



## **“I don’t like speaking Spanish:” delayed narration in children of Latino immigrants**

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**“I don’t like speaking Spanish:” delayed narration in children of Latino immigrants****Abstract**

The ability to tell a narrative upon entrance to kindergarten predicts expressive vocabulary and reading comprehension in fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. Current pervasive anti-immigrant environments and law enforcement practices have been shown to have a detrimental impact on a variety of developmental phenomena of immigrant children. Although it has not been extensively explored, narration ability may well be one of these, a gap this study seeks to address. The present study examined personal narratives of 14 children, aged four to ten, from Spanish-speaking immigrant homes. Results show that children’s narratives were considerably less well-structured than those of Spanish-speaking or English-speaking monolingual age peers. A possible explanation is that current immigration policy, which emphasizes deportation, may influence parents behavior and their socio-economic status and interfere with their inclination to foster their children’s Spanish skills and consequently with the children’s language and literacy development.

*Keywords: narrative development, anti-immigrant environment, deportations, academic achievement, Latino children of immigrants*

**Introduction**

There is much debate about the potential causes of low academic achievement of children of Latino immigrants to the United States. Acculturative stress, anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination, ethnic stereotypes, lack of Latino role models in school, and a push to speak English only are among the causes suggested by research. However, less is known about narrative development of young Latino children (in Spanish or English) and how that may contribute to potential delays in these children’s narratives. Since the structure and complexity of childhood narrative ability has been shown to predict later literacy and reading development, we set out to investigate narratives of children of Latino immigrants, whom we perceived to be growing up in contexts that would support their narrative development in Spanish.

**Impact of Immigration Policies on Immigrant Latino Children.**

Latinos now make up 22 % of all children under the age of 18 in the United States. A majority (52%) of the nation’s 16 million Latino children are U.S.-born with at least one immigrant parent, typically a product of the 1980 immigration wave from Mexico, Central America, and South America (Capps et al., 2007; Pasell & Cohn, 2010; Passel, Director & Lopez, 2009). A few studies that have examined the effect of immigration on children have identified that immigrant children tend to have more behavioral problems and learning difficulties in school, which may be attributable at least in part to

immigration stress. For example, they suggest that children who have immigrated, as well as US-born children whose parents have immigrated, may have greater risk in early childhood (Ortega et al., 2009). A qualitative study found that most Mexican immigrant mothers perceived their children as having significant communication delays. Eamon (2005) claims that Latino children and youth are disproportionately poor, which may also impact their development. They are also exposed to other kinds of developmental risks such as attending low-quality, segregated schools and residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In addition to those risks, Latino immigrant children have been living in a largely anti-immigrant environment; one need only look at media and social stereotypes highlighting the “threat” of “job-stealing” immigrants that refuse to assimilate. This has been supported by research (Eamon, 2005) that shows that socio-economic status, discrimination, hostile treatment by immigration officials, and residence in transient communities might lead to Latino children of immigrants scoring lower on early academic achievement tests. Thus, identifying factors related to development and academic achievement is important for Latino children.

A factor that both reflects and contributes to anti-immigrant sentiment is the high number of deportations that have taken place over the last ten years, especially during the first four years of the Obama administration. Many children of immigrants have experienced deportation in their family or their community. The increase in deportations was made possible by the

passing of a series of laws that made deportations easier. In 1996, the U.S. government passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), which expanded both the categories of immigrants (documented and undocumented) who can be deported and the kinds of offenses for which they can be “removed” from the United States (Sladkova et al., 2011). Rosenbloom (2007) and Baum (2010) point out that even legal permanent residents have been or could be deported for shoplifting, jumping turnstiles, drunk driving, urinating in public, forgery, receipt of stolen property, petty drug crimes, or nonviolent theft offenses often committed many years ago. As a result of the aforementioned legislation, between 2001 and 2010 approximately 2.8 million immigrants were deported from the U.S., the vast majority from Latin America. In fiscal year 2012, ICE removed 409,849 individuals (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2011). Increasingly, it is often parents of U.S. citizen children from Latin American countries who get deported (US Office of Immigration Statistics, 2010).

Even though both documented and undocumented immigrants can be deported, it is much more likely to happen to those who do not possess the required documentation. Ortega (2009) reports that Mexican children in both the undocumented and the documented categories were at greater risk of having a developmental problem compared with white children. Undocumented families may be subject to additional stress due to increased marginalization because of their status or the threat of deportation, resulting in “lower rates of positive development-promoting activities in the family among parents born outside the United States” (Ortega et al., 2009, p. 281). Living and working in the US without authorization has profound consequences for immigrants’ physical, emotional, and financial health. Kalil and Chen (2008) reported that undocumented parents experience greater economic hardship, including food insecurity and social exclusion, when compared with their documented peers. Arbona et al. (2011) found that undocumented adult immigrants experience the greatest levels of immigration-related challenges, such as social isolation, lower English proficiency, fear of deportation, and greater extra-familial acculturative stress (i.e., difficulties with employment, communication, discrimination, and legal status). The same study found that fear of deportation predicts both extrafamilial and intrafamilial acculturative stress (i.e., difficulties with behavioral and attitudinal dispositions among family members). Brabeck and Xu (2010), Brabeck et al. (2011), and Xu and Brabeck (2012) found that parents with greater levels of legal vulnerability were more likely to report that detention and deportation policies

negatively impacted their own emotional wellbeing and relationships with their children, as their ability to provide financially and access to services was impaired. (Cavazos-Rehg, et al., 2007; K. M. Brabeck & J. Sladkova, n.d.).

Parents’ undocumented status has consequences for children even when the children are US-born citizens because when parents are stressed and depressed, their parenting is compromised, and their children suffer. (Conger et al., 1994; Webster-Stratton, 1990). Children’s cognitive development (e.g., language, motor skills, and perceptual abilities) at 24 and 36 months was shown to be affected by conditions that were a result of their parents’ undocumented status, namely lower job autonomy, occupational stress, lower social support, and lower use of child-based care (Yoshikawa et al., 2011). Similar results were found by Brabeck and Xu (2010) who reported that parents’ legal vulnerability combined with the impact of policies on the family environment were the best predictors of outcomes for their children. Short and long-term consequences for children following a parent’s arrest included anxiety, withdrawal, anger/aggression, clinginess, developmental difficulties (e.g., speech delay), and behavioral and academic decline at school (K. M. Brabeck & J. Sladkova, n.d.).

Suarez-Orozco et al. (2011) found that many of the above-discussed stressors on parents are associated with lower achievement among middle and high school students. “During this period children develop new cognitive skills, including abstraction and reasoning, which may lead to social comparisons and a realization that their family is “different” (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Maturing perspectives may lead children to become aware of the legal status of their parents, and of the negative perceptions dominant society holds of their families (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Such developing consciousness about the implications of legal status may impact children’s self-esteem, effect academic performance and school belonging, increase anxiety, and result in other internalizing symptoms” (Perreira, 2007; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; K. M. Brabeck & J. Sladkova, n.d.).

All the above research suggests that Latino children of immigrants are at high risk for cognitive and developmental delays. Those who live in a family where at least one person is undocumented have even higher stressors and thus have higher risks. Previous studies have not examined narrative and literacy development of this population which have been shown to effectively predict future literacy and academic success. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by assessing young Latino children’s narrative development and theorizing potential causes for delays.

### **The importance and difficulty of maintaining heritage language in children**

As we have noted, Latino children, many of whom are raised in low-income circumstances, often enter American schools speaking Spanish and begin to acquire English from preschool on up. In the process, their competence in Spanish becomes compromised and children become reluctant to speak Spanish. This is known as a subtractive language-learning situation and may lead to negative cognitive effects and problems communicating with parents (Baker & Hornberger, 2001). In the United States, such occurrences have led many professionals to mistakenly blame bilingualism *per se* for the children's difficulties (see McCabe et al., 2013, for a more detailed history of this). However we know from research in Canada and Europe (De Houwer, 1999) that children from various SES backgrounds who are acquiring more than one language in circumstances that support their continued acquisition—circumstances known as additive language learning situations—view acquisition of multiple languages as a marketable skill (Snow et al., 2007). Children in such additive situations develop a strong competence in both languages (De Houwer, 1999).

Latino children's reluctance to continue to speak Spanish with their parents is undoubtedly the result of many factors. For instance, parents may unfortunately hear from professionals in the United States (e.g. teachers) that they should speak English with their children, not Spanish. If the parent is not fluent in English, then the child will receive input that is neither of high quality nor consistent. Hart and Risley (1995) documented the fact that even monolingual parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds speak significantly less frequently to their children compared to those from higher SES backgrounds. In addition, the way that they speak to their children is less than optimal, with negative tone and dominant commands rather than the responsive, positively toned input that is known to facilitate children's language acquisition (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001).

Latino parents instead should be informed that research finds that Spanish language skills support the acquisition of English in complex ways (Brisk & Harrington, 2006). Cummins (1979), among many others, has provided considerable evidence that children's skills in their native language transfer to learning a second language. Over the years, many have argued that the United States should actively support children's bilingualism (Eamon, 2005). One way to do this is to establish two-way bilingual schools (e.g. the Amigos school in Cambridge, Massachusetts) which usually enroll a student body half fluent in one language (Spanish), half in another (English), and offer

instruction in each language for a certain portion of each day. Such schools support both language-majority and language-minority students. Under such circumstances, bilingual children can perform on par with monolingual children in both languages by the age of ten (Fiestas & Peña, 2004; Gathercole & Thomas, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, C. et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the political climate of the United States remains conflicted and, in some cases even antagonistic towards such schools.

### **The importance of personal narrative development**

One particular linguistic skill that children must acquire is the ability to tell a personal narrative; this has been extensively researched and verified over many years. A personal narrative is a description of an experience that really happened. Personal narratives are very important for many reasons. They are the means by which children make sense of their experiences; with parents guiding them, children learn to understand how events are sequenced, as well as why people behave the way that they do. Personal narratives are also the way that we connect with others, including friends and family, and both reflect and contribute to closeness with others (McCabe et al., 2006; McCabe & Peterson, 2012; Peterson et al., 1999). A key issue for the present project is the finding that a child's ability to narrate upon entrance to kindergarten predicts second (Griffin et al., 2004), fourth, seventh, and tenth grade (Snow et al., 2007) reading comprehension, a critical component of academic success.

Much work on narrative development began by studying English-speaking children. Children develop the ability to narrate beginning at about 27 months, when they typically tell one event (e.g., "I hi'ed the big boy," meaning that the child had just said hello to a waiter). At three and one-half years they tend to tell two-event narratives. By four, they are telling many more events at a time, but they tend to jump around and leave things out—known as a leapfrog narrative. By five years, children at their best tell a number of events that comprise an experience, but they leave the narrative unfinished at the high point or climax, in what is known as an end-at-the-high point narrative. At six, children begin with an abstract (e.g., "Did I tell you about the time I broke my arm?") and go on to resolve their narratives in a classic fashion (McCabe, 1997).

There is a growing amount of information on the ability of Latino children to produce narratives. For example, low-income Mexican-American children go through a developmental sequence similar, but not identical, to that of their English-speaking American counterparts (Guerra, 2008). By the time these children were six and one-half years old, 77.6% told at least one narrative with a classic highpoint story structure. Barra and

McCabe (2009) examined four -to six-year-old low-income Chilean children's narratives and found that while the younger group produced quite heterogeneous personal narratives, the older, kindergarten group, like their English-speaking counterparts, told chronological and end-at-high-point narratives. However, low-income indigenous or Afro-Caribbean Costa Rican six-to-nine-year-olds did not display such similar structure in personal narration. Shiro (2008) found that six to 11-year-old Venezuelan children's socioeconomic status had a considerable impact on the form of evaluation used in fictional, but not personal narratives, making personal narratives the more apt form of narration to be examined in low-income populations.

In short, the present study seeks to examine the personal narration of low-income Latino children in local environment that supports Spanish speaking in order to determine their narrative abilities.

#### Method

#### Participants

Thirteen children (seven boys, six girls) between the ages of four and 11 years were recruited for participation with the consent of their parents in Lowell, MA. All of the children had parents who immigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic (N=1), Columbia (N=11), or Puerto Rico (N=1). Latin American immigrants, who comprise 22% of immigrants in Lowell, come primarily from Brazil, Columbia, and the Dominican Republic, and Colombians comprise 4.8 % of the population. A large influx of immigrants from Latin America in the 1990s and later suggests that a significant proportion of these immigrants are undocumented (Lotspeich et al., 2003). Even though we did not ask for legal status, it is likely that some participants and/or their parents lacked required documentation at the time of this study.

We had hoped for a higher number of participants but just before and during the course of the study a number of Latino immigrants in Lowell, including one of the childcare providers, were deported. Afterwards, several parents who first consented to participate in the study withdrew due to fear of deportation. This was disheartening but not surprising given that immigrant communities in Lowell and elsewhere have been living in fear (Sladkova et al., 2011; Thronson, 2008) and 409,849 were immigrants deported in 2012 from the U.S. (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2011).

#### Recruitment

Children were recruited from a childcare agency in Lowell, MA.

#### Table 1: Participants

Gender	Age	Country of Origin of Parents
Male	7	Colombia
Female	5	Colombia
Male	7	Colombia
Female	6	Dominican Republic
Male	5	Colombia
Male	9	Colombia
Male	6	Colombia, Brazil
Female	11	Colombia
Female	9	Colombia
Female	7	Puerto Rico
Male	5	Colombia
Male	7	Colombia
Female	8	Colombia

Research assistants worked closely with childcare providers who facilitated parental consent. Because of the general lack of trust of authorities in immigrants (Sladkova et al., 2011) it took several weeks to gain confidence of the providers and develop a relationship with them. The Colombian ancestry of one research assistant helped in this process.

#### Interviewing

We used the conversational map (McCabe & Rollins, 1994) to conduct the interviews, which took place at providers' homes in a separate, quieter area from where other children were playing. In this procedure the interviewer gave a series of brief personal narratives, asked the child if anything like that ever happened to him or her, and followed up with only neutral prompts (e.g. repetitions of what the child says or "anything more," "what else", or "tell me more"). One or two research assistants (trained on the technique) conducted the interviews, initially using arts, crafts, books and toys to build rapport with the children. Once the children assented to the interview, they were asked questions such as, "I usually get a shot when I go to the doctor's office. Did you ever get a shot in the doctor's office?" Each child could choose whether they wanted to be interviewed in Spanish or English. At the end of each interview, the child returned to the rest of the kids in the particular childcare setting. Each participating family received ten dollars, even if a child did not assent to be interviewed and childcare providers received a gift certificate to a local shopping center.

Upon the completion of all interviews, they were transcribed by a professional transcription service. The research team double-checked the transcripts before delving into analysis.

### High Point Analysis

High Point analysis (HP) was developed by Peterson and McCabe (1983) based on Labov's work (1972). Labov's analysis looks at how well personal narratives are structured as a whole around "suspension points" rather than around goals (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). Labov's narrative analysis was developed for application to personal narratives. It breaks up individual narratives into information and evaluation, and considers the relative placement of such information (McCabe, 1997).

The longest three narratives were selected for further analysis because length is a good predictor of complexity and we were interested in determining the upper bounds of children's performance (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Each of those narratives was classified as one of the following structures:

**Classic Pattern:** The narrator may begin with an abstract ("Did I ever tell you about when I broke my arm?") or attention-getter ("You know what?"). The narrator then provides orientation information about who, what, when, and where some experience occurred, followed by a series of complicating actions that build to a high point ("You can't believe the worst part."), and then gives an additional series of events that resolve the problem ("I had to go to the hospital and get a cast on.").

**Ending-at-the-High-Point Pattern:** The narrator gives a chronological sequence of events, as in the classic pattern above, but simply builds to a high point and ends the narrative. There is no resolution in this pattern.

**Chronological Pattern:** The narrative is a simple description of four or more consecutive, but not causally related events (e.g., "We went to Disney World. We rode on roller-coasters and ate ice cream. We saw Mickey Mouse.").

**Leap-frogging Pattern:** The narrator gives more than two complicating actions that are components of a single experience, but does not give them in chronological order and/or omits key events. In other words, the narrator jumps around and leaves events out.

**Three-event Pattern:** The narrator tells us three events that constituted an experience.

**Two-event Pattern:** The narrator only tells us two events that constituted an experience (e.g., "One time I tripped and fell.").

**One-event Pattern:** The narrator only tells us a single event that constituted an experience (e.g., "I got stung on a trampoline, not on my foot, right here.").

We checked the reliability of the study by coding 15 % of the narratives independently by two members of the team. Reliability was estimated by correlating these ( $r = .98, p < .0001$ ).

### Results

**Table 2: Results**

STRUCTURE	NUMBER	PERCENT
1 Event	10	.3
2 Events	7	0.21
3 Events	4	0.12
Chronological	5	0.15
End at High Point	2	0.06
Classic	5	0.15

All thirteen children preferred to at least begin their narratives in English even though they were given a choice, and only two of the children switched into Spanish at some point in the interview. The interviews were conducted by a native bilingual (Spanish and English) Colombian in a predominantly Spanish-speaking childcare site.

### Discussion

As reviewed in the introduction, there is abundant evidence in favor of maintaining a child's heritage language. The children we interviewed not only came from Spanish-speaking households but were cared for by native Spanish-speaking providers and were interviewed by a native Spanish-speaking bilingual interviewer. We had expected that under such circumstances, all or most of the children would respond in Spanish. To our surprise, none of the children began the interview in Spanish, and only two switched into Spanish at all during the course of that interview. This could possibly be explained at least in part by the culture of fear instigated by massive deportations that have been taking place in the past four years as well as during the study itself. For example, one of the providers and a parent of two children were deported after we started the study. Since Latinos are the most targeted group of immigrants for deportations (Simanski, 2012), the children may have associated Spanish and Latino culture with risk. Although the interviewers were friendly and warm, they did come from a university, which represents a sort of authority for the children, and so they may have been mistrusted.

In many ways these children had additional conditions that are very supportive of maintaining Spanish (e.g., visiting their country of origin and having people other than family members speaking Spanish to them). For example, the oldest child, an 11-year old girl, went for a visit to Colombia and described some pleasant things she did, but then went on to complain, “but the thing is I had to speak Spanish all the time and I don’t like speaking Spanish.”

This reluctance to speak Spanish despite strong support is particularly concerning given the second major finding, which is that these children produce narratives that are substantially less well developed than other poor Latino children in a variety of contexts (Cuneo et al., 2008). Specifically, Cuneo et al. (2008) found that 22.2% of Dominican Americans age seven to eight told stories that contained only one to three events and Costa Rican children told 16.7% of their stories in this minimal way, whereas our participants told 63% of their narratives in this manner. At the other end of the performance range, classic narratives were told by 28% of the Dominicans and 27% of the Costa Ricans (Cuneo et al., 2008), whereas only 15% of the narratives in this sample were classic. Three out of five of those classic narratives were told by the 11-year old who “didn’t like speaking Spanish” and who was several years older than the children in the other study.

Following is one of the best narratives produced by an eight year-old girl (I stands for interviewer and C for child):

- I: When the glass fell off the table, my juice spilled all over the place. Have you ever spilled anything?  
 C: I did.  
 I: Tell me more about it.  
 C: So much – so much times.  
 I: So much?  
 C: Yeah, maybe I just don’t remember. We at night I did, but it was a little bit so I just wiped it off the big table.  
 I: You wiped it off?  
 C: The paper.  
 I: And what happened after that?  
 C: ....And I don’t - - I don’t know.

This narrative is an example of a two-event narrative. At the age of eight children are expected to produce lengthy narratives mostly in a classical form as described above. Because of the links between narrative and literacy development reviewed in the introduction this presents many concerns in terms of the probable reading comprehension and ultimate educational accomplishment of these children (Snow et al., 2007). In addition, written personal narratives are a part of high stakes testing in Massachusetts beginning in fourth grade. If these children are not telling personal

narratives now, they are less likely to be writing them well when required to do so by tests.

Subsequent narrative content analysis revealed two accounts of death, one of them narrated in a surprising detail for a seven-year old (I stands for interviewer and C for child):

- I: Have you ever been to a hospital?  
 C: I’ve been there but I—I—  
 C: Used to see like something— ...  
 C: I used to see somebody covered.  
 I: Yeah.  
 C: They were zipped. Have you seen those zippers that you cover somebody inside?  
 I: I think so.  
 C: Like those mummy things?  
 C: They’re like green yellow and black.  
 I: Yeah.  
 C: It’s like he was, um, but he was very, very sick. He was in the hospital for very long and he – he’s in the dirt. He’s covered in the dirt.  
 I: He is covered in the dirt?  
 C: Yeah because he died.

Narratives of dramatic occasions including death are not uncommon among young children. In another narrative, a five-year-old Colombian boy told us: “My sister is in the sky because – no, I almost forget because I was here when she went to God.” This can be explained by the poverty these children live in as well as the instability of their situation, given the presence of deportations and frequent moves to new communities to escape the ICE.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the sample of low-income Latino children in this study told narratives that were considerably less complex than other low-income monolingual Latino children living in Spanish-speaking countries. We have no reason to believe that our participants’ narration would be better had they chosen to speak in Spanish; however Spanish-English bilingual children’s narratives in Spanish have been found to highly correlate in length and complexity with their narratives in English (McCabe & Bliss, 2005). Rather, we believe that these children are not receiving the high-quality input they need in English or in Spanish in order to achieve literacy. This lack of input has also been found with monolingual English-speaking children from low-income backgrounds (Hart & Risley, 1995). In part it may reflect the fact that a parent has been deported and thus is not available to provide linguistic input. But the lack of linguistic input to these bilingual children seems also to reflect the peculiar and unfounded myth in the United States that parents should not speak Spanish with their children or that their

children should speak only English outside the home. Were the children receiving the kind of high-quality input that their immigrant parents could provide in Spanish, their narratives in either language would have been more complex due to the fact that linguistic skill transfers from one language to another (Cummins, 1979). Unfortunately, as one of our participants noted in the quote that provides part of the title of this paper, these children have already begun to eschew speaking Spanish despite the fact that they have support in and outside the home for doing so. We hope that immigrant Latino parents increasingly receive a different message: speaking fluent Spanish to their children will benefit those children far more than speaking relatively less fluent English.

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