Studying the Home Language Experiences of Mexican Toddlers: A Mixed-Methods Approach

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10% of the total population under age 5 in the United States is Latino (US Census, 2012). Nearly 70% of these children are of Mexican origin (Hernandez, 2006) Many children from Mexican backgrounds (e.g., Crosnoe, 2006; National Research Council, 2006): • Have parents who were born in Mexico • Are exposed to Spanish in the home • Live in poverty (>25 – 45%) These children are likely to be increasingly included in family-centered interventions designed to promote their early language development (e.g., Rowe, Suskind, & Hoff, 2013) Yet, existing language intervention strategies may not reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of Mexican families (Harwood et al., 2002) Research is needed that describes Mexican children’s early language learning experiences in order to improve the cultural sensitivity of interventions (e.g., Parra Cardona et al., 2012) One approach is the description of the early language-learning settings in the home (Gallimore et al., 1995), which includes: • Underlying cultural beliefs and values • Types of activities • Participants • Activity goals • Social scripts This research meets this need by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to study the early language-learning settings in the homes of Mexican immigrant families.

METHODS (continued)

Participants

35 Mexican immigrant families of toddlers living in the northeastern US in low-income homes participated.

Mothers:

- Average age = 29.2 years (range = 19 – 36 years)
- Mean length of US residency = 11.5 years (SD = 8.3)
- Educational attainment: 
  - 57% had less than high school
  - 43% had a high school diploma or higher
  - 37% were employed
  - 74% spoke English not well or not at all
- Children:
  - No reported developmental concerns
  - Average age = 20.1 months (range = 15 – 28 months)
  - 51% were female
  - All were exposed to Spanish from birth
- 12 were enrolled in early educational programs
- All but one lived with their father

Measure & Procedures

Semi-structured interviews completed with mothers:

- 22 previously piloted questions that targeted toddlers’ home language-learning settings:
  - Beliefs and values regarding child rearing, toddler development, language learning, and bilingualism
  - Toddlers’ routine weekday and weekend activities
  - Participants in toddlers’ routines: mothers’ goals for toddlers’ activities
  - Social scripts of toddlers’ activities, including the type of talk and language of the households
  - Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim

Recordings of the toddlers’ home language environment:

- Up to 16 hours of recording time for 34 families
- Using the LENA Digital Language Processor (LENA Pro System, 2012), when the researcher was not present

Analyses

Semi-structured interviews:

- Directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005):
  - Components of the language settings as a priori codes
  - Also accounted for emerging content
- Coding scheme refined through constant negotiation between two trained coders (Campbell et al., 2013)
- Interviews coded with Dedoose (Sociocultural Research Consultants, 2012)
- Frequency of codes determined major themes

LENA language recordings:

- Visual inspection of the composition of the audio environment across recordings > 1 hour
  - Estimated number of adult words heard in 10-hour day
- In depth transcription of 3 discrete samples (using SALT; Miller & Iglesias, 2012) to calculate:
  - Proportion of child-directed versus overhear input
  - Proportion of Spanish, English, and Mixed utterances

RESULTS

- The predominant themes from the semi-structured interviews of all mothers (N = 35) is presented
- Variations in toddlers’ activity settings are presented using the interview and LENA data of two families:
  - Both mothers worked part-time
  - Both toddlers had older siblings
- P12: Male toddler, age 18 months
- P37: Male toddler, age 21 months, enrolled in an early education program

- The findings provide foundational knowledge regarding the early language learning experiences of Mexican children from low-income, immigrant backgrounds
- Toddler language learning is important for these families
- This information can inform family-centered language intervention strategies for this population, for example:
  - Decreased focus on mother-child play, increased focus on siblings and others as language facilitators
  - Use of Spanish and English in intervention strategies

IMPLICATIONS

- These methods can also be used to individualize intervention services for families from a variety of diverse backgrounds by:
  - Uncovering the beliefs and values related to language learning
  - To tailor LENA data to families’ particular needs
  - Determining the targets of intervention
  - Mothers may not be the optimal target in all families
  - Identifying the language-rich times of the day
  - To build on the language facilitation strategies already used

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