

# Challenges Faced by Bilingual Children from Mixed Parents in Predominantly Monolingual-Monocultural Spanish-Speaking Extended Families

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## Abstract

In the United States, some parents also prefer to raise their children bilingually regardless of structural challenges they might face. This qualitative article is drawn from experiences from three 8–10 years old children from intercultural and interracial families whose home language is Spanish in a predominantly English speaking setting. It explores some phenomenological challenges faced by bilingual children from intercultural/interracial families living in monolingual Spanish-speaking extended family in South Texas. Moreover, findings suggested that children growing up bilingually, far from being challenged intellectually, can gain more than the ability to communicate in two languages. The process of learning and understanding in more than one language can lead to a slightly enhanced ability to think creatively.

## Resumen

Algunos padres en los Estados Unidos prefieren crecer a sus vástagos siendo bilingües independientemente del reto estructural que enfrenten. Este artículo cualitativo está trazado de la experiencia de infantes de 8-10 años de familias interculturales e interraciales cuyo idioma en casa es el español en un ambiente predominantemente anglo parlante. Explora algunos retos fenomenológicos encontrados por niños bilingües de familias interculturales/interraciales viviendo en una familia extendida predominantemente hispano parlante en el sur de Texas. Aun más, los resultados encontrados sugieren que los niños creciendo bilingües, lejos de tener problemas intelectualmente, ganan más que sólo la habilidad de comunicarse en dos idiomas. El proceso de aprendizaje y comprensión en más de un idioma conduce a una ligera mejora en la habilidad de pensar creativamente.

## Introduction

Nobody ignores that the United States is a nation formed by people from many different countries with an amalgam of native languages, cultures and traditions. The American educational system has not been open to supporting and encouraging bilingualism or the ability to use two languages (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004). Monolingual extended family relatives sometimes have been hostile to English, especially when bilingual children want to talk to them in English. The impact of extended family members cannot be underestimated in this study because grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins play a great influence in the growth of bilingual children.

When parents of children who speak at least two languages still have relatives in the country of origin, it is important that they can communicate with these people (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004). The communication with grandparents can be important for bilingual children to realize that their parents also have a background and a family (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004).

A long stay of extended family members in bilingual children's family can be beneficial for bilingual children; at the same time it can generate problems for children. In some circumstances it is important for parents to show support to their children and extended family

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members. Bilingual children may face challenges with closest relatives, school, community and neighbors in everyday life (Caldas, 2006).

In fact, most bilingual parents are eager to see their children learn their mother tongue and to be proud of their cultural heritage. At the same time, they want to see their children succeed in school and the broader society. It seems that parents with these dual language goals tend to act more on promoting both languages. However this desire can be challenged by some extended families members who might not be aware of bilingual parents' bilingualism desire. Therefore, a long visit of a monolingual-monocultural family member might disrupt the dual language acquisition pattern (Ball, 2011).

Another problem that may face bilingual children in a monolingual extended family is disapproval of bilingualism. The disapproval may be found among monolingual grandparents and monolingual extended family members (Baker, 2000). For instance, if an English speaker marries a French speaker, grandparents who are raised and rooted in a tradition of monolingualism and monoculturalism may express distaste for bilingual grandchildren (Baker, 2000).

As suggested in the title, this article consists of conducting a phenomenological analysis of bilingual children who are growing up in an environment where both parents speak one language in the home and a second language is used at school. Both parents have knowledge of English and Spanish languages, but with different cultural backgrounds. As approached by Caldas (2006) and Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (2004), phenomenological analysis means the researcher will analyze the observed challenges from a theoretical lens. No interactions with the participants embodying the central phenomenon of inquiry will be performed. To do so, the researchers followed Caldas (2006) and Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson, (2004) phenomenological perspective to explore this topic of inquiry.

The phenomenological experience demonstrated that families who take time to consider how their children will develop two languages, and who make the necessary commitments to bilingual language development, tend to be more successful in raising bilingual children (Rosenberg, 1996). Therefore, this article briefly addresses the challenges experienced by bilingual children from mixed origins in monolingual and monocultural extended family environment.

It is intended to inform readers on how mixed race bilingual children experience unique challenges in developing healthy pathways to racial and cultural identity. The following inquiry questions are explored: 1) what language and methods are used by parents to help bilingual children communicate effectively with extended family members? 2) What challenges do children face in communicating with monolingual relatives? 3) Is it beneficial for monolingual extended family members to live with bilingual children's family for a long time? The following section briefly provides an overview of the theoretical frame. The inquiry questions will be answered. Conclusions and recommendations for parents of bilingual children will be given.

### **A Brief Literature Review**

The main characteristics underlying Caldas's (2006) work is a focus on raising bilingual-biliterate children in a monolingual culture. The key concept of the present article is bilingual children and the challenges faced in monolingual/monocultural extended family. This article was based on the observations of bilingual children when communicating with monolingual extended relatives. Children who grow up learning two languages learn more than two linguistic codes.

Considering the many challenges faced by mixed race bilingual families, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) suggest that biracial girls from Black and White marriages face even tougher circumstances. The support of the extended family can be beneficial and helpful for parents and family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and cousins.

Bilingual families sometimes face disapproval from monolingual relatives. When the disapproval occurs among extended family members, the grandparents often feel personally excluded. Therefore, parents of bilingual children need to be social as well as language engineers (Baker, 2000). Beside the racial identity and the issues of appearance, bilingual children sometimes face pressure when communicating with monolingual-monocultural grandparents. Monolingual relatives have a tendency to force bilingual children to speak a language in which they feel more comfortable.

Lessons from the field (Moreno & Ekiaka, 2011) suggest that Hispanic college students prefer Spanish language for communications with relatives. This language preference may be a motivational source for Hispanic parents to raise their children bilingually. There are many advantages to raise children bilingually (Rosenberg, 1996). If members of the extended family speak different languages, then it is a benefit for children to learn those languages so that they can be fully functioning as members of a family.

This is especially true if some family members speak only one language and might be cut off from communication with children if they do not learn the other language. All these kinds of family situations can affect bilingual children in their search for identity. Indeed, Caldas (2006) emphasizes sociolinguistic aspects of second language acquisition instead of morphological ones.

The aforementioned scholar used a mixed methods approach and focused on how his children's accents were perceived by family, friends, teachers, and his children. Caldas' family implemented the one-parent-one-language approach during his children's infancy. At the adolescent stage, Caldas and his wife focused on employing the French policy at home. In the one-parent-one-language, children needed to hear both languages often and in a diversity of situations. In this approach, Caldas acknowledged that raising bilingual-biliterate children coincides with the efforts to maintain the culture of Caldas' ancestors (Colomer, 2010).

However, the challenges in raising bilingual-biliterate children come not only from extended family environment but from school as well. Parents face challenges in selecting an ideal school environment. The main concern is how public, non-public, monolingual, and bilingual education affect the children's academic and bilingual language formation (Colomer & Harklau, 2009). As far as the impact of extended family, monolingual grandparents can be especially helpful. The interaction with monolingual extended relatives has a great influence on bilingual children. From this exposure, children also learn the language and their parents' culture.

In fact, the 2010 Census of the United States has shown considerable growth of Hispanic population in general and Mexicans in particular. The number of Spanish speaking immigrants has considerably increased over the past several years. According to Bernstein and Bergman (2003), Spanish speaking population has increased approximately 62% in the last ten years. The 2000 and 2010 Censuses have shown the increase of Hispanic population between 2000 and 2010. Hispanic or Latinos refers to persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 2010, there were 50.5 million Hispanics in the United States, composing of 16% of the entire population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As a consequence of population growth, it is not surprising that the use of the Spanish language in industries, hospitals, some government offices and schools has also risen considerably. In fact, over 38 million of the United States citizens report themselves as Hispanic.

Certainly, Hispanic population has specific needs, especially in the educational field which cannot be overlooked. Therefore, The United States is practically mandated to make some structural adjustments to foster bilingualism in some public schools. Consequently, the Hispanic population growth in U.S. is inherently forcing the many employers to request proof of proficiency in a second language, especially Spanish, for job seekers when applying for a professional position involving interaction with the Hispanic community. Despite the before mentioned trend,

bilingualism is still treated as a liability, rather than a rich cultural and economic resource (Caldas, 2006). The next section describes the phenomenological observation settings of this research.

### **Brief Overview of Phenomenological Settings**

The three observed children's names were Kuka La Crazy, Titi and Guagu. Kuka La Crazy, ten years old, was born in Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. She moved to the United States with her parents when she was two years old. Kuka La Crazy's father spoke and understood Spanish and English. Her mother also understood and spoke Spanish. Most of Kuka La Crazy's extended family members were married with people from other nationalities and cultures such as French, Italian and Spanish. Kuka La Crazy lived in and grew up in multilingual and multicultural environments. This situation had an impact upon Kuka La Crazy's language learning. She had a good appreciation for people and their culture.

Titi, eleven years old, was the second observed child. She was born in McAllen, Texas and she was a sixth grade student. Her parents were a lawyer and a chemical engineer. Both parents were very supportive to her. Titi grew up in Mexican and Mexican American environments. She liked reading, mathematics and social studies. She improved her Spanish through reading, watching television, and Spanish immersion class organized each summer in her school.

The third and last observed child's name was Guagu, twelve years old. He was born in Germany and was the youngest son in the family. He enjoyed learning about other cultures. His father, a retired Marine, travelled around the world. Guagu's father understood and spoke Spanish, English and German well. The mother spoke English, Spanish and French. Guagu's mother was a French language teacher in Rio Grande Valley for more than twenty years. She lived in and grew up in a French African community in Paris. This environment influenced his language learning acquisition.

Data were collected through extensive hours of observations within the community in natural settings. The three observed children were not aware of that they were observed. Contrary to the children, parents were aware of this project. This process was very instructive and formative. Parents facilitated it because of their openness and appreciation to other cultures. The families of the three observed children were very supportive and hospitable.

Each bilingual family demonstrated the desire to raise their children bilingually. At home the parents supported their native language by using it in their everyday conversation with their children. The more exposure the three children had to a second language, or more languages, the easier it became for them to master the language or languages. As many adults have found out, simply sitting in a classroom is a very hard and painfully slow way to learn a new language (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004).

According to Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (2004), children who grow up with two languages have a unique chance to acquire them both in a way that is not possible for those who meet their second language later in life. The exposure of Kuka La Crazy with more than two languages and a multicultural environment has enriched her life. She displayed some potential to access the richness of cultures, and may become linguistically and culturally a competent adult with the best of two worlds (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004). Based on the observational data gathered from each child, the authors used Caldas (2006) and Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (2004)'s approaches to answer the inquiry questions.

### **Answering the Inquiry Questions**

The inquiry questions were answered using a theoretical lens described in our literature review based upon observations of three children from a network of friends in 2010-2011. The first question of inquiry was: what language and method are used by parents to help bilingual children communicate effectively with extended family members?



For children to properly grasp two languages and grow up to be bilingual, they will need to be exposed to both languages on a regular basis. For many families, frequent vacations from monolingual relatives and/or visits to minority language countries seem to be an important factor in children's attainment of bilingualism (Caldas, 2006; Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004). The more exposure the three observed children had to their second language, the easier it was for them to master it.

The use of minority language at home helped children to communicate effectively with most monolingual extended family members. The idea of raising bilingual children is both appealing and possible for more and more families these days. Growing up with more than one language certainly has its advantages in today's global village. According to Rosenberg, (1996), parents who want to raise their children bilingually need to develop their first and second language learning plans, select accurate schools and afterschool activities for their kids, and create living networks where their children can practice their first and second language with others (Caldas, 2006; Rosenberg, 1996).

The language and methods used to help bilingual children to communicate effectively with extended family members depend on the circumstances and the needs of each particular family. Also when children are learning two languages at the same time, parents need to look for the language strategies that emphasize boundaries between the languages (Rosenberg, 1996). For instance, there are two traditional bilingual strategies: a) the one parent, one language – (OPOL, see next section) and b) the one language in the home and a second language is used at school or within the community (Rosenberg, 1996).

Observations suggest that the three families adopted Caldas (2006) and Rosenberg's (1996) strategy of creating living networks where their children can practice their heritage language with others (in this case with the extended family members). Parents emphasized the use of Spanish language when they had visits from monolingual extended relatives at home.

This strategy has been also suggested by Caldas (2006) and Cunningham-Andersson (2004) when they discussed the importance of social networking when raising bilingual-biliterate children. With knowledge of the heritage language (parents' first language(s)), the child will be able to communicate with the older generations of the family, those that live in their native country, keeping the child connected to forebears (Cavaluzzi, 2010). Heritage language and culture help bilingual children to develop a sense of self identity (Cavaluzzi, 2010).

In Kuka La Crazy's case, her parents emphasized the use of Spanish at home during dinner time. Also they offered her the opportunities to spend summer vacations in Mexico in order to improve her Spanish language. The vacational periods enhanced her staying in touch with Spanish, the Mexican culture and her monolingual grandparents. The role grandparents play in children's development is an increasingly recognized phenomenon in the United States, as well as other developed nations (Fogarty, 2009).

Grandparents are also thought to influence their grandchildren's academic success and psychological well-being (Edwards, 2003). For Titi, Spanish immersion class during summer vacations helped her to improve the language. The contact with other multicultural children was beneficial for her. Through home schooling she also learned language and culture.

Learning Spanish enabled Titi to have two different world perspectives and cultural experiences. Those who speak two languages symbolize the essential humanity of building bridges between peoples of different color, creed, culture and language (Baker, 1995). Bilingual parents need to use and find strategies that fit well with their children's situation when discussing the bilingualism issue in the family.

Guagu learned language through his contact with community members who spoke Spanish. Language is a symbol of cultural and personal identity (Jones & Lorenzo-Hubert, 2008). If

children do not learn their home language, there is a risk they may become alienated from their families and communities (Genesee, 2008). The home language is often the only one a child can use to communicate with family and community members which is vital to the child's understanding of the native culture (Cavaluzzi, 2010). The learning of Spanish developed in Guagu the sense of appreciation of other peoples and their cultures.

In addition the parents of the three observed children promoted the aforementioned OPOL strategy at home. This traditional method is widely used in language learning systems worldwide. It is the easiest way to provide consistent language input. OPOL allows each parent to speak a language to the child regardless of whether the other parent understands the other language or not (Pearson, 2008). Each extended family member can speak to the child in the same language that the parents do. In contexts where the OPOL strategy cannot effectively be applied, parents might choose to speak each language in specific situations, such as at the dinner table or on weekends (Steiner & Hayes, 2008).

The second question of inquiry was: what challenges do children face in communicating with monolingual relatives? Observations suggest that living with monolingual extended family members continues to be a great opportunity for the three observed children as they visited monolingual extended family during summer vacations, therefore there are three main aspects of monolingual extended family that are challenging for bilingual children: adjustment, communication and routine.

Beside adjustment and communication with monolingual relatives, bilingual children face diverse challenges with the existing monolingual context (Diaz Soto, 1996). For example, Kuka La Crazy faced challenges from monolingual and multicultural extended family relatives. Some monolingual relatives were not open to learning a second language, and they wanted to promote only the use of Spanish language.

Furthermore, Kuka La Crazy's grandparents were rooted in a tradition of monolingualism and monoculturalism. They were not receptive to her when she used English to communicate with them. Stated differently, the grandparents felt that their strong monolingual background was progressively replaced by a diluted bilingual and bicultural experience (Baker, 2000).

To help their children grow as true bilingual individuals in a predominantly monolingual community, bilingual parents need to find solutions. According to Baker (2000), most bilingual parents can act as social and language engineers when their children experience low receptivity among some extended family members when speaking English. One of the solutions is to explain to children and grandparents alike how communication can be facilitated (Baker, 2000).

Titi's challenges are based on the encounter of Mexican and Mexican American cultures. She had problems to define herself as who she was. She was confused about the adoption of culture she lived in. In other words, for Titi, it was very hard to draw the line between the Mexican and Mexican American backgrounds. In this situation, it is important for monolingual extended family relatives to be open-minded when interacting with her.

Guagu's challenges came from the community he lived in. Most community members often spoke Spanish during their encounters. This situation created a frustration at the commencement of his integration into Spanish language environment because of his lack of Spanish language command. The challenges motivated Guagu to learn Spanish.

The problems each observed child faced were different because of the family environment in which each participant grew up and lived in. Without any doubt, a long stay of monolingual relatives in bilingual children's homes has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the benefits of having grandparents at the home is that they encourage bilingual children when the parents are not around; they answer the children's questions even when they are expressed in English.

An example of this is Kuka La Crazy's grandparents who played the role of Spanish instructors. Abundant interactions with them helped her to improve her Spanish language.

However, monolingual extended relatives can also be a barrier especially if they have monocultural roots with little understanding of the importance of growing up with two languages. Kuka La Crazy experienced this situation in her life because her grandparents were monolingual and her aunts married people from different cultures and nationalities.

Titi, in contrast, experienced linguistic and cultural confrontation. Most extended family members were hostile to the use of English language and Mexican American culture. In this particular case, monolingual extended family members' stay with the bilingual family may have negative impact and generate some conflicts and misunderstanding within the family. The language and culture confrontation in this context did not help Titi appreciate the beauty and the richness of her primary reference subcultures. Guagu's case was different from that of Kuka La Crazy and Titi, because there were not frequent interactions and communication with extended family members. However, intensive and systematic exposure to the community's language and culture played a great influence on him.

In brief, raising a child to be bilingual requires a conscious effort from educators and parents. Genesee (2008) urges parents of bilingual children to provide systematic exposure to both languages all the time and avoid radical changes to the child's language environment. Such changes can disrupt language development and create difficulties for the child.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The three observed children were raised and grew up in different circumstances and family environments which influenced their bilingual development. When planning to raise children bilingually, family should be aware of four entities that can help children to live fully bilingual. According to Steiner et al. (2008), these four are: 1) the bilingual child; 2) the family; 3) the community; and 4) the world.

In the context of the family, community, and schools, bilingualism builds the bridge between language, culture and generations. Bilingualism is not only about learning words in two languages, but about connecting with two different cultures (Steiner & Hayes, 2008). The following are examples of these connections:

a) For Kuka La Crazy the family environment, summer vacations in Mexico and interaction with monolingual and multicultural extended family members were helpful in order to learn not only the language but the cultures as well. Also vacation periods gave Kuka La Crazy the opportunity to intensively experience her parents' heritage language and culture. Kuka La Crazy's experiences showed how she lived with monolingual and multicultural extended family relatives. We can compare Kuka La Crazy's experiences with Caldas' (2006) children in Canadian camps in Quebec.

b) Titi's bilingualism experience was different from Kuka La Crazy and Guagu. She faced confrontation between Mexican and Mexican American cultures. As a consequence she now saw Spanish and the Mexican and Mexican American cultures as boundaries for her growth in the family, community and school. We cannot underestimate the impact of the environment on the life of bilingual children. She had a distaste of language and culture because of the family confrontations concerning the issue of raising bilingual children. Before planning to raise children bilingually, parents should take into account the methods and the influence of the monolingual extended family and environment. As to the effectiveness of one-parent, one-language approach, there is evidence that it can lead to the development of children's active competence in two languages, but it can also result in passive bilingualism (Dopke, 1992). If monolingual extended relatives can be a large obstacle for children, it is better to find the environment that can help and can fit with the family situation.

c) Guagu lived in the family environment where both parents were fluent multilinguals. Guagu's father spoke English, Spanish and German and his mother spoke French, Spanish and English. Multilingual and multicultural family environment allowed him to fully experience multilingualism. In fact, in multilingual settings, parents should make sure that the child has been firmly rooted in the parents' heritage languages before trying to teach a third language.

In few, the relationship between bicultural families and monocultural grandparents sometimes fails because of the strategy used by each group. While parents are trying to create their own balance of language and blended culture, grandparents are competing with parents for cultural influence on their grandchildren (Grosjean, 2010; Mummy, n.d.). In some instances, grandparents feel threatened by the fact that one of the parents is from a different cultural background. This might hypothetically explain the lack of commitment to bilingualism from some monolingual-monocultural grandparents. Therefore bilingual parents living with extended monolingual relatives may find a way to solve the problem by using some recommendations given below.

1) To facilitate a more harmonious relationship with monolingual relatives, parents should understand that there is a grieving process, often unconscious, as grandparents watch grandchildren growing up with what they consider "foreign" even unacceptable customs and influences (Caldas, 2006; Grosjean, 2010).

2) When there is conflict concerning cultural issues, both parents should interact with monolingual grandparents in order to make them understand the value of diversity and growing up with two or more languages and cultures (Grosjean, 2010).

3) The parents should avoid being defensive while being concise and clear about their decisions as a bilingual couple. The bilingual and multicultural family should also consider creating as many opportunities as possible for bilingual children to experience customs, to hear stories, to listen to music, and to see the family photographs and art directly from grandparents (Grosjean, 2010).

4) It is recommended to reinforce the use of the minority language at the home. It is the minority language, not the majority one, which is in danger of not developing (Grover, 2005). Bilingual children can be taught to read and write in the minority language as this will give children an independent means to develop the language later (Grover, 2005).

Insights from this article suggest that bilingual children living with monolingual-monocultural families might enhance their heritage language fluency/proficiency only when grandparents or relatives are committed to act as "true language instructors". However, this recommendation might not apply to those children from intercultural (or mixed) families where parents speak different heritage languages in a predominantly English speaking community where access to each parent heritage language and culture is limited.

In such context, mixed families should arrange opportunities aimed at enhancing their children's multilingual-multicultural competencies as book sharing and reading experiences (Mummy, n.d.) using web-based teleconferencing/videoconference technologies for example, singing, educational videos, family visits, trips (Mummy, n.d.) to home countries, the regular use of social media technologies communicate with distant grand parents and relatives, identification of community services offered in their respective heritage languages, etc. Some of the above strategies might require extra investment for mixed parents.

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