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Heritage Languages: the Language of Emotions

"Heritage language is the essence of who we are," writes Clara Lee Brown, describing the feelings of Korean immigrant parents she interviewed about their children's language (33). I come from a family of immigrants. For this reason, I know the importance of maintaining the home language, in particular, to have the feeling of belonging to somewhere. Today, people move all around the world and could live in many different countries. Therefore, immigrants feel the need to transmit their language and culture to their children as part of their identity. Nevertheless, some people think that the new country's language is more important, and don't want to transmit the heritage language to their children. Although there is a loss of heritage language by the second-generation immigrants, families should keep trying to maintain their mother tongue because our language is our identity.

One significant action for maintaining a child's heritage language is to speak it at home. According to Martin Guardado, an assistant professor at the English Language Program, at Alberta University, using the heritage language to communicate at home is an important way to preserve the values, convictions, culture, and identity of the family. The transmission of a language happens when the language is spoken and nothing is better than parents speaking their home language with their children because it will be an emotional language. Also, when parents talk to their children in their home language, they transmit their culture with stories and the family background. In fact, that helps families to keep their identity and their cohesion. As

Nina's father explains, "We need to talk about our roots as immigrants. Keeping Korean means keeping our roots" (qtd. in Brown 33). As this quote shows, immigrant parents believe that without communication with children in their heritage language, they may become a disconnected family with no relationship (Brown 33). In other words, the heritage language is connected to the culture and the identity of the family. The parents can also try to transmit their culture in the new language, but it is unlikely that they will succeed, because language is closely linked to emotions, and people are better at explaining feelings in their home language. An interesting example of this is that in Portuguese, we have the word 'saudade.' That word in English means a combination of words like 'missing,' 'nostalgia' and 'homesickness.' There is no direct translation in English to that Portuguese word. So, we need to know and understand the Portuguese language and culture to have this feeling. This demonstrates how important is the transmission of the culture through the home language. Communicating in the heritage language at home is an important way to develop and maintain language and culture.

Bilingual and heritage language schools also play an important role in maintaining immigrant children's bilingual proficiency. Languages need to be spoken, but sometimes, just talking in the heritage language at home is not enough, and schools can help to develop literacy skills. According to Ruth Lingxin Yan, a professor at Nebraska College of Education and Human Sciences, "... parents who held the view that heritage language learning was connected to the academic performance of their children in regular English-language school tended to choose as the ideal school bilingual schools or English-language schools with extra instruction using the heritage language" (105). In other words, parents understand that learning two or more languages helps children in their academic performance. Some studies show that bilingualism has personal, intellectual, and societal advantages (Kang, 432). An interesting example of this is the variety of

opinions that can exist in a group, due to cultural diversity. Different people have different viewpoints, and that is a social wealth. Besides, today, it is so important to know more than a language, that it is in the interest of second-generation immigrants to learn their home language while it is easier for them, because they can speak with their families. Schools that can help families to keep their mother tongue are appreciated.

Another important way to preserve the heritage language is being around native speakers. Having relatives and compatriots that can talk with immigrant children in their mother tongue contributes to developing and maintaining the home language and culture. Stevens and Ishizawa explain, "Specifically, the presence of siblings and grandparents in the household increases the opportunity for Spanish use because older siblings tend to be more proficient in the mother tongue and grandparents' lack of English proficiency creates the necessity for communication in Spanish" (qtd. in Tran 263). Also, Guardado states that it is usual that families rely on these relatives to improve the home language and culture. In fact, we are more successful in learning a language when we are immersed in a community that speaks this same language. For example, for my cousins that were born in Switzerland, it was easy to learn Portuguese, because they have relatives that live near them, and the Portuguese community in Switzerland is big. Therefore, they could always speak Portuguese while they were learning the language. In contrast, my niece, who lives in the United States, does not have relatives besides me who speak Portuguese. Consequently, she understands almost everything, but she does not speak Portuguese. In cases like these, the possibility to go some months on vacation to the home country, being with family, could help children to learn the language. As one of Hyun-Sook Kang's interviewees recalls, "We...spen[t] a whole summer in Korea last year. Henry was five years old...We just sent him to a local kindergarten there, so that he could meet and make

friends with Korean kids around his age. His Korean...improved a lot during that time period” (qtd. in Kang 435). Sending the immigrants' children to their home country on holidays is one way that parents have found to put their children in full immersion of the home language. Not to mention that besides language, they will learn the customs, the culture, and even their family background. My niece will go to a Portuguese kindergarten this summer in Portugal, and I hope that she improves her fluency in the language, particularly in order to be able to talk to her great-grandmothers.

On the other hand, some immigrants' children do not learn their home language. Clara Lee Brown, an associate professor of the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, at the University of Tennessee, explains that some parents believe that it is more important to learn the new language from the country where they live. So, they speak that language at home in the hope that children will learn this new language faster (31). However, it is important to also consider the fact that “second-generation children who are fluently bilingual performed better on academic tests and had better GPAs compared to monolinguals...” (San Diego et al. qtd. in Tran 261). Additionally, many children, refuse to speak their heritage language when they grew up, and frequently just the oldest child speaks the native language whereas the siblings start to speak the new language with each other and they do not get to learn the home language. Nevertheless, it lies with parents to motivate children to learn the heritage language making them feel proud of their culture.

In conclusion, families have a major role in maintaining and developing their children's heritage language. Families, with distinct languages in the various countries, have different reasons to keep or not the home language through generations. Despite this, communication between household members is necessary; for this reason, it is important to speak the heritage

language at home in an attempt to preserve the family identity and to transmit the culture to the second generation. Moreover, bilingual and heritage language schools could help parents to teach the heritage language to kids. Finally, immersion in the heritage language can increase the motivation that second-generation immigrants need to maintain their native language. It is important to understand that knowing more than a language is having a world of possibilities.

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