. This was also an area that she had obviously reflected upon in the past, a feeling I also got from Anthony's comments, but somehow, absent from the other two families, the L1 loss families. It is possible that the deep understanding of this complex issue is one of the keys to success in L1 maintenance, coupled with the complete cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and economic resources necessary to provide children with an enriching experience. The two families in this study that had succeeded the most in L1 maintenance also seemed to enjoy a higher socioeconomic status and higher formal educational background, a finding that departs from other studies (Schechter and Bayley, 1997; Winsler *et al.*, 1999).

The role of family (Fishman, 1991; Li, 1999; Thomas and Cao, 1999; Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al.*, 2001; Tannenbaum and Howie, 2002; Garcia, 2003; Tannenbaum, 2005; Tannenbaum and Berkovich, 2005) was also predominant in most of the parents' reflections. Although the families in this study did not have a local family network guaranteeing greater exposure to the L1 and the culture, they felt that family played an important role in L1 maintenance. Carmen's family was the most fortunate in this sense. Her daughter, Fay, had several opportunities to visit family members in various North American and Latin American contexts, where she was able to obtain increased exposure and participation in the language and culture. Carmen seemed convinced that such opportunities were critical in her daughter's ability to develop a high level of Spanish. Thus, family becomes one of the modes through which families seek social, cultural and linguistic support, as it can facilitate the creation of spaces for L1 maintenance and cultural identity to develop on a continuous basis (Guardado, 2005).

Because the data in this and other studies (see e.g., Li, 1999; Sakamoto, 2001) suggest that attaining a high level of cultural awareness may be identified as an important step in the on-going process of cultural identity re/construction, it is likely that the promotion of a sense of Latin American cultural identity within the participating families strongly contributed to language maintenance in their children, while the opposite appears to be true for families that, for whatever reasons, had not yet been able to transmit such a feeling of cultural attachment to their children. Therefore, it could be speculated that the more culturally aware people are, the more likely they may be to raise children with a high level of command of the L1 and a strong sense of attachment to their family's cultural roots.

All the participants were convinced that a narrow linguistic community, and as a consequence, low ethnolinguistic vitality, was a major obstacle for language maintenance, as argued by Landry, Allard and Henry (1996) and Zentella (1997). Although the L1 maintenance families were able to succeed in

maintaining the L1 despite that limitation, they concurred with the L1 loss families that the availability of Latin American friends does not guarantee Spanish practice, as children tend to prefer English use among themselves. This finding does not prove or disprove other research findings on the need for high ethnolinguistic vitality for L1 maintenance (e.g., Kravin, 1992), but the fact that some families can transmit the home language under adverse circumstances (i.e., small L1 community) is helpful in pointing out the complexities associated with L1 maintenance. It is necessary to look at how parents who have succeeded, despite such limitations, have dealt with the issue of maintenance. In light of what the participants revealed about their home practices, we can learn that one way this is addressed is by providing rich input in the L1 and by making other adjustments, such as supplementing this input with a *virtual immersion* in the C1. This can be achieved by creating engaging opportunities for interaction in the way of personal anecdotes, culture specific stories, songs, and plenty of playful caregiver-child contact in the L1. This may help partly compensate for the lack of play friends and of rich, complex family and friend networks often found in a natural L1 and C1 environment.

An important factor affecting the children's bilingualism was school. Although parents in other studies have reported receiving specific instructions from school personnel to only speak English to their children (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Schecter and Bayley, 1997; Kouritzin, 1999, 2000; Schecter and Bayley, 2002; Garcia, 2003; Guardado, 2005), this was not the case for the participating families. However, they seemed to be aware of the assimilative forces that schools and the wider community exert on minorities in general and on their families in particular. Lisa, for instance, referred to this specifically and felt she was fighting a lonely battle against those forces. Silvia and Joel also expressed concerns about the enormous influence of the dominant language community and the little time they had available to expose their children to the language and culture at home. Additionally, all the parents agreed that their children had friends and school peers with Latin American roots, some of whom were very proficient in Spanish; however, they also reported that for all of them English was the preferred common, and possibly dominant, language, making them English-speaking *Spanish-speaking* children.

Many immigrant families emphasize the learning of the dominant language, to the detriment of the first, an attitude that is also prevalent in schools and society in general (Merino, 1983; Cummins, 2000). Children have a tendency to become dominant in the second language more easily than their parents, quickly losing aspects of the first language. Often this process gets underway while the L2 is still not fully developed (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Although one of the families in this study reported academic difficulties in their children and described a language situation that has often been labeled as semilingualism, an analysis of the factors at play is beyond the scope of

this study for lack of appropriate data for addressing the issue. However, I can speculate that their language situation could be just a temporary phase in their language development (McLaughlin *et al.*, 1995). There are cases in the literature where minority-language children have been found to be deficient in their two languages and diagnosed as communication handicapped, for instance, only to be found later to have caught up with their peers (see e.g., Schiff-Myers, Djukic, McGovern-Lawler and Perez, 1993).

Conclusion

This article has sought to address how the participating families view their experiences with the issue of home language loss and maintenance. Although many questions still remain, I believe that the main question has at least contributed to highlight the complexity of the issues. To sum up, the L1 loss families cited the lack of a wide L1 community as a major cause for their children's L1 loss. The four families associated L1 maintenance with future economic benefits; however, the maintenance families strongly associated it with identity, and moral and mental development. The L1 loss families acknowledged their children's L1 loss, but expressed hopes for their future success in developing it. The L1 maintenance families were satisfied with their success in helping their children maintain the L1 and expected them to become successful members in the heritage culture and effective users of the L1 in their adult lives. Additionally, they saw L1 maintenance as inextricably connected to family life. To them, maintaining the home language meant more than just being able to access their home culture. It meant establishing and maintaining a key link to family and strengthening their relationships.

The present findings suggest the cultural awareness of minority parents and the extent to which they are able to instill this implicit knowledge into their children may be inherently associated with the level of learning and success in retaining the L1 for their children, as language is inherently related to culture (Halliday, 1978; Kramsch, 1998; Jandt, 2004). Similarly, perhaps some of the same factors contributing to making the L1 maintenance parents articulate and knowledgeable about issues related to L1 and C1 are the ones that provide the conditions for L1 maintenance. Some of the intervening variables giving the L1 maintenance parents the metalinguistic knowledge to describe their motivations, aspirations and visions (in relation to L1 and C1 maintenance) may be the same ones facilitating the L1 and C1 maintenance process.

This exploratory study raised several questions about the intervening factors in L1 loss and maintenance: How do factors such as parents' own upbringing, personal life experiences, identities, and educational background impact on families' attitudes about L1 and L2? In what ways do language ideologies shape and in what ways are they shaped by home language practices? What

is the impact of different childrearing styles on the level of L1 maintenance? To what extent does a family's cultural awareness influence the maintenance of home languages and cultures? What role does the sociopolitical context play in relation to the above questions? Addressing these questions would generate a better understanding of how these and other factors affect the language socialization that language-minority children experience as they negotiate language and cultural spaces at home and in the wider community.

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