

**MARÍA EUGENIA DÍAZ**  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
Brownsville, USA  
maria.diaz@utrgv.edu

***“En la casa yo me encargo del español”: Low-income Latino/a parents fostering biliteracy in a US-Mexico border community***

**Introduction**

Because of the passage of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and the prevalence of standardized tests, many U.S. schools promote English-only instruction (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). As a consequence of language and testing policies, many teachers discourage and devalue first language (L1) literacy (Hornberger & Link, 2012) and emergent bilinguals have lost opportunities to develop literacy in L1 (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009).

Certainly, literacy challenges faced by emergent bilinguals represent equity issues (García & Kleifgen, 2010), essential in New Literacy Studies (NLS) traditions (Luke, 2005). For instance, many policymakers do not understand the importance of an individual's L1 in academic learning (Bartolomé, 2011). Also, teachers working with bilingual students may perceive literacy in L1 as a barrier for the development of second language (L2) literacy skills (Palmer & Lynch, 2008). Biliteracy, or “any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing” (Hornberger, 1990, p. 213) is undervalued in the local schools (Smith & Murillo, 2013). Contrary to myths, Latino/a parents are interested in their children's education (Gregg, Rugg, & Stoneman, 2012). In particular, parents get involved in out-of-school literacy practices because they want their children to preserve their L1 and to become biliterate (Reese & Goldenberg, 2006).

Several studies have focused on the involvement of Latina mothers (e.g., Durand, 2010), but little is known about other family members' roles during these practices at home. This study adds to the literature and aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the out-of-school literacy practices of low-income recent immigrant families in a Texas border community? And (2) What are the roles of different family members in fostering biliteracy at home?

**Theoretical frameworks**

I framed this study on non-formal learning environments that exemplify how human beings utilize social processes and cultural resources to learn. Under sociocultural theory's umbrella (Vygotsky, 1978), I drew on NLS traditions, which refer to ideological, socially situated practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Luke, 2005). We must consider literacy practices in wider social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts (Gee, 2012). Like NLS scholars, I reject the view that literacy constitutes decontextualized linguistic abilities (e.g., sounding out letters) and that becoming literate requires the learning of discrete skills. Instead, I perceive literacy as a functional, constructivist, contextualized, and culturally relevant social practices, one in which families read and write the symbols in their daily living experiences in a culturally appropriate manner.

Another important sociocultural concept includes Funds of Knowledge (FOK), signifying culturally developed knowledge and skills for a household or for an individual to function effectively (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988). Moll (1992) argued that FOK include people's strategic exchange of knowledge, skills, and resources to compensate for limited finances. Since the present study focuses on L1 use, I also refer to linguistic FOK to address language resources (Smith, 2002). Thus, NLS and FOK involve efforts to understand and appreciate families' contexts as educational resources.

**Context of the study**

This study took place in the households of families living in a low socio-economic neighborhood in a South Texas city located along the U.S.-Mexico border. This region is one of the most bilingual and also one of the poorest in the USA. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), in this city Latinos/as represent nearly 90% of the population, 86% speak Spanish at home, and 35% live in poverty. Despite high levels of bilingualism in this region, Spanish is rarely accepted in local schools (Smith & Murillo, 2013). According to the Texas state law, bilingual students should receive instruction in English and Spanish, but local educators emphasize English throughout many local schools (Palmer & Lynch, 2008).

**Methods**

Participants were eight mothers and three fathers, ages 30 to 45, whose children attended kindergarten through second grade. These low-income recent-immigrant parents from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala spoke Spanish as a mother tongue. All had attended at least some elementary schooling in their native countries and none have received formal U.S. education. Most mothers were married and only one worked outside of the home. All interviewed fathers reported having a full- or part-time job. Participating parents signed consent forms before data gathering in this institutionally-approved research board (IRB) study.

I gathered data through semi-structured interviews in respondents' family homes. My positionality influenced data gathering and analysis, as I am a native-Spanish speaker from South America with graduate degrees in Bilingual Education. I conducted interviews in Spanish, which lasted for one to two hours. I analyzed data for this grounded theory study by looking for patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I color-coded relevant information and identified themes by looking for similarities across data vis-à-vis the research question and theoretical frameworks (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In the following section I present the themes that emerged after data analysis. These themes

were: (a) Mothers' literacy practices as a pushback to maintain Spanish; and (b) Teaching and learning English as a mutually beneficial tool.

## Findings

### *Mothers' Literacy Practices as a Pushback to Maintain Spanish*

Mothers were impassioned about their roles in maintaining their children's heritage language, which is more likely through L1 reading and writing (Bartolomé, 2011). Also, they perceived themselves as powerful, an important NLS equity concept (Luke, 2005). Mrs. Lara (all names are pseudonyms) realized that due to the English monolingualism in Texas schools (Palmer & Lynch, 2008), her children would learn only English in the classroom. Thus, she envisioned herself as their Spanish teacher, "*Yo me encargo de la educación en español, en la escuela es en inglés*" [I am in charge of the education in Spanish; the education in English is at school]. Similarly, Mrs. López knew that these English-only practices diminished her children's L1,

*"Les ayudo a avanzar rápido en la instrucción en español. Lo olvidan bien. Es increíble, como el primer año de escuela ellos ya olvidan su idioma. Pero nosotros como padres se los tenemos que seguir enfatizando"*

[I help (my children) to quickly advance with the Spanish instruction. They easily forget it. It is incredible how they forget their language during the first school year. Thus, we, as parents, have to continue emphasizing it].

Participants revealed teachers agreed with this compartmentalization of languages. Mrs. Gómez said a bilingual teacher told her son, "*No te preocupes, yo te enseño el inglés, para el español están tus papis*" [Do not worry, I teach you English and your parents will teach you Spanish].

Latino/a immigrants face unequal access to educational resources, including mother tongue materials (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). However, participating mothers found ways to gather different resources to push their children's L1 literacy. Since they could not afford to buy books, they borrowed materials from the school and public libraries, found materials in their churches, and used Spanish language materials that they had at home. In particular, they focused on the use of the Bible, which helped other recent-immigrant Latinos/as to maintain high levels of Spanish literacy (Ek, 2009; Smith & Murillo, 2012). Mrs. Laratapped into other migrant women with more resources and who brought her books from Mexico, "*Tengo amigas que me traen libros de México... también tengo una amiga migrante que le regala muchas cosas ... ella me regala libros*" [I have friends who bring books from Mexico... I also have a migrant friend who receives many things ... she gives me books]. This resource sharing, which can range from exchanging clothes to books, is considered a literacy (Gee, 2012). Also, sharing resources among people with "less access to formal sectors" is an important aspect of FOK (Moll, 1992, p. 228).

In their attempt to teach Spanish, mothers engaged in daily literacy practices with their children through storytelling, drama, explicit literacy instruction, and bedtime reading. In NLS traditions, these are literate practices because they are socially situated and meaningful to participants (Barton & Hamilton, 2012). Mrs. Sánchez pushed Spanish back into them through storytelling when they returned every day from school, "*Al momento que llegan de la escuela, les digo, 'Les voy a contar un cuentito' y se sientan en el sofá y quedan atentos ... luego lo quieren actuar*" [When they get home I tell them, 'I'm going to tell you a story,' and they sit on the couch and listen ... and then they want to act it out]. The children made Mrs. Sánchez' stories their own by dramatizing them. Participating in family stories helps to build oral language development and reading skills in children (Cline & Necochea, 2003), as well as empathy, creativity, prediction, reflection, and visualization (Braxton, 2006). Additionally, mother-child interactions while reading books at home has a positive effect on Spanish vocabulary development among bilingual preschool children (Quiroz, Snow, & Zhao, 2010). For example, Caspe (2009) discovered Latino/a four-year-olds made statistically significant gains in reading if their Latina mothers had a storytelling style of book sharing, e.g., narrating a detailed story instead of asking labelling questions or providing scant details.

Mothers in the present study used Spanish as a linguistic resource (Ruiz, 1988) and perceived bilingualism and biliteracy as desirable outcomes that benefit their children (Bialystok, 1997). Mrs. Cano appeared to understand that L1 development helps L2 acquisition (Cummins, 2003). She said, "*Yo les enseño bastante el español así cuando entran a la escuela se les hace más fácil aprender el inglés*" [I teach them a lot of Spanish so when they enter school they can learn English more easily]. Learning to read in the native language promotes higher levels of achievement in the target language (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). The results of large-scale evaluation programs corroborated that using the home language in instruction benefits the academic achievement of language minority students (August & Shanahan, 2006).

When asked how they taught their children to read, the mothers discussed continuing intimate family literacy traditions from their home countries. This intimacy is essential in helping youth to internalize and appreciate their L1 (Reyes, 2011). Mrs. Campos related the experience of extended family members teaching her to read in Spanish in Mexico, "*Yo también aprendí con mi mamá, y mis tíos. Tuve mucha convivencia familiar, y esa fue la manera que a mí me enseñaron. ... y así yo le enseñé a mi niño*" [I also learned from my mother and my uncles and aunts. I had a lot of family closeness and this was how they taught me. And this how I taught my child]. Indeed, second generation L1 maintenance in the diaspora is more likely through L1 reading and writing (Bartolomé, 2011). Thus, family language policies, or language norms parents establish at home, are important in countering English-only policies at school (Pérez-Báez, 2013). Also, these transnational socio-cultural practices and skills denote recent-immigrants' strengths and literacies in the diaspora (Jiménez, Smith, & Teague, 2009).

### *Teaching and Learning English as a Mutually Beneficial Tool*

In Spanish-dominant families in the USA, helping younger children with instruction in L2 can be an obstacle (Ortiz, 2004). However, participating family members circumvented this language barrier by using different resources. For instance, Mrs. Méndez used the Google translator to understand her children's homework,

*"Si estoy sola en casa, y no tengo a quién preguntar, lo más fácil es buscar en la computadora qué significa la palabra en el traductor de google. Le pongo la palabra en inglés y ya me la dice en español"*

[If I am home alone and have no one to ask, I search the word meaning using the google translator. I put the word in English and it says it in Spanish]. By using these resources, parents tapped into their FOK to get ahead, to thrive (Moll et al., 1992).

Mrs. Cano preferred to read in Spanish to avoid confusing her children. She said, *"Yo les pido a mis hijos que traigan los libros en español, pues no los quiero leer en inglés porque por la pronunciación yo los puedo confundir"* [I ask my children to bring books in Spanish because I do not want read them in English; I do not want to confuse them with my pronunciation]. However, when children brought books in English from school to be read at home, mothers invented the stories in Spanish based on the book pictures. Mrs. Lara narrated the following:

*"Yo decía algo que yo pensaba, les inventaba, y ellos se lo creían aunque estuviera en inglés; yo relacionaba la figura con los que estaba ahí escrito. Pero ahora que están más grandes ya saben que no es lo que les estoy diciendo. Y me dicen, 'mami, no dice eso'... Y me corrigen, y ellos se están riendo pues saben que no es verdad lo que les estoy diciendo"*

[I said something that I thought, I invented (the story) and they believed it. Although it was in English, I related the figure to what was written. But now they are older and they know it is not what I am saying. And they tell me, 'Mommy, it does not say that' ... And they correct me, and they laugh because they know that what I am telling them is not true].

Inventing stories based on the pictures and learning English from their children and the illustrations were resourceful and literate practices regarding linguistic FOK (Smith, 2002) and NLS (Barton & Hamilton, 2012). Mothers' engagement in these practices included not only those activities involving use of text, but also the cultural values, attitudes, and feelings that shaped and gave meaning to those events. The act of "reading" a book to their children in an unfamiliar language emphasized the importance mothers placed in using other linguistic resources to socialize (Gee, 2008).

Those fathers who have a higher level of English played an important role in helping their children with the L2. Mrs. Méndez explained how she relied on her husband when she encountered language difficulties, *"Pues hay cosas que sí yo entiendo y les puedo explicar (en inglés) y cuando yo realmente no puedo explicarle si le digo 'espera a tu papá'"* [I understand something and I can explain to them (in English), but when I cannot explain I tell them 'wait until your father comes']. Participating fathers also shared their roles in teaching their children L2. Mr. Gómez said, *"Yo tengo el inglés un poco mejor porque lo necesito en el trabajo...y mis hijos me esperan en la noche para que les lea un cuento (en inglés)"* [My English is a little better because I need it in my work...and my children wait for me when I come back home because they want me to read to them (in English)].

During these early literacy practices, family members learn from each other. When I asked mothers why they wanted to learn English, several reported they wanted to help their children with homework. Mrs. Cano was aware that the local church and school have programs to learn English. However, due to her responsibilities at home she could not attend them. Instead, she used different resources that she had at home. She said, *"Lo poco que sé de inglés lo aprendí de la familia de mi esposo, o de mis hijos más grandes, y cuando necesito voy a la Internet y pido la traducción"* [I learned the little English that I know from my husband's family or from my older children, and when necessary, I go to the Internet and ask for the translation].

Likewise, Mr. and Mrs. López explained how they took turns and learned from each other when they read bilingual books to their children. Mr. López said, *"Yo se lo leía primero en inglés y luego mi esposa en español"* [I read it first in English and then my wife read it in Spanish]. Mrs. López used this technique to learn English herself. She stated, *"Cuando mi esposo lo leía, aprovechaba y practicaba mi inglés"* [When my husband read it I took advantage to practice my English]. Mrs. Márquez also shared how she learned English when they read together with her older children, *"Aprendí con mis hijos; ellos me explicaban lo que yo no entendía y me corregían la pronunciación"* [I learned from my children; they explained what I did not understand and they corrected my pronunciation]. This act of parents reading with their children represents an important function. It is reciprocal, mutually beneficial mechanism for children and their parents to share a learning experience (Ortiz, 2004). Furthermore, using culture and language as resources to develop biliteracy relates to FOK and NLS.

### **Conclusions**

This study demonstrated that despite language barriers and inadequate L1 resources, Latino/a parents are involved in their children's education. This study also revealed that family members play different roles during early literacy practices as they learn from each other. Mothers reinforced L1 maintenance and L1 literacy development to compensate the monolingual framework in school and U.S. society (Palmer & Lynch, 2008). Fathers and older siblings helped with homework and with reading in English. Based on these findings, I recommend that schools districts and organizations promote parental involvement among recent-immigrant Latino/a parents. This parental participation would help educators to understand home contexts and literacy practices that are vastly different from those valued and rewarded at school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Awareness of the differences students bring to school is an important step. The next step would be to recognize

that these differences are not deficiencies, but FOK that should be incorporated in teaching to help minority students meet their dreams.

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