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When Learning a Second Language Means Losing the First

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In societies like the United States with diverse populations, children from linguistic minority families must learn the language of the society in order to take full advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the society. The timing and the conditions under which they come into contact with English, however, can profoundly affect the retention and continued use of their primary languages as well as the development of their second language. This article discusses evidence and findings from a nationwide study of language shift among language-minority children in the U.S. The findings suggest that the loss of a primary language, particularly when it is the only language spoken by parents, can be very costly to the children, their families, and to society as a whole. Immigrant and American Indian families were surveyed to determine the extent to which family language patterns were affected by their children's early learning of English in preschool programs. Families whose children had attended preschool programs conducted exclusively in Spanish served as a base of comparison for the families whose children attended English-only or bilingual preschools.

THE PROBLEM

In this article, we address a problem in second language learning that has long been acknowledged, but which has not received the attention it deserves from researchers.[1] Specifically, this article deals with the phenomenon of "subtractive bilingualism," the name given the problem by Wallace Lambert who first discussed it in relation to French-Canadian and Canadian immigrant children whose acquisition of English in school resulted not in bilingualism, but in the erosion or loss of their primary languages (Lambert,

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* This article was written on behalf of the No-Cost Research Group (NCRG), consisting of the 300+ individuals across the United States who participated in this study, preparing research materials, recruiting and training interviewers, interviewing families, processing and analyzing data and interpreting findings. It includes many members of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), and the No-Cost Research Group acknowledges the support of NABE's national leadership in this effort.

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[1] Merino (1983) and Pan and Berko-Gleason (1986) are notable exceptions.

1975, 1977, 1981). The phenomenon is a familiar one in the United States. It is the story of countless American immigrant and native children and adults who have lost their ethnic languages in the process of becoming linguistically assimilated into the English-speaking world of the school and society. Few American-born children of immigrant parents are fully proficient in the ethnic language, even if it was the only language they spoke when they first entered school. Once these children learn English, they tend not to maintain or to develop the language spoken at home, even if it is the only one their parents know. This has been the story of past immigrant groups, and it is the story of the present ones. The only difference is that the process appears to be taking place much more rapidly today.

Few among us realize what is really happening. Quite the contrary. Over the past several years, there has been an increasing concern among educators, policymakers, and members of the public that the new immigrants are not assimilating fast enough. There is a widespread belief among people who should know better that the new immigrants are resisting the necessity of learning English, and the reason why so many of them seem to have difficulty making progress in school is that they refuse to learn English. Bilingual education is often blamed for their problems: It is seen as the primary reason why these new immigrants are not learning English and why they are not making the academic progress they should be making in school. Many people see bilingual education as a cop-out: By educating children even in part through their primary languages, we allow them to get away without having to learn English. Because of these largely erroneous beliefs, bilingual education has lost considerable public support over the last few years. California no longer has a legal mandate for bilingual education, legislation requiring it having expired a few years ago.[2] This has been a matter of great concern for those of us who regard bilingual education as the most appropriate and pedagogically sound way to educate the many language-minority students in the society's schools. Bilingual education is provided for only a fraction of the students who need it, and even then, most of the available programs place greater emphasis on the learning of English than they do on the use and retention of the students' primary languages.

EARLY EDUCATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Even more troubling are the recent moves throughout the country to solve the immigrant language problem through preschool education. Over the past 5 years or so, early education has been touted as the ideal solution to the academic problems of language-minority students, whether these students are immigrants, nonimmigrants or Native Americans. The state of

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[2] The Bilingual-Bicultural Education Act was "sunsetted" in 1987, after several attempts to renew it failed. The legislature twice voted in favor of renewing bilingual education, but former Governor Deukmajian failed to sign either bill passed by the state legislature.

Texas led the way some years ago by passing legislation that provided preschool programs for 4-year-old children from minority backgrounds. The idea behind this legislation was that the younger children are, the faster and more completely they learn a new language. At age 3 or 4, the children are in a language-learning mode: They learn whatever language or languages they hear, as long as the conditions for language learning are present. By the time they are 5, the reasoning goes, they will be English speakers and they can get right on with school. This past year, Texas extended the legislation to cover 3-year-olds.

Other states have followed suit, and late in 1990, Congress augmented its funding for Project Head Start by $500 million dollars, to provide more programs of a similar nature throughout the country for the children of the poor, many of whom are language minorities. Head Start is a benevolent program in that its main objective is to give poor children some of the background experiences and skills needed for school, including English, before they get there. For language-minority children, any program that emphasizes English at the expense of the primary language is a potential disaster, however. And therein lies the problem that this article addresses.

Consider what happens when young children find themselves in the attractive new world of the American school. What do they do when they discover that the only language that is spoken there is one that they do not know? How do they respond when they realize that the only language they know has no function or value in that new social world, and that, in fact, it constitutes a barrier to their participation in the social life of the school? They do just as the promoters of early education for language-minority students hope they will. They learn English, and too often, they drop their primary languages as they do. In time, many of these children lose their first languages.

How likely is this? We will argue that the likelihood of children forfeiting and losing their primary languages as they learn English under the conditions just described is very great: great enough to pose a major problem to the school and society whose policies and practices created the problem in the first place.

Over the past few years, some of us have become increasingly concerned about the consequences of emphasizing English for children at younger and younger ages. Wong Fillmore and her students, for example, have documented the process of school language learning and primary language loss through case studies (Benjamin, 1990; Kreven, 1989; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Early in 1990, as Congress was considering the Bush administration's proposal to expand preschool funding for the purpose of teaching language-minority children English so they would be "ready for school," the situation seemed dire enough for us to step up the effort to document the effects of this practice in the hope of exerting some influence on the educational policies that were being formulated and implemented.

THE NO-COST STUDY ON FAMILIES

Methodology

As a plenary session of the 1990 National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) conference,[3] Jim Cummins, Alice Paul, Guadalupe Valdés, and Lily Wong Fillmore called for a national survey of language-minority families whose children have participated in preschool programs that were conducted partly or entirely in English to determine the extent to which these programs were affecting the children's language patterns. Because of the urgency of the situation, we could not wait until we had funds to conduct the study. It had to be done immediately. We appealed to the NABE membership to join us in conducting the study as volunteers. The study, because it was conducted without funding, was called "The No-Cost Study on Families."[4]

We prepared an interview form that was translated into many languages—among them, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Khmer, and Vietnamese—and we held two workshops at the conference in which we trained people to conduct the family interviews. The selection criteria for the families to be interviewed were that they be language minorities and have children who have attended preschool programs in the U.S. We wanted to know what languages were spoken by the adults in the family, especially those who were primary and secondary caretakers of the children. We asked about the programs the children had been in: What kind were they? Which languages were used in class by teachers and students? What did the parents like or not like about the programs? We asked about language usage patterns in the home: What language did the adults use to the children? What did the children use to the adults in the home and to siblings? We asked whether or not there had been changes in the use of language at home as a result of the children's being in school, and what those changes were. We asked the parents to judge their children's proficiency in the language of the home: Were they as proficient as children their age and experience usually are in that language? Finally, we asked the parents about their concerns: Were they worried about their children losing the language of the home? Whose responsibility did they think it was to help them retain it? What did they want us to tell policymakers and educators about their concerns as parents? The interview consisted of 45 questions; all but two were framed as forced-choice response questions.

Hundreds of people attended the two training sessions, and many of them eventually conducted interviews of families. Some participants recruited friends and associates to help in the effort. These volunteers—teachers, school administrators, social workers, researchers, students, parents and community workers—interviewed some 1,100 families across the country.[5] The families interviewed included American Indians, Arabs, Latinos, east and southeast Asians from a variety of backgrounds, and assorted others. Included in the study were 311 families—all of them Spanish speakers—whose children attended preschool programs conducted entirely in their primary language. These families served as a base of comparison for us in interpreting the data from the families whose children had attended English-only or bilingual preschool programs. NCRG members at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC)[6] were the NCRG researchers who were responsible for preparing the quantifiable data for analysis. No-Costers at the University of California at Berkeley (UCB)[7] and at the Foundation Center for Phenomenological Research in Sacramento[8] were responsible for processing the data that had to be treated qualitatively.

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[3] The conference was held in Tucson, Arizona in March, 1990.

[4] This was actually a misnomer because, although there were no funds to support it, the study was not exactly without cost.

In mid-December 1990, we called a 2-day No-Host meeting of researchers, educators and children's advocates at Berkeley to examine and interpret the data, to try to agree on what the data allowed us to say, and to decide how we might say it most effectively and forcefully. The 35 participants at this meeting came from all over the country, and represented a broad spectrum of ethnic groups, academic institutions and disciplines, and advocacy groups.[9] Several individuals who could not travel to Berkeley participated in

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[5] This was by no means a "representative sample" of the language-minority families in the U.S. The selection of the families was linked to the participation of the individuals who were willing to conduct interviews for the study. A convenience sample like the one we have can nevertheless tell us a lot about what is going on in other families.

[6] UCSC No-Costers were Barry McLaughlin, Eugene Garcia, and students associated with the Bilingual Research Group.

[7] UCB No-Costers were Lily Wong Fillmore, Guadalupe Valdés, Susan Ervin-Trip,, Leanne Hinton, and students in the Graduate School of Education's Language and Literacy Division.

[8] Foundation Center No-Costers were Marilyn Prosser, Antonia López, Maria Auxiliadora Garibi Dorais, Dennis Rose, and the late Gloria F. Montejano.

[9] Dean Ernesto Bernal (U of TX-Pan American), *Ms. Denise De La Rosa (National Council for La Raza), Prof. Susan Ervin-Tripp (UCB), *Dr. Rosie Feinberg (U of Miami), Dean Gene Garcia (UC-SC), Prof. Leann Hinton, (UCB), Prof. Kenji Ima, CSU-SD); Prof. Victoria Jew (CSU-S), Superintendent Hayes Lewis (Zuni Public Schools), Ms. Antonia Lopéz (Foundation Center), Mr. Jim Lyons, Esq. (NABE), Prof. Lois Meyer, (CSU-SF), Congressman George Miller (U.S. House of Representatives), Prof. Barry McLaughlin (UCSC), Ms. Laurie Olson (California Tomorrow), Prof. Alice Paul (U of AZ), Ms. Delia Pompa (Children's Defense Fund), Dr.Marilyn Prosser (Foundation Center), Prof. Jon Reyhner (E-Montana College), Prof. Flora Rodriguez Brown (U of IL), Dean William Rohwer (UCB), Prof. Migdalia Romero (Hunter College) Mr. Peter Roos (META), *Prof. Walter Secada (U of WI), *Prof. Lourdes Soto-Diaz (Pennsylvania State U), Dr. Hai Tran (BEMRC-U of OK), Prof. Guadalupe Valdés (UCB), Prof. Lily Wong Fillmore (UCB), Ms. Susan Larson (UCB), Ms. Hee Won Kang (UCB), Ms. Guillermina Nuñes Wright (UCB), Mr. John Sierra (UCB), Mr. Craig Wilson (UCB), Ms. Jann Geyer (UCB), and Ms. Janice Patch (UCB). The asterisked individuals on the list participated by phone.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Families

Ethnic Background	Families with Children in Bilingual/English ECE Programs (Main Sample) No.	(%)	Families with Children in Home Language ECE Programs (Comparison) No.	(%)
Latinos	468	(67.8)	308	(99)
East & Southeast Asians	94	(13.6)		
American Indians	62	(9)		
Arabs	34	(5)		
Others	24	(3.5)	3	(1)
Missing data	8	(1.1)		
Total	690	(100)	311	(100)

the meeting by telephone. The participants made a good many recommendations, including ones for additional analyses to be carried out on the data, other studies to be done in following up some of the hypotheses generated by this survey, and ones for the dissemination of the findings. In this article, we report only those preliminary findings that members of this group have already gone over. Needless to say, there will be a great many other things to report before we are done with this work.

Preliminary Findings from the No-Cost Survey

It should be noted that although over 1,100 interviews were returned to us, not all of them were received in time to be processed and included in this preliminary analysis of the data. The analyses reported here represent 1,001 families, 690 in the main sample and 311 in the comparison sample.[10] Table 1 shows the ethnic makeup of the families included in the two subsamples. As noted earlier, the 311 families that comprise the comparison group were all Spanish speakers, although three are shown on Table 1 as being otherwise.[11] So were two thirds of the others, thus Spanish speakers added up to 776 families, 77.5% of the total sample. This is not surprising because Spanish speakers are the largest language-minority group in the country. In 1987, 73% of the limited English speakers in California schools were Spanish speakers, so the proportion of Spanish-speaking families in our sample is pretty representative of their numbers, at least in the state of California. There were 94 east and southeast Asian families, including Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Hmong, comprising 13.6% of the families in the sample. American-Indian families, including Navahos,

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[10] The data on the other families will be included in future analyses but we do not anticipate that they will alter the findings reported here in any notable way.

[11] Three respondents gave noninterpretable answers to our questions about ethnic origins, so we categorized them as "others."

Table 2. Family Size

	Main Sample %	Comparison %	All Families %
1-2 children	43.4	42.5	43.2
3-4 children	41.5	39.9	40.0
5 or more children	17.2	14.8	15.7

Table 3. Head of Household

	Main Sample %	Comparison %	All Families %
Father or Stepfather	78.9	68.9	75.5
Mother or Stepmother	18.4	26.9	28.1
Both	.1	2.2	.8
Grandparent/Aunt/Uncle	3.5	.9	3.4

Yaquis, Apaches, Papago (Tohono O'odham), and Pascua comprise the next largest group, with 62 families, or 9% of the main sample. There were also 34 Arab families (5%) in the main sample as well, and 24 families (3.5%) from a variety of backgrounds, including Africans and Europeans.

Family size as shown in Table 2 was quite comparable between the two samples. 84.9% of the main sample and 82.4% of the comparison families had from one to four children; 14.8% of the main sample and 17.2% of the comparison families had five or more children. A significant difference between the comparison and main sample families was found in the frequency of families with children under age 5: 80.5% of the comparison families had one or more preschool-age children, whereas just 63.4% of the main sample families did. This is not surprising because the families in the comparison sample were ones who had children currently enrolled in a preschool program, whereas the main sample consisted of families whose children either were in, or had been in, preschool programs.

The families in the study were generally intact families with both parents present in the home, and traditional in structure, with fathers regarded as heads of households (see Table 3). The families were traditional in another important way. In both groups, mothers were reported as having the primary responsibility for caring for the children (82.7% of the main sample, and 84% of the comparison families). Fathers, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives were identified as primary caretakers in just a small number of families (see Table 4). The majority of families in both samples had been in the U.S. for more than 10 years (67.6% in the main sample, and 54.5% for the comparison sample; see Table 5). There was a somewhat larger percentage of immigrant families in the main sample who had been in the United

Table 4. Primary Caretaker of Children

	Main Sample %	Comparison %	All Families %
Father or Stepfather	7.0	3.2	5.8
Mother or Stepmother	82.7	84.0	83.2
Grandparent	7.1	4.9	6.4
Aunt/Uncle	1.3	2.3	1.6
Sibling	1.0	4.2	4.2

Table 5. Length of Residence in U.S.

	Main Sample %	Comparison %
Less than 5 years	13.5	9.4
5-10 years	19.0	35.9
Over 10 years	67.6	54.5

Table 6. Length of Residence in Community

	Main Sample %	Comparison %	All Families %
Less than 5 years	44.4	15.1	30.9
5-10 years	23.1	38.8	28.1
Over 10 years	38.4	46.2	40.9

States for fewer than 5 years than in the comparison sample (13.5% vs. 9.4%) and a higher percentage of comparison group families who had been in the U.S. between 5 to 10 years (35.9% vs. 19%).

Table 6, showing length of residence in the communities where the families presently live, indicates a few notable differences between the two samples. There was a higher percentage of families in the main sample than in the comparison sample that had been in their present communities fewer than 5 years (44.4% vs. 15.1%, or three times as many). The percentages were commensurately greater for comparison families reporting residence both for periods of 5 to 10 years, and for over 10 years than for the main sample. These differences may indicate that the families in the main sample were somewhat more upwardly mobile than the comparison families, but it may also be a reflection of the larger proportion of recently arrived families in the main sample. Despite these differences, the majority of families in both groups appear to be fairly stable in their places of residence. The differences in the patterns of language shift that we found do not seem to be easily relatable to residential patterns found among the families.

Table 7. Language Use Reported in Early Education Programs

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
English only or mostly	211	(30.6)	4	(1.3)
Language of home	76	(11)	232	(74.6)
Bilingual	322	(46.7)	32	(10.3)
Uncertain or don't know	81	(11.7)	43	(13.8
Totals	690	(100)	311	(100)

The questions regarding language use in preschool programs proved to be difficult for parents to answer in some cases. We asked them to say whether the preschool programs their children had attended were conducted in English only or mostly, in the children's language only or mostly, or in both languages (i.e., bilingually). Not everyone could say, perhaps because they had not been in the preschool classrooms while they were in session, or because they could not tell. The problem may be that it is not always obvious to the casual observer what the instructional language of a preschool program is because teachers at that level seldom engage in whole-class or even group activities for which there is an obvious "language of instruction." In most preschool programs, teachers interact with children individually or in small groups, and parents may or may not know what language the teacher uses in speaking to the children, except where the teachers are clearly English or other language monolinguals. As noted earlier, the children in the 311 families that we are using as a basis of comparison for the families in the main sample attended preschool programs which we knew were being conducted exclusively in Spanish. As Table 7 shows, however, many of the parents even in this group were uncertain as to how to characterize the use of language in their children's classes, or they responded in ways that contradicted what we had already independently established to be the case for those programs. Similarly, there were families in the main sample who reported that their children had attended native language only preschools, although the selection criterion we had established was that the families be ones whose children had attended bilingual or English-only programs. We decided to accept their responses at face value, as we did all of the information provided by our interviewees, and to examine the effects in the data parents gave us on language usage against this information because there was no way that we might have confirmed or disconfirmed any of the other information independently.

Hence, as Table 7 shows, 30.6% of the main sample and 1.3% of the comparison families reported that their children were in preschools that used English predominantly or exclusively; 11% of the main sample and 74.6% of the comparison families had children in programs that were conducted in the language of the home; 46.7% of the main sample and 10.3% of the comparison families had children in bilingual programs, whereas 11.7% of

Table 8. Changes in Language Use at Home After Children Attended Early Education Programs

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
No noticeable change	188	(30.9)	49	(18.3)
Negative change (Less HL, More E)	308	(50.6)	29	(10.8)
Positive change (More HL)	98	(16.1)	185	(69)
Neutral (Less E)	15	(2.4)	5	(1.9)
Totals	609	(100)	268	(100)

the main and 13.8% of the comparison families were uncertain or could not say what languages were used in their children's programs. Clearly, the differences between the two groups were great enough to justify maintaining the categorical difference that we were drawing between the two.

Effects on Language Use in the Home

First, a caveat: Given the data we have, it is not possible to determine whether or not there is a causal relationship between language use in preschool programs and changes in patterns of language use in the home. Many of the families we interviewed have children who have gone well beyond preschool, and the children in both our comparison and main sample families have learned a lot of English in the schools they have attended since they were in the preschools we asked about. Nonetheless, there were dramatic and highly significant differences to be seen in the data provided by the main sample families versus the comparison sample with regard to patterns of language use and maintenance in their homes. Let us consider their responses to our question concerning any changes parents might have noticed in language use at home once their children began attending preschool. The following analyses were based on responses from just those 609 families in the main sample and 268 families in the comparision sample for which parents provided information concerning language use in their children's preschool programs. The parents were asked to say whether or not there had been any kind of change in language use in the home, and if there were, what the change consisted in: greater or less use of English, and greater or less use of the home language (HL). Table 8 shows overall patterns of change reported in language use in the home for two samples. We can see that 30.9% of the families in the main sample reported no change in language patterns connected to their children's attendance in preschool programs, whereas just 18.3% of the comparison families said there had been no resulting change.

But change can be negative or positive. Because our concern in this study relates to language shift, we view the home language being displaced by English as a negative change especially in homes where the adults speak little or no English, whereas, an increase in home language usage represents a

Table 9. Changes in Language Patterns in Main Sample Homes by Language of Early Education Program

	English Only		Bilingual		HL Only		Total	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
No change	66	(31.3)	98	(30.4)	24	(31.6)	188	(30.9)
Negative change	136	(64.4)	152	(47.2)	20	(26.3)	308	(50.6)
Positive change	6	(2.8)	60	(18.6)	32	(42.1)	98	(16.1)
Neutral change	3	(1.4)	12	(3.7)			15	(2.4)
Totals	211	(99.9)	322	(99.9)	76	(100)	609	(100)

positive change. We categorized "less English" as neutral, because it is unclear what kind of change it represents. When we grouped the responses in that manner, we found 50.6% of the main sample reporting a negative change in the language patterns in the home, that is, a shift from the home language to English, versus 10.8% of the families reporting a negative change in the comparison sample. In other words, the families who had had their children in English-only and bilingual preschools were reporting negative changes 4.68 times more frequently than the comparison families were. The findings were even stronger when we analyzed the reports of language shift in relation to the kinds of programs the parents said their children had been in.

Table 9, which shows the changes in language patterns in relation to language use in early education programs for main sample families, reveals the importance of this factor. As we see, negative changes are reported in 64.4% of the families whose children attended English-only preschool, whereas they were reported in just 26.3% of those main sample families whose children attended primary language programs. Conversely, positive changes were reported by 42.1% of the primary language families, whereas they were reported in just 2.8% of the English-only families, or 15 times more frequently! Sad to say, bilingual education does not appear to offer children enough protection from language shift, as Table 9 shows: 47.2% of the main sample families with children in bilingual preschool programs reported a negative change in family language patterns, whereas just 18.6% reported a positive change. It is difficult to know just how bilingual these programs were, but it would be reasonable to guess that English was used more frequently than the children's home language in many of them, given the pattern of responses shown in Table 9. Table 10 relates reports of changes in comparision family language patterns after their children attended preschool programs. Here we see that the 72.8% of the families who knew that their children were in primary language only preschools reported positive changes in their family language patterns whereas 10.3% reported negative changes, or 7 times more frequently. Families who thought their children were in bilingual schools did, in fact, report positive changes less frequently

Table 10. Changes in Language Patterns in Comparison Sample Homes by Language of Early Education Program

	English Only		Bilingual		HL Only		Total	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
No change	1	(25)	11	(34.4)	37	(16)	49	(18.3)
Negative change	1	(25)	4	(12.5)	24	(10.3)	29	(10.8)
Positive change	1	(25)	15	(46.9)	169	(72.8)	185	(69)
Neutral change	1	(25)	2	(6.2)	2	(.8)	5	(1.9)
Totals	4	(100)	32	(100)	232	(99.9)	268	(100)

(46.9%) than did those who knew that the native language was used exclusively in the preschool, but they did not report negative changes much more frequently than did the others (12.5% vs. 10.3%). They did report "no change" twice as frequently as did the other parents, however (34.4% vs. 16%). Are the negative changes reported here really negative? One might argue that a shift to a greater use of English and less primary language use may not only be inevitable but desirable for these families in the long run. That question can be answered only in relation to facts about the families in our samples.

The first language in 97.7% of the main sample and 99% of the comparison sample families was reportedly a language other than English. Nevertheless, the families were clearly responding to the assimilative forces that work against the retention of ethnic languages in the society. Linguistic change almost always begins with the children in language-minority families. The children speak little or no English when they enter school, but they soon learn enough to get by. In that world, they quickly discover that the key to acceptance is English, and they learn it so they can take part in the social life of the classroom. And they take home what they have learned in school. All too often, English becomes their language of choice long before they know it well enough to express themselves fully in that language, and they use it both in school and at home. The parents in these families are considerably less proficient in English than they are in their primary languages, that is, assuming they know English at all. The assimilative forces that impel the children to learn English at school also operate on the adults when they come into contact with the world outside the home, of course. Without much English, the only jobs immigrants or refugees can hope to get in this society are ones at the lowest rungs of job ladders in any field of endeavor. Some attend adult school English classes, and others try to pick up what they can on their own. Neither of these measures will provide them with the exposure and help they need to learn the language for the most part. Adults seldom find themselves in the kinds of situations that allow them to learn a language as fully as children eventually do. It is not that they are incapable of learning, and in fact, there is evidence suggesting that when the conditions are right, adults may be better language learners than children are (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1977). The conditions, however, are seldom right for adult immigrants. They rarely have the time or means to take advantage of the type of language study that might lead to proficiency in English.[12] In any event, it is more difficult for the adults than for the children to learn English. In families such as the ones in our two samples, the adults simply do not learn English as quickly or as well as the children. But English nevertheless enters the home. Evidence of this can be seen in the responses parents gave to our questions concerning the language their children used at home.

Because age and relative position in the family appear to be important variables in primary language maintenance among immigrant children, we asked respondents to our interviews to divide the children in the family into three groups: older children, middle children, and younger children. If the family's children did not divide up sensibly into three groups, then they were asked to do a two-way grouping: older versus younger. If all of the children were younger than 5 or 6, the respondent was asked to describe them all as younger children. Thus, there were more families with younger children than older children, and few families with middle children. We then asked what language the older children used in speaking to the adults in the family, and what they used when speaking to their siblings. We asked the same of the middle children and the younger.

What we found across the board were highly significant differences between our main and comparison samples in all age groupings of children. In every case, the children in the main sample were reported as using the home language less frequently than were the children in the comparison sample, and English more frequently. Tables 11 through 16 show that not only were the children using English more frequently and the native language less with their siblings, they were doing so as well with the adults in the home who, from all evidence, did not know English well. We see this across age groups in nearly a third of all main sample families (30.8% of the older children, 30.5% of the middle and 27.1% of the younger), but in the comparison families this was reported far less frequently (5.6% of the older children, 5% of the middle and just 1.7% of the younger ones). All groups of children

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[12] The intensive language programs offered by the Foreign Service Institute or the Defense Language Institute are examples of adult language programs that do lead to high levels of second or foreign language proficiency. Neither is open to the general public, however. But few adult immigrants could take advantage of programs like them even if they existed because they require full-time study and a special aptitude to handle the pressure cooker methods used in such intensive programs. The English as a second language courses generally available to immigrant adults at night school seldom offer students more than survival-level English instruction.

Table 11. Language of Older Children to Adults

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
HL only or mostly	281	(55.1)	202	(87.1)
HL and English equally	72	(14.1)	17	(7.3)
English only or mostly	157	(30.8)	13	(5.6)
Total	510	(100)	232	(100)

Table 12. Language of Middle Children to Adults

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
HL only or mostly	216	(54)	191	(86.8)
HL and English equally	62	(15.5)	18	(8.2)
English only or mostly	122	(30.5)	11	(5)
Total	400	(100)	220	(100)

Table 13. Language of Younger Children to Adults

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
HL only or mostly	395	(61.1)	286	(94.7)
HL and English equally	76	(11.7)	11	(3.6)
English only or mostly	175	(27.1)	5	(1.7)
Total	646	(99.9)	302	(100)

in both samples used English even more frequently with siblings, as previously noted. For the main sample, 40.1% of the older children were reported as using English exclusively or mostly with siblings, as were 41.1% of the middle children and 33.6% of the younger children. Again, the children in the comparison families were doing so significantly less frequently in all groups (11% of the older children, 9.3% of the middle and 4.6% of the younger ones.) When the children in our samples, who were reportedly using English and the home language about equally, are added to those who were using English mostly or exclusively, we see that English is clearly becoming the language of choice in well over 50% of the main sample homes. Clearly, this inclination is one of the forces for change in family language patterns. In contrast, although English was being used by the children in over 20% of the comparison families, they tended to use it less in talking to their parents.

The effects of the children's use of English in the home can be seen both in what happens to their retention of the primary language, and on their

Table 14. Language of Older Children to Siblings

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
HL only or mostly	206	(40.3)	180	(75.9)
HL and English equally	100	(19.6)	31	(13.1)
English only or mostly	205	(40.1)	26	(11)
Total	511	(100)	237	(100)

Table 15. Language of Middle Children to Siblings

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
HL only or mostly	161	(40.1)	176	(78.6)
HL and English equally	75	(18.7)	27	(12.1)
English only or mostly	165	(41.1)	21	(9.3)
Total	401	(99.9)	224	(100)

Table 16. Language of Younger Children to Siblings

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
HL only or mostly	289	(52.3)	227	(87)
HL and English equally	78	(14.1)	22	(8.4)
English only or mostly	186	(33.6)	12	(4.6)
Total	553	(100)	261	(100)

parents' language patterns. What do parents do when their children speak mostly English at home, a language the parents themselves do not know? There is evidence that these changes were affecting all of the family members. Many parents in the main sample reported that although English was not a language they were able to express themselves in easily, they were using it in speaking to their children. In contrast with the comparison families, where 93.9% of the parents used their own languages exclusively or mostly at home with family members, only 78% of the main sample parents did. That may simply mean that these families are becoming assimilated more rapidly and these changes in language behavior are a natural part of the process. In families where the adults are bilingual, this would indeed be the case. As the children learn English and use it at home, the parents also switch over to it, at least in speaking with the children. But the families in this study were in most cases not bilingual: They were largely non-English-speaking monolinguals in other languages. As noted earlier, the primary language of the home was a language other than English in 99% of the comparison families, and in 97.7% of the main sample families. Some of the parents knew English as well as they did their primary languages, but the overwhelming majority did not. In many homes where children lead the way in changing family language patterns, parents can barely speak English. But in self-defense they eventually learn enough to deal with—if not communicate with—the children. There is little genuine parent-child communication in such situations.

Consider, for example, this excerpt from an interview with a parent who was telling us about the problems she and her friends and relatives were having because of changes in family communication patterns. The interviewer (*Int.*) is describing the situation in a close friend's family in which the children stopped speaking Vietnamese after they learned English. The adults in the household have learned English, as the interviewee (*Mrs. P.*) has, in order to talk to their children:

Int. How about your other friends, do they have young children?
Mrs. P. Yeah, young childoon, ena frien'? Ena my frien' have ena three childoon. Born ena Vietnam. Uh, li-do!
[*She gestures to indicate the height of the children she is talking about—around 30 inches tall* (*0.8 m*)]
Int. Oh, they came here when they were very little.
Mrs. P. Yeah, Li-do. Ena three year ena four, fi' year. My father ena childoon, he doctor. He talk ena Engli'—no good! Yeah, ev'y ena family, talk Engli' ena childoon. Childoon no—ena don' know ena Vietnam.
[i.e., 'Yeah, little. They were three, four, and five years old. The children's father is a doctor. He speaks English poorly. Yeah, everyone in the family —talk English to the children. The children don't know Vietnamese.']
Int. Oh, they don't speak any Vietnamese.
Mrs. P. No, no, no, don't know.
Int. The children were how old when they came here?
Mrs. P. Ena three year ena four year ena fi' year.
Int. Uh huh. And those children speak no Vietnamese?
Mrs. P. No, no Vietnamese.
Int. So the father can't talk with them.
Mrs. P. Yeah. Uh huh. S'e can't talk, s'e talk ena ena Engli'—ena no good Engli'.
[i.e., 'He can't talk with them (in Vietnamese so) he talks with them in English, in poor English.']
Int. Oh, so in bad English.
Mrs. P. Yeah, yeah, no very good ena talk.
Int. So he doesn't talk to them in Vietnamese because they don't understand.
Mrs. P. Yeah, no, yeah, uh huh.
Int. They don't understand anything at all?
Mrs. P. No talk ena Vietnam.
Int. They don't understand? When their father talks in Vietnamese, do they understand? Like when your nephew and niece tell their children, 'bring

me the shoe, get me something to eat,' you said they understand. Do your friend's children understand their father?
[Mrs. P. had told the Interviewer that her nephew's and niece's children couldn't speak Vietnamese, but they understood simple directives such as "Take me shoe," or "take me food."]

Mrs. P. No, no, don't understand. Friend ena childoon Engli' understand, Vietnam no. A li-do! uh, uh, Eat food, he understand. No.
[i.e., 'No they understand nothing. The children understand only English, they don't understand Vietnamese. Oh, maybe they understand a little— things like "Eat dinner".']

Mrs. P. reports that her own family, the older of her two children are able to speak Vietnamese fluently still. They were 9 and 11 when the family came over to the U.S. in 1978. The youngest child, however, was just 5 then, and he entered school shortly after the family arrived in San Francisco. This son is able to understand a little Vietnamese, but not well, and he has difficulty speaking it. Mrs. P. described her son's difficulties with the language as follows:

Mrs. P. S'e sound ena ena ol' Vietnam. S'e s'e fo'got!
Int. He's forgotten his Vietnamese words?
Mrs. P. Yeah!
Int. When he speaks Vietnamese, what does he do, what does he say?
Mrs. P. Uh, s'e talk ena Engli' wor'—he ena "uh, uh, uh, f-fo-fo-fo'go'! Oh, ena mom, wha' wha' what' uh fo'go'!
Int. I see! So he can't remember the words.
Mrs. P. Yeah.

Mrs.P. reports that although she communicates with her older children entirely in Vietnamese, she uses both English and Vietnamese when she is with the youngest child. She says she has to use English because he does not know Vietnamese well enough to carry on a conversation with her, and besides, she knows English better than he knows Vietnamese.

We can find plenty of evidence of language erosion and language loss in the parents' judgment of their children's proficiency in the primary language. We asked the parents to say whether they thought their children were able to speak the home language as well as children their age should. We asked them to think about children the age of theirs who really could speak the language well, and to use them as a standard against which to judge their own children's skills. Native speakers are generally able to judge whether children are able to speak a language well or not, given their age. What they told us confirmed our suspicion that early exposure to English leads to language loss. Children in the main group were described as very deficient or completely unable to speak the home language six to eight times more fre-

Table 17. Older Children's Proficiency in Home Language

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Speaks HL well, adequate for age	352	(64.3)	204	(81.6)
Speaks HL inadequately for age	127	(23.2)	42	(16.8)
Speaks HL poorly or not at all	68	(12.4)	4	(1.6)
Total	547	(99.9)	250	(100)

Table 18. Middle Children's Proficiency in Home Language

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Speaks HL well, adequate for age	224	(57.9)	178	(78.8)
Speaks HL inadequately for age	102	(26.3)	43	(19)
Speaks HL poorly or not at all	61	(15.8)	5	(2.2)
Total	387	(100)	226	(100)

Table 19. Younger Children's Proficiency in Home Language

	Main Sample		Comparison	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Speaks HL well, adequate for age	328	(52)	226	(74.1)
Speaks HL inadequately for age	180	(28.6)	72	(23.6)
Speaks HL poorly or not at all	102	(16.2)	7	(2.3)
Too young to talk	20	(3.2)		
Total	630	(100)	305	(100)

quently than were children in the comparison group. The children in the comparison group—children who had been in early education programs conducted entirely in the language of the home—were judged as being able to speak the primary language well considerably more frequently than were the children in the main sample. They were by no means safe, however, as we can see from the data presented in Tables 17 to 19. They leave their primary language preschool programs at age 5 or 6 and enter elementary school while they are still vulnerable to the assimilative forces operating on children. Their primary languages can and apparently do begin to erode once they encounter English in school as these tables show. Children in the comparison sample are characterized as speaking the home language inadequately for their age a little less frequently than are children in the main sample, but not by much (in older children, 16.8% vs. 23.2%; in middle children, 19% vs. 26.3%; and in younger children, 23.6% vs. 28.6%). When the reports of language loss are added to those of language erosion, the figures are substantial, especially for the main sample: for older children, 35.6%; for middle children, 42.1%; and for younger children 44.8%.

As shown in Tables 17, 18, and 19, the younger children both in the main and comparison samples show greater loss than do the older ones in the families: this having to do with the fact that where there are older and younger children in a family, the younger ones are exposed to English earlier because older siblings bring it into the home once they learn it at school. Another reason is no doubt that the children who are characterized as "older" can be quite a bit older than the younger children in the household, and they may not, in fact, have had to deal with English until their first language was beyond the slippery stage.

DISCUSSION

So what does all this mean? This examination of the data we have collected from families across the country suggests that as immigrant children learn English, the patterns of language use change in their homes, and the younger they are when they learn English, the greater the effect. The evidence would suggest that these children are losing their primary languages as they learn English. But why should they? What kind of explanation can we offer for this kind of loss? What theory of language learning would predict this kind of outcome? Should educators of language-minority children be concerned with issues like this? Can children really lose their native languages? What are the mechanisms and consequences of language loss, and what relevance does this problem have in a discussion of educational policies and practices? These problems would intrigue any researcher who wants to understand how people learn new languages. In order to really understand what the process of learning a second language involves in all of its cognitive and social dimensions, one really has to deal with the question of why it sometimes results in bilingualism, and why it sometimes does not. The situation described in this article is one that must be looked at more closely by other researchers, but it demands action beyond research. As educators and advocates for children and families, it is crucial that we understand what is happening, and that we do something about the problem that our educational policies and practices are creating.

Why are so many children dropping their home languages as they learn English? This question can be answered only in reference to the societal context in which the children are learning English. Second language learning does not result in the loss of the primary language everywhere. But it does often enough in societies like the United States and Canada where linguistic or ethnic diversity are not especially valued. Despite our considerable pride in our diverse multicultural origins, Americans are not comfortable with either kind of diversity in our society. The U.S. English movement is just one sign of that discomfort. Language-minority children encounter powerful forces for assimilation as soon as they enter the English-speaking world of the classroom in the society's schools. Young children are extremely vulnerable to the social pressures exerted by people in their social worlds. But the social pressures they experience are not entirely external. Internal pressures are at work as well. Language-minority children are aware that they are different the moment they step out of their homes and into the world of school. They do not even have to step out of the house. They have only to turn on the television and they can see that they are different in language, in appearance, and in behavior, and they come to regard these differences as undesirable. They discover quickly that if they are to participate in the world outside the home, something has to change. Children do not apparently have to be in an all-English environment to discover that one of the things that stands between them and easy participation in their new world is language. They can tell by the way people interact with them that the only language that counts for much is English: the language they do not as yet speak. If they want to be accepted, they have to learn English, because the others are not going to learn their language. Children come to this conclusion whether they are in all-English classes or bilingual classes. And so they are motivated to learn English. At the same time, they are motivated to stop using their primary languages: all too often long before they have mastered the second language. As we have said, there are both internal and external pressures at work.

The younger children are when they encounter these assimilative forces, the greater the effect on their primary languages. It is especially problematic for children in the preschool period, that is, under the age of 5. At this age, children have simply not reached a stable enough command of their native language not to be affected by contact with a language that is promoted as heavily as English is in this society. English is the high-status language; it is the societal language. Although young children neither know nor care about prestige and status, they do care about belonging and acceptance. They quickly sense that without English they will not be able to participate in the English-speaking world of the school, and so they learn it, and they give up their primary language.

And here we see a serious problem for these children and for those of us whose interest in language-minority children goes beyond an academic one in how they manage the linguistic adjustments they must inevitably make if they are to live in this society. We believe that the consequences of losing a primary language are far reaching, and it does affect the social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development of language-minority children, as well as the integrity of their families and the society they live in.

What are the cognitive and educational consequences of losing one's primary language? What happens to familial relations when the language children give up happens to be the only language that the parents speak? What is lost when children and parents cannot communicate easily with one another?

What is lost is no less than the means by which parents socialize their children: When parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings, or wisdom about how to cope with their experiences. They cannot teach them about the meaning of work, or about personal responsibility, or what it means to be a moral or ethical person in a world with too many choices and too few guideposts to follow. What is lost are the bits of advice, the *consejos* parents should be able to offer children in their everyday interactions with them. Talk is a crucial link between parents and children: It is how parents impart their cultures to their children and enable them to become the kind of men and women they want them to be. When parents lose the means for socializing and influencing their children, rifts develop and families lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understandings.

There is evidence, albeit anecdotal, to be gleaned from our interviews that these changes in the communication patterns in the home can have serious consequences on parent–child relationships. We included a couple of open-ended questions in the interview in which we asked the parents what they wanted us to tell policymakers about their concerns and desires as parents. Many parents were worried about their children losing the language of the home. Many, but not all, did. Sad to say, there seems to be a barn door principle at work here. The parents who expressed the greatest worry were the ones whose children had already begun to lose the language, and who were having trouble communicating with them. What we learned was that this loss can be highly disruptive on family relations.

Some of the saddest stories came from the people who conducted the interviews for this study. One of them told the story of a family that had been referred to county social services after the father was accused of abusing his children. Someone at school had noticed bruises on the children. When the children were questioned, they admitted that their father had beaten them with a stick. The children were taken into protective custody, and the father was brought in for questioning. The story that unfolded was tragic. The family is Korean, and its language is one that requires the marking of many levels of deference in ordinary speech. One cannot speak Korean without considering one's own social position and age relative to the position and age of one's addressee because a host of lexical and grammatical choices depend on such matters. It seems that the children in this family had stopped speaking Korean, although the parents spoke little else. Everything was under control at home however, even if parents and children did not communicate easily with one another. Then one day the children's grandfather came from Korea for a stay with the family. Because Grandfather did not speak English, the father ordered the children to speak to him in Korean. They tried. They used the Korean they could remember, but it was rusty. It had been a long while since the children had spoken the language and they had forgotten little things, like the intricacies of the deferential system. They used none of the forms that children must use when speaking to an honored relative like their grandfather. The grandfather was shocked at the apparent disrespect the children were displaying towards him. He did what the situation called for: He scolded his son—the children's father—for not having trained his children properly. The father did what the situation required of him: He punished the children—with a stick—for their rudeness and disrespect. What was sad was that no one seemed to realize the role language played in this family drama.

It may take years before the harm done to families can be fully assessed. When the children are young, the parents feel hindered but not necessarily defeated if they cannot communicate easily with them. One family that has been in the United States for nearly 20 years revealed the extent to which breakdown in family communication can lead to the alienation of children from their parents. The four children, who are now teenagers, have completely lost their ability to speak or understand Spanish. The children are ashamed of Spanish, it was reported. They do not acknowledge it when their parents speak it, even though it is the only language the parents know. The mother reported that her 17-year-old son is having problems in school. He is often truant and is in danger of dropping out. She has tried to influence him but can't because he doesn't understand her. A recent attempt at discussion ended in physical violence, with mother and son coming to blows when words failed them.

The stories of families in which language and cultural shifts have resulted in the breakdown of parental authority and of the children's respect for their parents are often tragic. For the Southeast Asian refugee families especially, the breakdown of family can mean a loss of everything. Many of them left behind all of their possessions when they fled their native lands. They came to the U.S. with the hope of keeping their families intact. They do not understand what is happening to them as they see their families falling apart. They do not see how the language their children are learning in school figures in this process. They want their children to learn English. They know how critical it is to their economic survival in this country. They believe that they can maintain Hmong or Khmer or Lao or Vietnamese without help because these languages are spoken in the home. They ask, "How can children lose their language?" But they do. And by the time the parents realize what is happening, it is usually too late to do anything about it.

Let us consider some possible cognitive and educational consequences of primary language loss. We are convinced that there is a connection between native language loss and the educational difficulties experienced by many language-minority-background students. As noted earlier, children frequently give up their native languages long before they have mastered English. But what happens if their efforts to learn English are not altogether successful?

It is not hard for children to learn a second language, but we are all familiar with instances of second language learning that fall short of the language being learned. Researchers have examined cases of language learning that may not have gone beyond the interlanguage stages documented in their studies (e.g., Schumann, 1974; Selinker, Swain, & Dumas, 1975; Wong Fillmore, in press). In Selinker's (1972) terms, they ended up with "fossilized versions of interlanguages" rather than with fully realized versions of the target languages. What leads to this kind of outcome rather than the more complete mastery expected in second language learning? Social and psychological factors have been implicated in the case of adult language learners, whereas situational factors have been critical in the case of children. Fossilized interlanguages are very likely to develop in the language-learning situations that we find in many schools with big enrollments of immigrant and refugee students. In the classrooms of such schools, non-English speakers frequently outnumber English speakers. In fact, except for their teachers, the learners may have little contact with people who know the language well enough to help them learn it. In any event, the language learners spend a lot more time talking with one another than they do with their teachers, and the English they hear most often is the imperfect varieties spoken by classmates rather than the more standard varieties spoken by their teachers. That being the case, the input they base their language learning on being the speech of learners like themselves, is not altogether representative of the target language. Not surprisingly, language learning based on such input is neither perfect nor complete.

What happens when students do not learn well a second language after they have already decided to give up their first language? Can children who develop neither their first nor their second language fully take full advantage of the educational opportunities their parents and their teachers have to offer? These are questions that need to be examined closely in the light of what we have learned in this study.

So where does all this leave us? Does this suggest that we should abandon English in programs for language-minority children? Not at all. The problem is timing, not English. The children have to learn English, but they should not be required to do so until their native languages are stable enough to handle the inevitable encounter with English and all it means. Even then, teachers and parents must work together to try to mitigate the harm that can be done to children when they discover that differences are not welcome in the social world represented by the school. Parents need to be warned of the consequences of not insisting that their children speak to them in the language of the home. Teachers should be aware of the harm they can do when they tell parents that they should encourage their children to speak English at home, and that they themselves should try to use English when they talk to their children.

The researchers who have been working on this project realize that our work has just begun. The No-Cost study is far from finished, but already it has raised many questions that can only be addressed through further research. This article discusses some of the issues that need to be examined in greater detail. We hope other researchers will be motivated to do some of this research by the same concerns that got us involved, that is, by the very high cost we see language-minority children and their families paying for their participation in the society.

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