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Dual Lives Assimilation Literacy

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Dual Lives Assimilation Literacy

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
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Chapter 1- Introduction

If I were to ask ten Americans what their ideal of America is or what it means to be American, each answer would be uniquely different but sentimentally similar. American culture is surrounded by certain ideals that govern how we function, how open we are, and what we hold dear. The highly patriotic would tell us that we are the best country in the world, and for many reasons, I would not disagree. Many ideals that we hold dear in this nation separate us from many around the world; they ground us and perpetually reset us toward progress. Our own Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (*Declaration of Independence: A Transcription*). These expressed feelings have carried the dream of what America could be. However, it has also held us accountable in times that we have fallen short of these words. If this is something that we live by in this nation, then the idea of an immigrant (a person not born in the particular country in which they reside) holding on to these principals should be welcomed and encouraged.

Unfortunately, in the last few years, there has been a resurfacing of anti-immigrant sentiments instead of an embrace. The very presence of recent immigrants has been challenged. And, in particular, there has been quite a negative reaction to Latin immigrants in this country. While this country has deep roots in immigration, the current president, Donald Trump, has been cited saying, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” they’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good

people” (Reilly, *Time.com*). Not only was this statement deemed as unacceptable to many, it also shed a negative and unfair light on Mexican immigrants. Therefore, when this kind of rhetoric was spewed in the 2016 election year, many Latinos, regardless of where they were from, found this as an attack on their ethnicity. In addition, many viewed this as hate speech and prayed that this would not continue.

While many have accused the president of fueling the fire against Latin immigrants (and in some respects his rhetoric has exacerbated the issue), the truth is that his words are only a reflection of underlying feelings already within America. Latin immigrants have faced discrimination for years in fact. Between the years of 2003 and 2008, 96,000 immigrants were arrested through the National Fugitive Operations Program. While this program is in operation to improve the national security and remove those that would increase crime, only 27% of those apprehended had a criminal record (Ayón 7). This is just one example of the mistreatment and discrimination that has been thrust upon Latin immigrants.

Division has swept this nation as the talk of walls being erected has plagued the news. Immigrant rights have also been in question, as detainment facilities have managed to keep women and children in cages without water, food, or medical attention; this is America at its lowest and worst state. These examples highlight the injustices that have been happening. However, there is another underlining issue that is affecting Latin immigrants in a profound way- English literacy. In recent years, the field of literacy studies has not given enough attention to exploring the English literacy journeys of immigrants and in particular, Latin immigrants. Furthermore, there has been little dialogue that has encouraged plans to help fix this issue.

We, in the academy, have a unique opportunity to not only tell the stories of the world, but also help create avenues for those stories to create change. Beatriz Arias, a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics, has expressed her disdain towards her state of Arizona and others that take away English-only educational programs. She discusses the discrimination against individuals specifically on the basis of the language that they speak. She believes that due to language often being an indicator of ethnicity, people are intentionally being held back. She says, "There is a political equation of Americanness with speaking English. People who don't speak English are just as American as those who do" (Kaur). What Arias brings up is not only occurring in the state of Arizona; it is happening all over. Immigrants are not only penalized through the lack of opportunities for the Spanish that they speak, but also for the lack of English that they know. While this country does not have an official language, English has been the standard for years. While the United States can be seen as a multi-lingual country (due to the diversity present within this country), there is still some resistance.

The Center for Immigration Studies reported that "Hispanic immigrants struggle the most with English literacy. Their average score falls at the 8th percentile, and 63 percent are below basic" (Richwine). Many times, you will hear, "just learn English!" This is not an uncommon statement in this day and age. Let it be noted, however, that most Americans do not know a second language and never will. So, if we are not exercising the ability to learn something new, why should Latin immigrants be expected to learn English in order to be considered "American"?

English language assimilation is difficult for many Latinos and if they are not successful in it, this can result in them not advancing in this society. This is a nation that is very much centered around English, even though we have no official language as previously stated.

Therefore, anyone that comes into this country who does not speak it or speak it well, may be ostracized and not feel full acceptance into the American society.

Before going any further, it would be beneficial to touch on the word assimilation and how I am choosing to use it. In the past, the word assimilation has had a negative connotation in our society (especially for immigrants). It was seen as a word used for oppression and dismissal of non-Anglo culture. While many have tried to reclaim the word in present day, I did not wish to blot out the negative implications that it has on those that hear it. Assimilation, as Kate Vieira describes is to “literally “become similar,” which usually connotes a violent stripping of identity as minority groups are subjected to mainstream cultural values” (“American by Paper” 52).

English assimilation needs to be examined in greater detail within literacy studies. There is a desperate need for more conversations surrounding immigrants and language assimilation within the academy. When an immigrant assimilates to the language of the land, they are assimilating to the culture. In effect, the two cultures are more than likely not mutually co-existing; one is dominating while the other is pushed to the side. This can then result in a loss of cultural identity, heritage, and traditions.

For this reason, the research questions in this study seek to flesh out the idea of assimilation and its effect on Latin immigrants. The questions used to guide this study deal with the effects of the dominant language on a Latin immigrant, if it is possible to have a grounded native language identity and feel accepted in this society, and if an immigrant can hold on to their overall cultural identity. These questions also serve as parameters for what scholarship I examined, what interview questions I chose, and how the interviews were formatted. Through this, the nature of the project was discovered and marked as an opportunity to provide a platform for Latin immigrants and to describe their journey with English Language Literacy. Therefore, I

trust that the research that I have provided in this capstone project below will be used as an entrance into the conversations surrounding English literacy and Latin immigrants and first-generation Americans.

This capstone will be broken down into four additional chapters: Literature Review, Methods, Findings, and the Discussion and Conclusion. In the literature review, I will discuss the authors who informed my research and provided theories that grounded my understanding. Lastly, in the additional chapters, I will provide a comprehensive breakdown of the data and what emerging themes were found. I trust that this will provoke thought and thought will provoke action.

Ch. 2 Literature Review

Understanding the Framework: Language Assimilation-Privilege and Power

Discussing assimilation based on language and how that impacts immigrants who have to conform is a tricky situation. There are many moving parts that contribute to the discussion and dictate the way that society views acceptance. I will be considering the intersections of privilege, power, citizenship, and belonging through the aid of personal narratives provided by interviews that will help my understanding of what it means to be a part of a marginalized language group in the United States. While much of my research is rooted in literacy interviews that I will conduct, my theories and initial perspectives are grounded in authors that have informed my understanding.

April Linton and Tomas R. Jiménez provided a unique perspective for me. In their article “Contexts for Bilingualism Among US-born Latinos,” Linton and Jiménez discuss the impact that language has on the individual and in particular, what it means to be bilingual in America. Through their use of data analysis and personal experience, they are able to bring the reader into the world of the native-born or 1.5 generation Hispanic. Linton and Jiménez see speaking the native tongue of a marginalized group as something that is not readily accepted in our society. They state,

Historically, immigrants in the United States have been discouraged from using their native tongue and passing it on to their children... (Alba 1988; Massey 1995 as qtd. in Linton and Jiménez). The dominance of English in government, industry, education, and popular culture has made language ‘the single most important element in construction of national identity, both positively as a communicative instrument shared by members of

the nation and as a boundary marker affirming their distinction from others.’ (Zolberg and Long 1999, p. 22 as qtd. in Linton and Jiménez 1).

Here, authors give credit to the idea that the dominant language of this nation can have a negative impact on the “native tongue” of others.

The idea of English overshadowing the “native tongue” becomes a problem in instances of tradition, culture, and expression. There are family and cultural significances to speaking one’s language, and Linton and Jiménez reveal that in Latino households, the loss of the “native tongue” is something that could be a reality for many. They state,

The first, consonant acculturation, involves both parents and children learning English and seeking to integrate into the American mainstream. With time, English becomes the dominant household language. The second generation adopts mainstream American customs, speaks mostly or only English, and is upwardly mobile. (Linton and Jiménez 4)

With each passing generation, for many Latinos, the Spanish language becomes less important because of the influence of English and North American society. It is portrayed that in order to have upward mobility in this country one must be literate, and more specifically, literate in English. This assumption is related to what is commonly referred to as the literacy myth. Krista Bryson perfectly captures this myth in her article “The Literacy Myth in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives.” She brings to light the words of literacy studies scholar Harvey J. Graff, stating “The Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward mobility...” (Graff, 1991, p. 41 as qtd. in Bryson 255). The literacy myth addresses the notion that literacy, at its core, is a major determining factor for success.

However, understanding that there have been many individuals in our society who have gained influence and power without finely tuned literacy skills, as well as those who have been literate and denied such power, creates a basis of denial for the myth.

Bryson pinpoints that any attribution we give to literacy and its effects on culture, society, or the individual are self-made constructions. These constructions have dictated the way that we approach cultural acceptance and have limited the impact that others could have on us due to their literacy level. In many ways, we can see why this is problematic. Much like Bryson, Vivian Johnson, in her article “Literacy Sponsorship, Beliefs and Practices Among Selected Urban African American Women,” discusses the implications of the literacy myth and how it can be detrimental to those experiencing “othering.” While she is not focusing primarily on Latinos, she mentions other marginalized groups. She describes literacy as “a desirable skill that allow[s] the person who [is] literate to be viewed as better than the person who [is] not...” (Johnson 36). Pulling from generations past, Johnson says that literacy “affirmed their humanity, their personhood” (37). Both Johnson and Bryson admit that to negate literacy and its power overall is not sensible. However, Johnson suggests that literacy is a set of varied definitions that are unique due to “sociocultural” factors (41). It is deceptive, at best, to deem literacy as an even playing field that has the same set of factors for all. The idea of “othering” presented by both Bryson and Johnson brings up an avenue that is unique and revelatory. “Othering” is not a new concept, but the idea of “othering” within the framework of literacy is a discovery that deserves attention. I have considered “othering” in my own research.

Language is in itself a power structure that is often used for the benefit of those who are on top. Therefore, the question of what happens when basic literacy meets marginalization is an important one. For the immigrant, the idea of being literate in a new language is often

overwhelming. In addition, there is added stress from trying to understand how others are using the new language to promote power and oppress. This point creates a focus for many scholars in the discussion of citizenship in terms of belonging. For some, the very concept of “citizenship” is problematic and systematically instilled in society to promote an “othering” effect. J. Paul Padilla, in a review of Espinosa-Aguilar’s *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy* on the idea of “citizenship,” states, “[she] argues that the concepts ‘immigrant’ and ‘citizen’ reflect the problem of linguisticism—language that creates, promotes, and reproduces inequalities in power structures” (Padilla 239). He continues on to express his support for the idea that language can be and is used to keep groups apart; words can make a statement about the already established hierarchal landscape of a society. This is one of the main points that he expounds upon, and he considers language as a tool that has been used throughout the formation of the world. In effect, the idea that he presents continues the discussion of “othering” and shines light on the lengths that a society will go to in order for others to feel as though they are outsiders.

While the ideas that Espinosa-Aguilar and Padilla bring up are incredibly valid observations, one must ask whether the dispute over terms is the real issue. Padilla goes on to admit that many of the conversations being had, and even those included in the work that he was reviewing, are Latinx scholars trying in some way to make sense of the emerging rhetoric surrounding their culture. Considering the juxtaposition between the world of academia and the outside world, the current conversations about where Latinx scholars belong is an important one. However, for the average Latino, the need for these conversations cannot wait to be figured out; they must happen immediately and frequently to promote some type of understanding and change.

In the field of literacy studies or even composition and rhetoric as a whole, there is no doubt that Latin scholars' voices are in a state of flux. Finding a sense of their own positionality, many authors take the burden of trying to help others in the outside world come to an awareness. Whether through the re-explanation of certain terms, like with Espinosa-Aguilar, or combating the status quo that promotes silences, or simply going down a path of discovery and taking the reader with them, there are many conversations happening. All of these conversations are distinctive and are the diamonds in the rough. They have all informed my perspective and the way that I will approach my interviews, interview questions, and ultimately, create a more conscious balance within this study.

Literacy is complex and has many layers of meaning. It is not enough to be proficient in English; as seen above, a person must be proficient in the ways that language is used and understand how that affects them. Current perspectives detail the strained relationship between academia and the realities of oppression. Seen as an ivory tower in which others look on from afar, there is a clear distinction. And for this reason, there must be a balance that is shared between academic scholarship and real-world stories of the everyday.

Citizenship and Belonging

The aforementioned scholars have proven that English, while not the official language of America, has a significant place in our society; in fact, one might consider English the driving force of all major affairs. The dominance has produced the idea that those who do not hold this skill of knowing the language or how it is used are powerless in our society. While this thought has been challenged by Bryson and others, the fact remains that those living under the myth are

subject to its influences over their life. Richard Rodriguez, in his book entitled *Hunger for Memory*, discusses what it was like to live in a world of English. He states

In public, my father and mother spoke a hesitant, accented, not always grammatical English. And they would have to strain — their bodies tense — to catch the sense of what was rapidly said by los gringos. At home they spoke Spanish. The language of their Mexican past sounded in counterpoint to the English of public society. The words would come quickly, with ease. Conveyed through those sounds was the pleasing, soothing, consoling reminder of being at home. (11)

Here Rodriguez expresses that his parents found comfort in their original language and this combines perfectly with the thought that Linton and Jiménez discuss about the original language being a safe space. Due to Rodriguez's parents being immigrants, they found comfort in Spanish that he would later find in English after he was assimilated into the language and culture. The disappearing of one language and the acceptance of another made Rodriguez feel at home when he would hear English abroad. The language that his parents, and he at one time, deemed as the language of “Los gringos” (or the non-Hispanic or non-Spanish speaker) became his comfort. He often talks about the level of discomfort that he would see in his parents whenever they were forced to speak English, whether outside of the home or when someone would come to the door. He describes his parents having to “strain — their bodies tense — to catch the sense of what was rapidly said by los gringos” (11).

Rodriguez, in his literacy narrative, recalls moments where the language of his people was a safe haven and a place of belonging from the outside world. After a while, however, he found English as a door into acceptance, and he felt a sense of citizenship or belonging there. This is a feeling that was challenged by Morris Young in his article “Reading Literacy

Narratives: Connecting Literacy, Race, and Citizenship Through the Stories of Others.” For Young, the idea that having full literacy skills in English equals acceptance can be problematic. Throughout, he discusses the intersections of race, literacy, and citizenship. He positions himself in the conversation as a person who believes these three factors are inextricably connected to one another.

Therefore, he rejects the argument that Rodriguez makes about English being the pathway to citizenship and belonging. Young states, “Rodriguez makes the point that if he had not learned English ... he would have continued to be a disadvantaged student. But more telling in his comments is his belief that English, that this public language, is necessary if he is to participate in culture as a citizen” (Young 61). From this, Young details that Rodriguez’s point leads one to believe that “he must choose one identity over the other, that he must move away from the intimacy of the family to be a part of the larger society, that he must give up his private identity and language in order to become a citizen” (Young 61-62). The idea that Young presents here is one that brings the conversation that I am exploring into focus. While the sentiments that Young highlights from Rodriguez are not the overarching feelings of all, they do strike an interesting note for those who feel the need for language and literacy assimilation. If leaving behind “identity” in order to conform to a new imposed culture is what many Latino immigrants feel they must do, what does that say about American society? Young, however, gives us his answer to what he feels that Rodriguez misses. He expresses the idea that there can be a marriage of two identities through coexistence rather than competition. An individual does not have to completely do away with the native culture and customs in order to embrace the new one.

This is something that author and social activist Gloria Anzaldúa equally supports by pointing out the dangers of one culture’s language intruding on the other. The issues that arise

when there is a lack of space created for both to thrive is what gives leeway for conversations about assimilation. These moments of imbalance create lasting effects and Anzaldúa gives the reader perspective into what those effects are.

Having the ability to speak English in this country comes with power and influence. This is something that Anzaldúa heavily explores in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She brings the reader on a journey into her dual life of being from indigenous Mexican roots to her transition to America. Anzaldúa shows a level of resentment for the imposed English culture and the impact that it has had in her culture. She portrays a struggle of the two worlds in a bilingual story that constantly mixes English and Spanish. She recalls at the beginning of the section “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” the moment that she was in an American school. She says,

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong. (Anzaldúa 1585)

The power struggle that Anzaldúa is experiencing brings us back to the conversation to which Young and Bryson contribute. Her identity is being challenged, and her level of progress is based on her literacy in English which connects to the literacy myth. She is helpless in this situation and is not accepted when she draws from the comfort of her native tongue. Her realizing this, and recalling this early moment in her life, creates a bridge for the conversation between Young and Rodriguez on citizenship.

In “Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology,” Dolores Delgado Bernal, C. Alejandra Elenes, Francisca E. Godinez, and Sofia

Villenas discuss the same duality in identity that Anzaldúa expresses. While their positionality is different than hers was at the time, they feel the same discomfort. Being in the world of academia, they journeyed to write something that would represent the spirit of their people. However, they admit at the beginning of their work that in order to embark on this journey, they left the four walls of their offices to feel totally free. Acknowledging that there are limits within the realms of academia and a shortage of spaces for true cultural exploration and critique, they wanted to have an opportunity to live in a space free from uninformed judgment and bias. Therefore, all of the authors having their individual merits within the academic sphere, stepped out of it in order to connect and reconnect to the culture that grounded them. This decision was a significant one because it shined light on the fact that even those deeply steeped within the culture, there are spaces where assimilation is the accepted norm.

Victor Villanueva's perspective coincides with these ideals in his work entitled *Bootstraps: From An American Academic of Color*. He states that "Language is also race in America. Spanish is color" (Villanueva 11). Much like the aforementioned authors, Villanueva became aware of his identity in relation to language as he started growing up and becoming immersed in the world. Leaving the four walls of adulthood and recalling the all too familiar moments of rejection from his youth, he discusses the moments of assimilation and "othering" that he felt throughout his childhood. He discusses that there were many times that his own identity was a mesh of complexities and a product of the "grouping" effect; you were what you looked like. For him, the idea of blending in was just something that a person did. It was what had to be done in order to be fully accepted. He recalls a time when a teacher recommended that he speak English more so that his accent would fade. All of this led him to the three major factors that affect language assimilation and overall sense of belonging in America. Those

factors are: “The historical mode of entry into the dominant society; The number and distribution of those attempting to take part in the overall society; and The racial and cultural characteristics of those seeking equity with the majority” (Villanueva 41).

Villanueva’s approach is different than the other authors’ in that he provides a timeline of entrance and language progression. However, it all works together and aids in supporting the claims of the authors previously mentioned. For any Spanish-speaking immigrant, their roots in this country run deep both in history and the contributions that they have made in this country. The factors that Villanueva points out were factors affecting all immigrant populations. The difference, however, is how Spanish-speaking immigrants are being viewed in comparison to others in our American history. To remix the words of Louis Faraq’an, “power is the ability... to come to the table with your own food” (111). This quote that Villanueva introduces provides a profound metaphor for the power struggle in relation to belonging. While many would argue that it is important for any immigrant to have some level of assimilation into the culture that they find themselves in, the idea of bringing your own culture should always be the end goal. Therefore, those who celebrate the idea of America being a “melting pot” should not have a problem with immigrants bringing their own ideas, culture, and language to the table. For Americans, the term “melting pot” has become a staple saying within the culture, but in action it is rarely accepted. For this reason, my research strikes an important chord and uses literacy as a way to examine the reasons behind this problem. Until immigrants have the right to bring their own culture to the table, they will never have power.

Kate Vieira in her work ““American by Paper””: Assimilation and Documentation in a Biliterate, Bi-Ethnic Immigrant Community,” understands this point as she examined Brazilian immigrants and their English language journey. Discussing the history of immigration and why

learning the dominant language has been especially difficult on immigrants she brings up the idea of America being vastly diverse but also very limiting to immigrants. While she acknowledges what America claims to be, in terms of a melting pot, she recognizes that assimilation has always been the real underlining issue when it came to those that were outside of the Anglo race. Her work specifically informed mine because of its similarity of topic and approach. Her use of assimilation also struck a chord. She says, “I do not seek to revive assimilation's racist past, but to explore empirically its inner workings in the present. To this end, I hope to develop a critical, non-normative view of assimilation (Brubaker) that can uncover the workings of power by helping to account for the social forces that condition immigrants” (Vieira 52). Vieira so perfectly blends with many of the scholars represented within this literature review, but in particular her understanding of dominant and non- dominant language connects to Villanueva. They both understand that “language is also race” and those that have not harnessed the dominant language in America will experience “othering”. This was a profound discovery that weighed heavy on my own research.

All of the aforementioned authors have contributed in multiple ways to the ongoing discussion of the intersections between literacy studies, immigrants, and citizenship as it relates to feelings of belonging in this society. They all inform us through varied lenses of experience and knowledge. Both academic discourse and personal narrative are needed to have a complete picture; this is what these authors have provided. While the angles from which they come to the table are different, their varied viewpoints help give some context to the conversation and illuminate the gaps in research and discussion. All of them have helped inform my own research and direction, and for this, I am grateful.

Through literacy interviews, I hope to fill in the gaps of what it means to be literate as an immigrant, if English assimilation is synonymous with privilege and power, and if citizenship means giving up identity. While these directions may seem entirely different, one cannot be answered without the other. As we have seen from the above research, these three issues overlap continuously with each other. All three create the intersections of what it means to be an immigrant in America and more specifically a Spanish-speaking immigrant. I hope that through this research, I will be able to add more stories to bring greater awareness to this important topic.

Chapter 3: Method

This chapter contains information pertinent to the development of this research, how it was conducted, and the end goals associated with the methodology. For this qualitative study, I used interviews to gather information about the literacy experiences of Latin immigrants and how language assimilation has affected their integration into American society. The structure that I chose to use is a standard holistic account that specifically pulls on participant meanings to draw conclusions (Creswell 186). The six subsections in this chapter give the full picture of this research: Framing the Research, Research Design, The Researcher, The Participants, Ethical Considerations, and Data Collection Procedures.

Framing the Research

When I approached the subject of dual language literacy and language assimilation, I knew that the conversation was one that was not an easy topic to flush out or lightly skim at a surface level. There would have to be many perspectives and many voices to help frame the complexities of the discussion. Therefore, turning to scholars who already had stake in the conversation was my first step and a way to provide grounding for my own understanding and emergence into the discussion.

As an African-American woman married to a mixed-race Latino, the way that I would approach the conversation surrounding Latin immigrants transitioning to English and their feelings about acceptance in this country would provide a unique perspective in comparison to those I had consulted in my reading. I fully understand my own complexities of social, racial, and gender intersectionality, and it was important that this endeavor was not a selfish one. Every bit of the information provided needed to be authentic, raw, and reflective of the intersections that Latin immigrants encounter; there needed to be a marriage of information and narrative to

effectively tell this much-needed story. Therefore, I could not capture accurate inferences without the right perspectives. With my current positionality and stake in the conversation, I could only provide so much insight into this topic; I simply am not, nor will ever be, a part of the demographic. After facing this conclusion, I was led to the realization that the best way to gather information would be to interview Latin immigrants. While my reading provided the groundwork, I still needed to hear, and experience first-hand stories surrounding this topic and reflect on these perspectives.

From the beginning, I knew that my research would be in narrative form to describe the literacy stories of Latin immigrants in this country. Using the historical narrative approach that Kate Vieira modeled in ““American by Paper””: Assimilation and Documentation in a Biliterate, Bi-ethnic Immigrant Community,” I was able to ground my own research and frame it in a unique way. Providing cultural and societal defining moments in chapter 1, I, much like Vieira, identified the need for this kind of research involving this demographic; it simply could not be overlooked. Therefore, historical narrative intertwined with interviews of Latino immigrants worked well for this endeavor.

As I planned this study, I needed a clear understanding of researcher and interviewer roles and methods for gathering information. For this, I leaned on the research of Catherine Reissman. She described the researcher/interviewer relationship as a collaboration with the goal of one story. This point about a single story that brings exposure to the words of the interviewee and meaning to the study of the researcher was outstandingly impactful. When the researcher is just as invested as the participant, it allows for a truly authentic retelling of experiences. My level of observation surpassed what was being said, and I began to take note of the emotion and body language behind the words; I couldn't help but infuse it into this study. I became just as invested

as the participant, and I am grateful for the exchange. I soon realized that the stories of these participants were the sole reason for this research and instantly gave it meaning. This was my main motivation for making sure that every bit of information obtained was carefully gathered and written with intentionality.

I believe that there have been times in academia when people have spoken in the place of those who did not have the opportunity to articulate their own situations in which they were silenced by circumstance. Over the years, this trend has lessened, but still every so often you come across a text that speaks on behalf of a marginalized group instead of letting that group speak for themselves. This, in so many ways, is problematic. Knowing that I could not speak for those who have been silenced and “othered,” the only goal that I created was to further progress this invaluable discussion, while also providing a space for the stories of those who live in the struggle of this daily. For them, it is more than a conversation. I leaned on Kim Etherington’s words that “co-constructing previously untold stories by asking curious questions... help[s] thicken and deepen existing stories and invite the teller into territory beyond what is already known to him or her” (qtd. in Nigar 12). Therefore, the best method to capture these stories was through interview. I leaned on this qualitative method to gain an understanding, describe this understanding, and interpret the varying perspectives.

In order to answer my primary research question--“Does an immigrant of Latin descent need to have full language assimilation in order to be accepted into the American culture?” --I needed a workable method that could give me more than one word or multiple-choice responses. While survey and data collection may work for some in reference to empirical collection, early on I realized that this would not best suit my project. The point of my research was to have a holistic understanding, to the best of my ability, of the current feelings of Latin immigrants and

marry that to my current research questions. In addition, participant articulations would be juxtaposed to the current social climate of the nation to produce a timely understanding of the impact that it was having on their own integration. Therefore, any quantitative methods were determined to be an ineffective direction for this research. My research question fueled the need for a qualitative, interview-based method, and no other method would have provided me with an unhindered response quite like interviews. Therefore, a qualitative approach through the use of interviews was the best direction.

Three main research questions guided my study:

1. Does an immigrant of Latin descent need to have full language assimilation in order to be accepted into the American culture?
2. Does a person who maintains a sense of their own cultural language identity fill the full benefits of citizenship (in reference to feeling accepted to the point of belonging in the culture)?
3. Is it possible to preserve one's cultural identity while simultaneously adopting the American cultural identity?

Research Design

The main goal for the interviews was to learn about participants' English literacy journeys, experiences with language assimilation, and feelings about where Latin immigrants fit within American society. I asked ten questions during the interviews and participants had unlimited time to answer the questions as they saw fit. The questions were as follows:

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. What is your first/primary language?

3. Did you grow up learning both Spanish and English or was one language introduced later in life?
4. What have your experiences with learning English been?
5. Do you feel that it is necessary to speak English in order to be a part of this society (the U.S.)? Why?
6. Is the U.S. accepting of Spanish speakers?
7. Do you ever feel self-conscious when speaking Spanish in public? Why?
8. Have you had negative experiences when speaking Spanish in the U.S. (From a young age to present)?
9. If a person only knows Spanish in this country, do they have the same outlook as someone who knows English?
10. Do you feel that you have been able to keep your own heritage and traditions, while adopting the American culture?

The questions were open-ended and allowed participants the opportunity for free response. The questions served as a way to kickstart and guide the conversation. This allowed for better fluidity and less pressure on the chosen participants. In turn, no participant at any time had to make up or extract from thin air something to talk about; there was always a guide.

The protocol for the interviews began with each participant having the opportunity to sign a consent form with a detailed account of the purpose of the study, the need for the study, the projected outcomes, its use, and confidentiality statements. In addition, they were offered a copy that we both signed for them to keep for their own records. While this is a common practice, for this study the emphasis on confidentiality was especially needed due to the potential vulnerability of the population, which included documented and undocumented immigrants. At

this stage, the participants could either decline or have the option at another time in the process if they felt uncomfortable for any reason. Upon passing this step, the interview location was determined. Each participant was given the choice of the particular room that they felt most comfortable in within the designated interview location. For this participant population, the same church was used for each due to protection and privacy. This was pre-determined and agreed upon by each participant at the beginning, before any interview had begun. After choosing the desired room, each participant at the beginning of the interview was given a pseudonym of their choosing to protect their identity. This was also decided upon before the interview recording began.

Each interview was conducted face-to-face and lasted roughly between 30 to 45 mins. The interview schedule was thrown off as described in the Ethical Considerations section of this chapter; this did create additional obstacles. I completed seven interviews in total over a three-month period of time. There were no follow-up interviews needed or additional recommendations for interviews.

When considering the dynamics of the interview, at no point was the participant made to feel unengaged. The interviews were interactive, in that there was engagement with the participants, instead of a standard question and answer format. This allowed freedom to express their stories without hindrance. Pulling again from Riessman, how narrative dialogue affects interview participation was something I considered when going into each session. The “interactional/dialogical approach” was used to frame my understanding that truly, “stories do not happen in a void but are told and heard in settings which encompass historical, dialogical, institutional and discursive values, and involve people, groups, society and culture” (Nigar 14). This idea made analyzing the participants’ responses easier and bridged any associated gaps for

me as the interviewer. Not only was the interviewee able to convey important parts of their life's experience, I also was afforded the opportunity of an "intensive experience" (Creswell, 1978).

The Researcher

A graduate student at Kennesaw State University, this was my first study of this kind and therefore, I wanted to work with a population that was near to my heart. As a mentor and worship leader at a church with a large Latin population, I have seen first-hand the effects that English language literacy has had on those struggling to learn. In addition, I have seen the ways in which some of the parishioners have denied their own culture at times for the sake of fitting in in order to be more "American." Often, hearing individuals trying their best to suppress their accents and conform, the only time that they can be free is in the church environment. My relationship with the participants created a deeper level of desire to share the stories that they have lived for so long.

The Participants

The participants included are both undocumented and documented immigrants or first generation Americans. Each participant had some kind of dual language journey and therefore, were selected for that reason also. There was no preference between male or female participants. In addition, although participants under the age of 18 were not considered, age did not otherwise play a part in participant selection. Since the participants had to divulge the details of their dual language literacy journey, there was a need for some degree of fluency in English. This was deemed a flexible component, however, as the selection process began. As I determined the parameters for selecting participants, the participant pool narrowed to include only those who

met the aforementioned requirements. Having sought out a diverse range of potential participants who met the general requirements, the pool was further downsized as to not repeat background, ethnicity, and family relation (unless married). Lastly, the categories of age, socioeconomic standing, marital status, and education were wide ranging.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the journey of question creation and interviewing participants, there were some ethical considerations present--many of which were aforementioned. From the beginning, I had to consider the fact that participants might be undocumented. For this reason, protection of their identity had to be of the utmost importance, and they had to know that I valued this just as much as they valued it. Due to my position in the church as a leader and worship pastor, I am over people who had put their trust in me. They equally felt this trust when they agreed to be a part of my study; there was a confidence in knowing that I would protect them. In the beginning, gathering participants was easy. Many had reached out to me to have a chance to put in their oar in a discussion that so profoundly affected them on such a personal level. I did not really need to advertise this around my church, because there was so much reception due to word of mouth. However, around the months of October and November, the twelve interviews that I had scheduled quickly began to disappear. The mother of one of the members of the church was detained one day on her way to a doctor's appointment; the first appointment after her remission of cancer. This made national news and quickly those within the church started to fear about their loved ones, their friends, and themselves. Due to this development, many interviews were canceled, postponed, or those that once expressed interest, did not wish to talk about it. Due to my position in the church, I could have pressured many to participate and leaned on their trust in

me; however, ethically this would not have aligned with the kind of research I wanted, needed, or the kind of person that I am. Respect, support, and confidentiality were the keys to this research. The pros and cons were weighed, but in the end, the smaller participant pool was welcomed and valued in light of the surrounding circumstances.

Data Collection Procedures

The data was collected through audio recordings only; there were never any visual recordings of the participants or any other mode of recording used. All individuals understood the recorded copies would only be heard by me and kept in a guarded place with no identifying information attached. Not only did this aid in maintaining confidentiality, but also it allowed the interviews to flow. We were having a regular conversation. I could be fully immersed in the experience without having to take written notes.

As aforementioned, each interview was carefully recorded on a protected device and transcribed shortly after. Any evidence of the conversations that were had in these interviews will only be seen through written text within this paper. The actual data (recordings) will be kept, however, for a period of three years and then discarded appropriately.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research methods that I employed for this project. The research design and research questions helped to guide this study and grounded it. In addition, the acquisition of data, understanding the data presented, and the participant demographics were included. The data collection was through standard audio recordings and each interview was then transcribed for use in chapter 4. This standard holistic account grounded the methodology of the

project as a whole. The goal of chapter 4 is to discuss and interpret the data. In this way, chapter four complements and completes this chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will present the data collected during this research study. The findings will be organized by headers that reflect themes that emerged from the seven interviews. Each participant will be discussed in detail, and a narrative representation of their answers to the interview questions will be disclosed. Each of the participants fall within one of three categories: documented immigrant, undocumented immigrant, or first generation American.

Negative English Literacy Experiences and English Assimilation as the Road to Success

Leroy and Tiffany

Leroy, a 24-year-old bank teller, and his wife Tiffany, a 24-year-old daycare worker, with Puerto Rican and Dominican backgrounds respectively, expressed excitement about the opportunity to share their feelings on the topic of English language literacy. Both deeply rooted in their cultures, they shared with pride their ethnic backgrounds upon answering the first question “what is your ethnicity?” After observing their enthusiasm, I asked them why they felt so strongly about their ethnicity. They revealed that their joy comes from the question itself. Expressing that their heritage is a defining characteristic to them, they can hold on to it even when they are not in those countries.

We continued on to the next question “What is your first/primary language?” After stopping and thinking for a while, they stated that it was almost like a blur to them. Leroy expressed that Spanish was his first language and Tiffany learned Spanish and English simultaneously. Tiffany shared that her parents, in a measure to keep their native language alive,

created a unique system to go by. Sharing that her family moved back and forth a lot from Puerto Rico to other parts of the United States she said,

Every few years, it seemed, we would move back to Puerto Rico for a little bit. So, my dad being a native English speaker, would start speaking English to us when we were back in the P.R. So that we would not forget and still had that practice. But when we would move to somewhere else in the U.S., my mom would speak Spanish to us in the home so that we wouldn't forget that. So, I always had English and Spanish in my house.

While both of them had different language backgrounds, they revealed that in school they had to be put into ESL classes.

Describing these classes as a challenge for them, learning English was something that seemed foreign. Leroy, in particular expressed feeling much anxiety during his English literacy journey. As we took some time to discuss the transition from Spanish to English, Leroy quickly wanted to discuss some of the negative experiences that he had. Without prompting, he began to share the ways that he had been treated in school and how it made a stain on his journey of learning English.

Living in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in New York, he was sheltered until he had to go to school in another part of the city. He recalls his time in ESL classes and how the average student was supposed to stay enrolled for at least three years; however, he was pushed out in two. He explained that this was not because he was proficient in the language, but just because there was an overflow of many other kids. Recalling the first moment when he went into a straight English-speaking class, he felt more comfortable but still he was not completely proficient. He recounts how the other kids would pick on him and make fun of his lack of knowledge. He says,

The other kids would make fun of me and one time in particular, they had blamed me for saying a whole bunch of bad words that I didn't say. And because the teacher that was in the room at the time was not our regular teacher because she was gone for the day, we had a substitute teacher. A bunch of kids thought it was really smart to blame me and I didn't know any of those words because I didn't know English well enough. But, you know, the teacher believed them and because I pretty much swore to her that I had not said those words, she believed that I did because I told her "I didn't say X word. I didn't say Y word." And because I didn't understand the weight of the words, she believed them because I said those words to her.

A very strong and rugged man, as Leroy reminisced, he became noticeably emotional. Continuing, he discussed how it made him feel at that time and the impact that it had on him. In the end, he said that it motivated him to be better. "They were picking on me because of who I was. I was just trying to learn." Entering the next year, he worked really hard on his English and improved it as much as he could. As he approached the standardize test that year, he shared that he scored higher than all of the kids who had made fun of him the previous year. Still holding on to that memory as a major victory in his life, he felt pride that he was able to do what others felt he couldn't in his English literacy journey. With a smile, he said, "that showed them!"

Continuing, we ventured into the other questions listed. In response to the question "Is the U.S. accepting of Spanish speakers?" Leroy answered first: "For the most part Spanish is accepted and viewed as appealing when it's needed, you know." As he started to describe the factors that make Spanish accepted in this country, Tiffany showed her disagreement. Believing that Spanish is more accepted in this country, she expressed that people want to learn it in school and university. Beginning a back and forth conversation, Leroy jumped in to express that

Spanish is only accepted when it is used for business. He stated that for a person who knows Spanish, their pay will be more, and they will have more opportunities. However, he believed that this is not because it is inherently accepted or celebrated. He states, “it is more prostituted than accepted.” This was something that Leroy and Tiffany strongly differed on.

After this, they both shared their feelings on “Is speaking English necessary in order to be a part of this society?” Falling within the 57 percent of participants who felt that it was somewhat important to learn English in some form, whether written or oral, Leroy and Tiffany felt that it was ultimately important for upward mobility. While they did state that there are many Latinos in the United States who do not know English well and are very successful, they admitted that even those with success will still be limited.

For much of the interview, the current climate in our nation and its impact on English literacy became a resounding theme. They both expressed that the policies and laws being passed are detrimental to an immigrant and especially one who is actively learning English. They believe that the road is long and hard. “Learning English is not easy, and while they are trying to speak even broken English, they are being spit in the face for not knowing it well enough. It is perpetuating a feeling of resentment,” stated Leroy. Both of them felt that the country was taking steps back toward times of intense racism. Unfortunately, they are not hopeful that it will get better. While neither wanted to talk longer about that particular subject, they conveyed that everything happening at the U.S./Spanish border concerned them and made the process of learning English extremely difficult.

As the interview came to a close, Leroy gave his last remarks, “the same people that say that you need to learn English, me personally, I feel like they are the kind of people that don’t

have the capacity to learn a second language themselves. So, if you can't do it, why would you expect that from someone else?"

English Literacy Affects Young Latin Immigrants and Immigrants Experience Ridicule in Learning English

Pablo

A 22-year-old graphic designer and photographer, Pablo shared his experiences with English language literacy and the difficulties that he encountered along the way. He shared that Spanish is his first language, but he feels very proficient in English at this point in his life. While he said that his mother recalls him only taking three months to learn a good amount of English at the age of five, he expressed that his mother recalled many times that he would come home upset at the fact that he felt excluded. "She would often tell me that I would come home and say 'Mom, I don't understand what they are saying in school. Mom, this is frustrating,'" he said. As a kid, he says that the transition from Spanish to English seemed easy, but that there were definitely hard moments. For him, language is inextricably connected to identity. Therefore, he believes that identity is confused in situations like learning a new language.

Further expressing that identity can be very wrapped up in language, he said, "The system of school and the culture overall, is a lot to handle and take in. I was put into a room that no one knew Spanish and if they did, they did a good job of hiding it because I couldn't understand anything." Having roots in Honduras, his experiences in school were one of the factors that stood out to him in a defining way. Jokingly, he shared that his English is "perfection" now, but the pressure that was put on him during his English literacy journey created a lasting memory. Admitting that he still corrects himself a lot, he says that past experiences instilled in him the desire to be a perfectionist.

Continuing, he stated, “People who are trying to learn English here are ridiculed. You’re looked down upon if you have broken English or even an accent. We’re good at accepting people like us but not good at embracing those that are different than us.” He sees this as an ironic fact that we would be so quick to describe ourselves as the melting pot when it’s convenient for us to do so or when we want to put it up on a billboard celebrating diversity. “It’s the hypocrisy of this nation,” Pablo explained. “We’ve always had this problem.”

Throughout the interview, Pablo continued to share his stance on the complexities that surround Hispanics. He said that instead of helping Hispanics learn English, people are being ridiculed when they try. He believes that it is in the American nature to say,

Why haven’t you learned it already? That’s where the issues lie. It’s not whether Spanish people can learn English; it’s the fact that when they do try, they are ridiculed, even just for having an accent. The perception is that if you come to this country, you should already know English. This needs to change and people need to be helped along the way in their English literacy journey.

Wrapping up the interview, he expressed that if you have an accent, regardless of knowing English, people still look down on you: “Everything has to fit the standard of Anglo American in order to be accepted and viewed as a part of the culture.” He shared that in a way, you have to abandon a part of yourself in order to succeed here.

Loss of Latin Identity and Unfair Assimilation Expectations

Michelle

Michelle, a 19-year-old student attending Emory University, was no stranger to doing an interview. Very comfortable from the beginning, she expressed her delight in the opportunity to

talk about the subject of English literacy. She shared that she was on a quest to rediscover her identity.

Born to a Puerto Rican mother and Haitian father, she stated that she had often felt lost in the mix when it came to her identity and the way that people have viewed her. One of the central points that she wanted to share was that in this country, if you look like you are American (either black or white in her estimation), then that is what you are. Feeling as though there is no real interest in getting to know a person and their background, she expressed that “people lump you into whatever category they want.”

Growing up in New York, the world seemed different to her. Expressing that the way language and English language literacy was viewed was very different than other parts of the United States. Spanish was the primary language spoken in her home, and Michelle had an understanding that her language connected her to her heritage. As she started to go to school, however, the very language that connected her to her identity started to slowly fade. She said, “my grandpa would actually say, ‘I’ll give you a dollar for every time you speak Spanish to me.’ He wanted me to know the language so bad.” She explained that in New York a person could easily speak Spanish all of their lives and not feel the pressure of speaking English. She was raised with little pressure until she started going to school.

Now a Spanish major graduating this semester, she is proud to have the opportunity to return back to her cultural roots through learning Spanish. She shared that she had to make the conscious decision to return to those roots because in America once you start learning English and become fluent, any other language becomes secondary and irrelevant. While she admits that there are certain areas in cities like New York, Miami, and Los Angeles that allow you to hold on to your heritage and language, she remarks that this is not widespread. Seeing firsthand the

literacy journey that her family members went through, she expressed how tough it was. She also revealed that to this day, some of her family still has not been able to grasp the language. She said, “the older you get the harder it is to grasp a new language. It is not fair.” She continues to say that “even though people think that English is the dominant language, we have no official language. And also, I don’t understand why English has to be upheld to an unrealistic level. Other countries know other languages, why don’t we?”

As we began to wrap up the interview, she shared her ideas on how she thinks people from outside of the Latin culture view people who do not know English. She explained, “I think that learning English is fundamentally important and that literacy in English is important. However, I will say that for those that do not know another language, it is unreasonable for them to point the finger and say just go learn English. They should just go learn Spanish.”

Acceptance and Holding on to Heritage

Samantha and Jose

Entrepreneurs, life coaches, and relationship gurus, Jose and Samantha have their hands in many things. At the beginning of the interview, they both expressed nervousness about the interview topic for very different reasons. Samantha, coming from immigrant parents, had experienced some difficult moments personally with English language literacy and had experienced the difficult literacy journey that her family had to endure. Jose, also a first-generation American, grew up with a relatively easy English literacy background. Their views reflected this difference.

As we jumped into the first question, Samantha expressed that her parents were both Chilean and Cuban. Jose revealed that he also had Cuban heritage. Both of them from Miami, Florida, they described life as “different and not as blended in terms of language.” Jose recalls

many instances when someone who was African American or Haitian would speak in Spanish to a Latino or a Latino would say a cultural phrase in English to them, and it was all done “in love.” They both described Miami as the representation of what America should be but is not right now. This informed their understanding of language and identity in a blended way that has framed their perspectives today. Continuing, they explained that many people knew different languages and there was no real sense of pressure.

We moved on to the next question: “What is your primary language?” Samantha responded that English was her first language despite being raised by her mom who spoke Spanish. Whereas, Jose was raised with many bi-lingual family members that contributed to him knowing both languages, although he admits that Spanish has definitely been a work in progress.

Jose continued and remarked that one of the things taught in Hispanic culture is that the children should be taught Spanish first because when they go to school, they will be taught English and probably will never have the chance to learn again. He says, “Hispanic parents only have a small window between birth and five years old to teach them Spanish because the rest of their lives, English will be captured.” This point came to life in the other interviews as only two participants revealed that Spanish was not their first language. However, out of the total participant pool, 100 percent acknowledged that someone in the home tried to initiate Spanish as the primary language.

Next the question was asked, “What have the experiences learning English been?” Samantha, a college-educated woman in her mid-thirties, admitted that English was easy because she was taught it first, but Spanish was always her struggle and something that brought her a great deal of embarrassment as she got older.

I asked, “Do you need to know English in order to be a part of this society?” Samantha very eagerly answered with a resounding yes but stated that it is odd that people have said a person needs to know English since we are a country of immigrants and without an official language. She believes that the necessity of learning the language is rooted in appeasing those who would criticize and block opportunities: “In order to make money you have to, if you only know broken English you will only get so far. They always run into a block that will stop them from getting further.” This is something that Samantha felt very strongly about.

She continued to express that for her, there needed to be a balance. For a Latin immigrant, it is difficult to hold on to your heritage and you have to do everything you can to keep it. She expressed her intense desire for her kids to be bi-lingual but learn Spanish especially. “If you don’t encourage the generations to hold on to their heritage, they won’t. That is something that I don’t want for my kids,” she said.

Prejudice and the Effects That It Has on English Literacy

Lorenzo

Lorenzo, a 29-year-old male with African American and Mexican roots, shared his views from what he calls “an outsider’s perspective.” Never fully learning Spanish, he said that as the generations went on in his family, there was a profound sense of loss when it came to the Spanish language. Wanting him to grasp everything that America had to offer, Lorenzo expressed that his mother never forced Spanish on him. He said, “My grandparents speak Spanish fluently. They are native born. Spanish was not taught; even though my grandparents wanted me to speak Spanish and learn it, it was never forced.”

Many times, throughout the interview, Lorenzo conveyed sadness over the fact that he never fully learned the language. Now, on a quest to improve his Spanish, he feels as though he

should go back to truly grasp it. He said, “People look at me weird when I say I don’t speak Spanish fluently, and I look the way that I do. I do know enough Spanish to get along, I mean, but the way my language journey went, English was the focus.”

As we continued, the focus switched and we started discussing the question, “Do you feel that those who speak Spanish are accepted in this country?” His reply came in the form of an example. He said, “there can be a guy standing on the side of the street in California, where I am from, and he can just be selling flowers. I stop and ask him, “¿Cuanto por las Flores?” That can be all that I say, and someone can start honking their horn and say, “Learn English!” He revealed that situations like this happen all over the country and even in liberal places like California. He finished answering the question by stating that it is not about isolated, geographical specificity, like the media would have the American society to believe. “It happens everywhere.”

Lorenzo expressed that for those who only know Spanish, their journey will be rough. While he says that people should be more accepting in this country, he admits that the idea of a melting pot is just a justification for a country that has many moments of past prejudices. He says, “We just use the melting pot analogy to cover up our intolerance of others. We don’t accept others that are different—not their language, not their heritage.”

As we moved further into the interview, he shared his ideas on acceptance and how there is not much of it in America. He said, “American culture is not a melting pot...it conforms more to English language and Anglo culture only. If you become more like them, then you are accepted.” He believes that when a person comes to America or even just learns English, it is essentially leaving one culture for another without there being an even blend.

I soon prompted the next question: “Do you feel that it is necessary to speak English in the order to be a part of this society (the U.S.)?” He replied, “While my grandparents are very proud people, there was still a part of them that said, you have to conform, or you won’t get certain opportunities. They wanted me to fit in. Everything is rooted in the desire to assimilate.” Previously stating that he was part Mexican and African American, he expressed that he never felt like he belonged because both sides of his heritage have been historically oppressed in this nation. While he never encountered much of this discrimination, he was very aware that it still exists. Therefore, the discussion of acceptance was one that he responded to with conviction.

An automotive inspector, Lorenzo discussed that his literacy skills had a direct correlation to how high he could go in his career and how much he could achieve. While he was born here, he connects with the idea that English literacy is a variable to success. However, he contends that while Spanish literacy is not accepted in the general sense, it is a tool that is used by American culture and society for convenience’s sake. He says, “Whenever business has to be done in Spanish, they need it or whenever they want money from Hispanics, they quickly get somebody that speaks Spanish.”

Throughout the interview, Lorenzo continued to explain that there was a wide gap between those who fully assimilate into the culture (meaning that they, in every way, adapt to Anglo culture) versus those who do not. Believing that the first step into integration is through language, he reveals that a person can try their hardest, but in the current climate of America, they are still summed up by what they look like. Undoubtedly, he credits English literacy as an important first step toward acceptance, however.

As the interview came to a close, he shared his final thoughts in response to the last question asked, “Do you feel that you have been able to keep your own heritage and traditions

while adopting the American culture?” In his reply he stated that, “regardless of what people say, every person does have the right to celebrate their heritage and keep that alive.” He revealed that while learning English is an important step for a new immigrant, protecting the Spanish language and keeping it alive is most important. While he knows that his English literacy journey has been easy, he acknowledges that most immigrants do not get help to learn and are often put in helpless situations. In the end, he states, “I am proud of who I am and will always be.”

Shared Experiences

Each participant shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in regard to their own English literacy journey. The narratives above highlight major themes that emerged within particular interviews. As shown in Table 1 below, many of the participants shared similar experiences throughout this study. The two columns are separated between the emerging themes from the study and the participant percentages.

<u>Emerging Themes</u>	Participant Percentages
Negative English Literacy Experiences	43%
English Assimilation as the Road to Success	57%
English Literacy Affects Young Latin Immigrants	43%
Immigrants Experience Ridicule in Learning English	71%

Loss of Latin Identity & Unfair Assimilation Expectations	43%
Acceptance and Holding on to Heritage	100%
Prejudice and the Effects That It Has on English Literacy	71%

Table 1

The “Emerging Themes” column highlights the most prevalent sentiments expressed throughout the interviews. The “Participant Percentages” column in the table above indicate how frequently the themes emerged in participant interviews. The higher percentages represented in this table show what most of the participants cared about or felt that a particular theme hit home in their own lives. The three themes with the highest percentage: Immigrants Experience Ridicule in Learning English, Prejudice and the Effects That It Has on English Literacy, and Acceptance and Holding on to Heritage. This can contribute to areas where there needs to be more exploration and conversation in future scholarship.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion

Now at the end of this project, the various perspectives provided throughout weaved a story far beyond anything that I had hoped. Not only did the information gathered create a vast tapestry of what it means to be in America as an immigrant, it showed the true complexities within the topic of English language assimilation. Returning back to my original research questions as a guide for analysis, I will discuss how the research both connected to the interviews and my initial perspectives. Lastly, I will discuss my hopes and desires for the future in regard to these types of studies in the literacy studies community.

Discussion of Results

Does an immigrant of Latin descent need to have full language assimilation in order to be accepted into the American culture?

In this first research question, I wanted to flesh out the idea of assimilation by way of language and what effect that has on an immigrant in this country. If they only know bits and pieces of English versus knowing English fluently, would that impact how others within American society viewed them as belonging in this country? This idea was grounded in Kate Vieira's research and fueled by the claims of Richard Rodriguez. Having my own ideology, I needed to hear first-hand how participants felt about the given topic in order to ascertain an accurate conclusion. For this, I examined all of the participant responses, and while many hit various notes within the research question, one in particular provided insight in a unique way.

Samantha had shared the story of her mother in her interview and how language assimilation made a difference for her mother and their entire family when she was growing up.

She conveyed that her mom was a single mother who struggled financially throughout Samantha's life. Samantha shared that her mother often was not able to find employment and when she did, she would try to speak as little as possible to hide the fact that she did not know English in order to keep the job. She recalls many times that her mother was fired when people would find out and that would put a strain on the family. Her mother, no different than many immigrants who are just trying to find a better life for their families, was hindered due to the lack of her English literacy.

Eventually achieving her goal of learning English well enough to be considered proficient, she was finally able to get a job and keep it for twenty-five years until retirement. From this experience, Samantha found that while she doesn't believe that it should be mandatory that Latin immigrants learn English completely, she acknowledges that English language literacy is the only way to truly have upward mobility as a citizen with full acceptance into this society.

Similarly, Leroy believed that language assimilation affects the way that an immigrant is accepted into this society. He shared that those who don't know English are seen as "different" and not fully American. Multiple participants expressed similar opinions, which coincide with Richard Rodriguez's experience of leaving behind part of his native culture in order to gain full integration into American culture. While I came into this expecting others to challenge this idea (and many did), the ultimate belief of the participants was that English language assimilation is necessary.

While the sentiments provided from the seven participants within this study all came to the same conclusion that it was necessary to learn English, all but two came to this conclusion with sadness. The idea of full language assimilation for an immigrant can be overwhelming and also distressing. While it was deeply troubling to me, as the researcher, to hear about the pressure

that Latin immigrants feel, the article entitled ““American by Paper”” by Kate Vieira opened my eyes to the ways in which immigrants feel backed into a corner to leave behind the language of their home. Her ideas on assimilation provided needed context for me. Through her expressing that, “the word assimilation began to be viewed as ethnocentric and retrograde, a feat of social engineering desired by the mainstream and actively resisted by immigrant groups” (51), I was able to approach that word with understating and care. I was taught through these interviews that the societal pressure placed on immigrants to fully learn English affects every part of their lives, whether they want it or not. In turn, even if an immigrant does not want language assimilation, the importance is understood. Therefore, in order for an immigrant to feel accepted in the mainstream culture, it is necessary to have full language assimilation, as in having English fluency.

Does a person who maintains a sense of their own cultural language identity feel the full benefits of citizenship (in reference to feeling accepted to the point of belonging in the culture)?

This second question was rooted in how Latin immigrants feel in relation to keeping their own language alive as well learning the new language. So, in this case, the question focused on the balance between knowing the native language and learning the English language. Lastly, I examined if this balance impedes the acceptance they feel in society.

With this question, I hoped to hear that there was a way to accurately balance the two. Finding myself deeply on the side of Morris Young and his argument that a person does not have to give up their complete native language identity in order to feel like they belong, I believed that this was a sentiment that others would convey. To my surprise, almost all expressed an inability to maintain their native language because of the new language. No one had successfully achieved it.

One of the first to express this was Michelle. Born into a mixed-race family, she expressed throughout the interview that she was always mistaken for African American, and while she didn't have a problem with that at times, her lack of knowing Spanish created too much of a problem after a while. She expressed, "oftentimes I have felt like I belonged especially when I have been in other places other than Puerto Rico, because of the way I talk and my lack of an accent." She further explained that people have accepted her as being a part of the American society because she doesn't speak Spanish openly. However, upon her reconnecting with her Spanish roots, she said, "I have gotten not nice looks and felt the climate in a room change as soon as I start speaking Spanish. It is almost like 'oh you were fine as long as we thought you were American, but if you're speaking Spanish, you're not American.' It's stupid!" Admitting that she slowly started seeing Spanish fade from her life, as she learned English, she confirmed that it is hard to keep both language identities in this country. In her closing she shared that "often one [language] has to be sacrificed in order to fit in."

Lorenzo similarly discussed his own journey by way of English literacy and if it is possible to hold on to both but still gain full acceptance in this country. In the beginning of his interview, he discussed how his grandparents wanted him to know Spanish to preserve his heritage, but they also wanted him to learn English to fit in and have more opportunities. Today, not knowing much Spanish, he recounted a story about if he were to speak Spanish in public, he would get a negative reaction. He conveyed that America is not a melting pot and those who are different are the ones who have to make the most sacrifice.

This sentiment seemed to ring true, because no one from the participant pool felt confident about their Spanish due to suppressing it at some point for English. This question resonated with Linton and Jiménez's point about slow transfer. They expressed that the transfer

from immigrants speaking their native tongue to speaking the dominant language of wherever they reside is the effect of immigrating. In order to feel the acceptance of the dominant society, the immigrant will start to abandon the old. They state that this transfer can and will affect the generations and result in a loss of language identity and then a loss of complete cultural identity. Therefore, a person that seeks to hold on to their native cultural language identity, often will not receive the full acceptance that they may want into the dominant society. In many cases a choice will have to be made depending on what aspirations the immigrant has in the dominant culture.

Is it possible to preserve one's cultural identity while simultaneously adopting the American cultural identity?

In my last research question for this study, the idea of a duality of cultural lives came into play. Pulling largely from Gloria Anzaldúa's reflection on her own life in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she connects identity to language. She says, "wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (34). In this she conveys that in order for the native language or even just an accent from the native language, to be removed from the person, it has to be purged out of them by force. Therefore, not having the opportunity to preserve Spanish can result in an immigrant feeling a sense of loss for the culture, which, ultimately, could result in them feeling like they have to choose one culture over another.

Throughout the interviews, this sentiment was expressed multiple times. Many felt as though their family tried to instill the native culture in them through various ways like only allowing them to speak Spanish at home or forcing them to participate in culturally significant events. However, because of their exposure to the American culture both in school and outside of it, the impression of the dominant culture made a lasting mark. In addition, all of the participants

started on their English language journeys as kids, so this further added to the detachment that they felt from their native culture as they grew up.

Pablo, channeling the ideas of Anzaldúa, expressed throughout his interview that he felt that language directly correlated with identity. Feeling as though he lost a sense of himself through school, where English was forced on him in ESL classes, he expressed his sadness over the fact that he could not even keep the language alive if he wanted to. “I felt alone. I didn’t have anyone to speak Spanish with even in my class,” he stated. This distance from his native tongue created in him a need to be very good at English to make up for his Spanish. “I worked hard on my English because I know my Spanish is a little *interesting* at times.” As the years have gone by, this lack of confidence in his native language has caused him to draw back on the culture entirely. He stated, “I wish I could be more grounded, like more steeped in my culture. There are some things I don’t even know because I only had limited experience in that culture. As the years, went by, I just identified myself as American—never anything else.”

The sentiment that he expressed was not a unique one, as the majority of participants felt that they were more rooted in the American culture than their native culture. Being able to talk more about American pop culture, music, etc., the participants were aware of the staples in this culture, but many brought up the fact that they didn’t even know most of the things happening back in the country their family was from. Therefore, without constant exposure to the native culture (as with the dominant culture), an immigrant can lose a sense of their heritage and become detached. This was represented in all of the participants.

What I learned

During this study, I learned that when it comes to literacy studies, nothing is black and white. Going into this research I expected to hear certain beliefs and a steadfast mentality about

how the participants would always remain connected to their heritage and overcome the hurdles to hold on to the native language. This expectation, however, did not factor in the pressures that accompany every immigrant throughout life, like upper mobility, financial security, and wanting to feel like they actually belong in America. I did not consider the “balance of stories” as author Chinua Achebe described (Fetters 2013). I myself was still stuck on a single-story mindset that represented a limited narrative. I also learned throughout this study that language identity and cultural identity go hand in hand, and it is not a simple topic. And lastly, I learned that conversations surrounding English language literacy are needed far more than I ever could have imagined. This research has shown me the need for more scholarship and dialogue about immigrant literacy journeys. More dialogue can bring about more reform. This should be the end goal.

Reflection

When I began this endeavor, I had expectations of creating a narrative that would change and impact the world in some way. Even if a single person read it and it motivated them to think differently about the plight of Spanish speakers embarking on their English literacy journey, it was worth it. Remembering the words of Chimamanda Adichie as she described the dangers of single-story narrative (“The Danger of a Single Story”), I collected data for this study that was reflective of my desire to have a balance of stories.

However, this was unfortunately altered at the beginning of my research as the detainment of a mother and cancer survivor rippled throughout our ministry in unimaginable ways. As described in Chapter 3, her detainment shifted the entire project and the response rate of participants. The reality of the climate of the nation crept in and this created fear even to talk.

While this was something that was out of my control, the ways in which I approached the research could have altered to give more people the opportunity to express their stories. This was one element that I wish I could have changed within this study.

In addition, I would have altered the way in which the interviews were done. Even though most of the interviews produced an excellent amount of useable content, I would have asked more questions in the beginning of the interview to further ground the participant demographic and gain more understanding of their backgrounds. For instance, I would have asked more about their work, their current ambitions within the country, and how they connected English literacy to those dreams. These elements could have further improved the study.

Conclusion

I approached this research through my own desire to understand and grapple with the idea of the literacy myth, and if it really does affect immigrants or those born here with an immigrant family. However, as I got further in the research, I realized that in many ways success in this country can be dependent on the English literacy level they achieve. For immigrants and first generation Americans, this pressure is something that stays with them throughout their lives.

Looking forward, it is important that the conversation surrounding Latin immigrants actually includes the perspectives of those immigrants. Reviewing the scholarship, there were not many instances where Latin immigrants were talking for themselves. Those of us on the outside have no right, nor have the ability to express their experiences and I hope as I put in my oar, that others will follow. Whether from the Latin community or not, whether they know someone affected or they don't, it only takes a person with the desire to create clear avenues for discussion.

Each of the stories presented in the interviews weaved a picture of resilience—all unique, yet so interconnected. From a bank teller to a college student, the ideas shared transcended the walks of life and backgrounds. It challenged my own ways of thinking. This research was a good lesson for me and one that I wanted to share with the world. Latin immigrants are real people, with sometimes unimaginable struggles in their everyday lives. The desire for a better life warrants their need for English assimilation, but it is not easy.

I will continue to find ways to create avenues of discussion so that hopefully change can spring forth. Those within literacy studies should continue and expand on this endeavor as well. Immigrant literacy stories are indeed the stories of America. Therefore, the scholarship should reflect this.

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