

## **Yo No Hablo Como Tú: The Experiences of Second-Generation Spanish Speakers and their Families**

**By Mariel Baitenmann-Middlebrook**

This presentation will be on my experiences working with second-generation Spanish learners. I became interested in this topic due to my own bilingual upbringing. I was raised by a Mexican mother and American father, and spoke only Spanish for the first few years of my life. I began learning English the year before I started school, and had a solid command of both languages by age six. However, being bilingual complicated aspects of elementary school. It was harder to navigate speaking English at school and Spanish at home. For this reason, I was slower at learning to read and felt socially isolated from the other children due to a language barrier. As I grew up, I observed other bilingual children struggling with the cultural and linguistic implications of speaking more than one language. After moving back to the US for university, I became interested in education and was able to work with both elementary school-aged children and high school students.

Last semester I was part of an anthropology class that conducted an individual semester long ethnography. At the time, I was working as a TA at Green Street Teaching and Learning Center at the time, and also co-taught at a language program for young children at Russell library. I encountered bilingual children and adults in both places, which made me analyze my own bilingual background. This inspired me to complete my class ethnography on second-generation Spanish learners. I was particularly interested in the interactions between bilingual children and their families. In some cases, their parents actively taught them Spanish from a young age. In others, parents feared that speaking Spanish would disadvantage their children due to possible discrimination. These fears often tied into the racial implications of speaking Spanish

or having a Latinx identity. Through my research, I met some individuals who identified as Latinx, but did not speak fluent Spanish. In contrast, others spoke Spanish but did not identify as Latinx.

I will argue two things throughout the course of this presentation. The first, is that bilingual learning is complicated by cultural expectations. The second, is that education, even bilingual education promotes an ‘ideal’ language learner, with national learning standards that many learners find hard to meet. As a result, some students feel discouraged by their relative ‘lack’ of progress. As a part of my research, I followed Joan G. Dejaeghere and Kate S. McCleary’s argument on “immigration discourses and practices materialized in local schools and communities assumed the formation of English speaking citizens”. If one believes that language forms part of what is considered to be ‘ideal’ citizenship, then the structure of Anglophone educational and social norms enforces certain qualities in bilingual learners. For example, J Roth-Gordon argues that American identity is based on a knowledge of English and other factors that suggest assimilation “the making of American citizens often hinges on the successful linguistic disciplining of racialized citizen-subjects”. If citizens deviate from this proposed norm, they may face discrimination, or in the most extreme cases, legal action. In one particular case, the mother of a bilingual five year old was reported for negligence and mother’s custody was threatened. In a court hearing, the judge stated “If she (the defendant’s daughter) starts first grade with the other children and cannot even speak the language that the teachers and the other children speak and she’s a full-blood American citizen... you’re abusing that child and you’re relegating her to the position of housemaid”.

Here we have two opposing ideals of language acquisition. On one hand, in order to be a successful product of an Anglophone education, one must speak, read and write perfect English.

In some cases, knowledge of an additional language is deemed threatening. On the other, bilingual children are expected to navigate two cultural and linguistic identities. In other cases, children are raised without a knowledge of their parents' mother tongue, due to a fear of discrimination. Finally, some children are raised bilingually by bilingual parents. However, even these children are held to different social and academic linguistic standards. One cannot expect a heritage speaker that has never received formal Spanish instruction to have the knowledge of someone that has studied the language in school.

My own positionality was challenged by this project. I had to reconcile my own experiences with the language, to the very different social and cultural connections of some of my interlocutors. Many of the people that I interviewed were individuals with whom I have either a close personal or professional relationship. This familiarity complemented much of my work, but also complicated aspects of my interviews. I completed participant observation with familiar faces and strangers, and at times, struggled to find common ground between the two groups of people. Moreover, my conception of the 'field' is a complex one. I conducted research in three primary physical spaces, but also spoke with people over Skype, and had to combine elements of virtual and live communication. However, this ethnography would not be complete without a combination of mediums, cultures, connections and most importantly: language.

This presentation will be divided into two sections. The first, will be an analysis of my interviewees. The second, will be a location-based summary of my findings.

### **Interlocutors**

I interviewed both students at Wesleyan as well as people I knew while growing up, and for the purposes of this presentation, all names have been changed in order to protect anonymity. Two Latin-American family friends in particular now have children, and I was able to interview

them about the challenges of raising bilingual children. One is a Colombian woman raising a five year old. The other, is an Argentinian mother of two toddlers who are primarily exposed to English. Differences in occupation meant that one parent was able to stay home and teach her daughter Spanish, while the children of the other parent attend daycare. The child that spends a majority of time with her mother is fully bilingual, whereas the two boys that attend daycare have some knowledge of Spanish, but find it easier to communicate in English.

For the Florence, the Colombian parent, identity is intertwined with cultural and linguistic factors. It is important that her daughter learn to navigate her way through a multicultural society, and have the ability to thrive in different linguistic settings. For her daughter, Spanish is the language that she speaks with her mother and mother's side of the family. English is the colloquial language that she is taught in school, and uses when playing with her friends. Although she would like it if her classmates spoke Spanish, she is learning how to adapt to different linguistic situations, a skill which is increasingly essential for success in a globalized society.

I met Catherine, a freshman 'Afro-Latinx' and has recently begun connecting with the Latinx part of her identity, during my time at Green Street. Catherine stated that although her parents spoke Spanish, she was brought up only speaking English due to her parents' fear that she would be inconvenienced or discriminated against due to her Latinx roots. Catherine's interest in learning Spanish is reflected through her work with second-generation Spanish speakers. By interacting with her students in Spanish, Catherine explores an aspect of her own linguistic identity as well as encourages young bilingual learners.

I also interviewed Catalina, a sophomore at Wesleyan who also identifies as Latinx. Catalina stated that she sometimes felt a social pressure to adapt her linguistic proficiency

depending on whether she was in a Hispanic or Anglophone environment QUOTE “I feel like I sometimes try to make my Spanish worse than it is” QUOTE. All of my interviewees had a different relationship to and experience with Spanish. For Florence, teaching her daughter Spanish was a fundamental part of her parenting. In turn, Catherine began to explore aspects of her linguistic identity which she had not had as a child. Finally, Catalina’s bilingualism is still challenged by different social expectations. Florence’s daughter is expected to navigate two cultures, albeit with the support of her family. However, as adults, Catherine and Catalina must individually come to terms with their relationship to Spanish and the effect that bilingualism will have on their social and cultural identities.

### **Middletown High School**

I currently TA at Middletown High School for Spanish 2, 4 and AP. Through my involvement at MHS, I have met students who are fluent in Spanish and others that are heritage speakers but have never received formal language instruction. Few students seem to actively enjoy learning grammar exercises, and many are intimidated by practicing their spoken Spanish. The students that are heritage speakers are at a distinct advantage. However, some of these heritage speaker students are less motivated to engage with the language in comparison to their classmates who have no prior experience with Spanish. The heritage speakers are in an interesting position when it comes to academic achievement. On one hand, they have a social and cultural understanding of the language that some of their other classmates lack. On the other, they may be held to higher standards than they are able to meet, which may intimidate and in turn, discourage them from continuing their study of Spanish.

### **Green Street Teaching and Learning Center**

During the time that I worked at Green Street, I met two sisters who had recently moved from Colombia. I was informed that up until recently, neither of the girls had been able to speak English. However, after attending school for a year, the girls' English improved, and after another six months both sisters became fluent. The two sisters were able to learn English because they interacted with their teachers and other adults in English. Similarly, Catherine did not interact with her parents in Spanish, but learned from other adults during her school years. Parent-child relationships both positively and negatively affect language acquisition. But, it is possible for a young person to actively seek out a linguistic or cultural identity not learnt from their parents.

### **Speak like Dora**

Speak like Dora was a program for children aged 4-7 at the Russell Library. The purpose of the program was to provide basic French and Spanish learning through storytelling and games. During an interaction with a parent at one of our Spanish lessons, I noticed that the young child spoke only Spanish. The parent stated that she found it easy to raise a Spanish speaking child in the US because her child spent a lot of time at home. The linguistic barrier only became an issue outside the home. This was evident in some of our interactions with the parent and child. Although the child clearly had strong communication with her mother and was able to speak a little Spanish to the program leaders, she was not able to interact with other children. The consequences of speaking a language that is not the national majority may suggest some social isolation.

### **Conclusion**

Bilingual children are affected by their surroundings from a young age. However, language is not always learnt from the parents. Although a majority of the children and young

adults with whom I interacted were taught Spanish by their parents, some learned it in a more formal educational setting, which sometimes created a linguistic divide between their school and home lives. Moreover, the parent-child relationship may create additional complications to the already taxing process of language acquisition.

Language can be a source of pride and/or shame. Fear of discrimination prevents some parents from teaching their children Spanish, and some have experienced discrimination. After all, how many cases have we not heard where bilingualism, or a language or cultural identity that is outside of the US majority is deemed threatening? However, some young adults are reclaiming a cultural and linguistic identity with which they are not familiar. This self-exploration is critical to the formation of a diverse multilingual and multi-cultural identity and society.