
Mexican-Origin Adolescents' Spanish Proficiency Is High and Benefits Ethnic Identity, Resilience, and Life Meaning

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INTRODUCTION

Mexican-origin youth with immigrant parents are very good at retaining their heritage language of Spanish in the United States. Indeed, retaining one's heritage language is critical for the positive development of linguistic minority youth. However, research on heritage language development focuses primarily on younger children's experiences, despite language development continuing throughout adolescence.

Given the rapid and significant social and emotional changes that teenagers experience, adolescence is a socially critical period for heritage language development (compared to the cognitively critical period of language development during childhood). For linguistic minority adolescents, several social factors can impact their ongoing heritage language development. For example, they may experience a deeper understanding of their racial/ethnic identity while at the same time feel more pressure to succeed in the English-dominant mainstream educational system. In addition, adolescents typically experience significant changes in relationships with their parents and peers.

First-generation Mexican-origin immigrant parents generally have limited English proficiency and commonly speak Spanish at home. This provides rich opportunities for their children's Spanish language development. Beyond actual language use, *family relationship quality* is critical to language development. Parents who are sensitive, responsive, and supportive encourage heritage language development through positive parent-child interactions.

Heritage language development is therefore a prominent contributor to adolescents' *ethnic identity* and cultural solidarity. When Mexican-origin adolescents are able to communicate in Spanish, they are able to develop a deeper sense of heritage values, norms, and belonging to their ethnic group. They are also better able to represent themselves within and beyond their ethnic group.

In addition, heritage language development may help promote Mexican-origin adolescents' *resilience* in the face of challenges such as discrimination, prejudice, and community violence. Mastery of Spanish can increase competence and boost confidence among adolescents. Spanish mastery also makes it easier for young people to receive support from their English-limited parents, grandparents, and other important adults in their lives. Heritage language development can also help youth see their life as significant, purposeful, and meaningful. This life meaning is expanded through young people's stronger connection with their heritage culture's past and future.

In this study [1], the authors examine profiles of Spanish proficiency across six years during adolescence among Mexican-origin youth with first-generation immigrant parents. The authors also explore whether and how family relationship quality (measured by how warm and/or hostile mothers and fathers were) and family language environment (measured by how often Spanish was used by parents and youth) impact adolescents' Spanish language development. Finally, they explore whether and how Spanish language development is associated with positive outcomes – ethnic identity, resilience, and life meaning – for these Mexican-origin youth.

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **Spanish language proficiency was high:** Almost half of Mexican-origin adolescents with first generation immigrant parents demonstrated consistently high Spanish proficiency throughout adolescence.
- ▶ **Language development continued during adolescence:** Mexican-origin adolescents' Spanish proficiency could still improve or decline during this period.
- ▶ **Family relationship quality was key:** Adolescents who experienced greater warmth from their mothers were more likely to have consistently high Spanish proficiency throughout adolescence. Relationship quality was more predictive of language proficiency than how much Spanish was spoken at home.
- ▶ **Spanish language proficiency was associated with positive outcomes:** High Spanish proficiency throughout adolescence consistently benefited youth's ethnic identity, resilience, and life meaning.

High levels of Spanish language proficiency were associated with positive outcomes for Mexican-origin youth



The left side of the figure shows how Spanish language proficiency was measured each of the three times adolescents were interviewed. Youth with high Spanish language proficiency throughout adolescence (and to a lesser degree, those who improved proficiency during adolescence) showed the best outcomes, demonstrating the highest levels of ethnic identity, resilience and life meaning. Examples of statements Mexican-origin youth answered on the right side of the figure show how these positive outcomes were measured.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Heritage language proficiency is important for the social and emotional well-being of youth in immigrant families. Parents and youth practitioners should intentionally support the preservation and continued development of adolescents' heritage language. In addition, because high-quality relationships provide an important foundation for adolescents' heritage language development, parents and others who support youth should be supported to prioritize relationship building with youth to generate other desired developmental outcomes.

Targeted and evidence-based intervention, prevention, and promotion programs across adolescents' developmental contexts can be offered to support their heritage language development and resulting positive outcomes. Universal and group-specific policies can be purposefully developed and implemented to support sustainable linguistic diversity and social justice across linguistic groups.

REFERENCE

[1] Wang, J., Wen, W., Sim, L., Li, X, Yan, J., & Kim, S.Y. (2022). Family environment, heritage language profiles, and socioemotional well-being of Mexican-origin adolescents with first generation immigrant parents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 51:1196–1209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-022-01594-5>

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