



“We Don’t Want Their Yoruba Language to Fade”: Examining the Home Literacy and Cultural Practices of Yoruba Families in the Midwest U.S.

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Abstract

This qualitative study engages sociocultural and New Literacy Studies theories to investigate the home literacy and cultural practices utilized by Yoruba parents to help their children develop their bilingualism and biliteracy (English/Yoruba). Using ethnographic methods, the study explored two main questions: 1. What are the home literacy and cultural practices utilized by Yoruba parents to help their children develop their bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Yoruba? 2. How do the focal parents conceive the relationship between language and culture in their children’s development of bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Yoruba? The findings revealed that the focal parents employed various home literacy and cultural practices such as sharing poems, folk stories, and teaching from religious texts to help their children develop their bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Yoruba. Furthermore, the findings show that these parents espouse a holistic approach to language learning that considers cultural practices a fundamental element in this process. The findings from this study provide important insights into the understanding of the literacy and cultural practices of African immigrant populations in the U.S. and contribute to the existing literature that seeks to bridge the gap between school and home literacy practices.

Keywords: Yoruba, African families, biliteracy, bilingualism, cultural practices, home literacy practices.

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Introduction

According to the UNHCR (2016), the major reasons for non-voluntary migration are forcible displacement, refugee status, statelessness, and economic hardship. The United States is highly impacted by such movement, having by far the most immigrants (Routley, 2022). As of 2015, the U.S. had 47 million immigrants, or “19.1% of the 244 million international migrants worldwide, and 14.4% of the United States’ population” (Partners, 2019). The United States Department of Homeland Security reported that in 2017, 1,127,167 people received permanent status in the United States; a total of 53,691 new refugees arrived in the U.S. in the same year, and another 10,523 were granted asylum. Immigration is predicted to drive population growth in the U.S. surpassing natural increases around 2030 (Routley, 2022).

Immigrants in the U.S. face numerous challenges as they seek to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage. These challenges include lack of institutional support, unfavorable demographics, lack of a “language island”, or an area with a concentration of people who share the same language (Riehl, 2010), navigating new sociolinguistic demands, and family dynamics. In addition, generational transfer of the heritage language becomes difficult as opportunities to use and share the language decline. This deprives children of exposure and motivation to learn and use the home language (Ojha, 2020). In such situations, the role of parents in early bilingual development is significant. With this in mind, this research inquiry examines the linguistic and cultural literacy practices of three Yoruba families in the U.S. Midwest to better understand the home literacy and cultural practices the focal parents utilize to support their children’s acquisition of both, English and Yoruba language. Two main questions guide this study:

1. What are the home literacy and cultural practices utilized by Yoruba parents to help their children develop their bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Yoruba?
2. How do the focal parents conceive the relationship between language and culture in their children’s development of bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Yoruba?

The findings from this study provide important insights into the understanding of the home literacy and cultural practices of African immigrant populations in the U.S. and the significant role that parents play in helping children to develop bilingualism and biliteracy. These findings also contribute to the existing literature that seeks to bridge the gap between school and home literacy practices.

Literature Review & Guiding Notions

The literature shows that in English-dominant contexts, the linguistic behavior of immigrant parents and children is shaped by communication, family affiliation, community involvement, and careers (Nesteruk, 2010; Ojha, 2020; Wang, 2018). Immigrant parents negotiate between their children’s maintenance of their heritage language and proficiency in English to be academically and professionally successful (Toppelberg & Collins, 2010). Thus, immigrant families are always at the crossroads between the heritage and dominant language, particularly when the home language is not “one that has high visibility and status in the surrounding society” (Borland, 2006, p. 23; see also Nesteruk, 2010; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009; Tovaes & Kamwangamalu, 2017).

A number of studies have examined home bicultural and bilingual literacy practices among Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Latin American, and some Asian and European families living in the U.S. (Ice, 2020; Kremin et al., 2019; Ojha, 2020; Samarth 2013). For example, in examining the attrition and maintenance of home languages among the Indian diaspora in the United States, Samarth (2013) found that even though multilingualism exists, generational transfer is impacted by the heavy use of English, and lack of effort and motivation around home languages. Wang's (2018)

multiple case study of Asian immigrant families' heritage languages in the U.S. Southwest (Mandarin, Nepali, Persian, and Arabic) revealed a general phenomenon of heritage language acquisition, shift, loss, revival, and maintenance. In addition, the findings unveiled Asian immigrant families' struggles around lack of resources, school community support, and time, as parents were busy international graduate students.

Another study of immigrant populations (Ojha 2020) explored the family language policies of Nepali families living in the U.S., in particular, how Nepali families' language ideologies and practices were shaped, and in turn shaped the heritage language development of their school-age children. Ojha (2020) showed that, despite having a positive attitude towards their heritage language, the families were not able to invest resources to support their children's heritage language and literacy skills.

In terms of biliteracy, Kremin et al., (2019) compared Spanish–English bilingual and English monolingual children in the U.S. to examine the effects of Spanish literacy on English reading among Spanish–English bilingual children. They suggest that “early and systematic biliteracy exposure at home and through afterschool programs can influence children's sound-to-print associations even in the context of language-specific (monolingual) reading instruction” (p. 192). Similarly, Ice's (2020) study of Russian speakers in educational and family contexts in the U.S. confirmed the prominent role of Saturday schools and family language policies in the preservation of the heritage language and the community.

The above-mentioned studies are significant for this inquiry because of their focus on the language practices of immigrant families/heritage speakers in the U.S. and these families' language policies. However, their findings point to the need for continued research into understudied populations, such as African immigrant families. Some extant studies like Salami et al. (2017) and Akintayo (2009) focus on parenting practices around cultural and religious values. Salami et al., (2017) highlighted the cultural and linguistic challenges that African parents face in this regard. Akintayo (2009) examined perceptions around parenting among Pentecostal Nigerian Yoruba parents in the U. S. and suggested American values and cultural contexts had impacted their parenting practices.

One of the few studies specifically on heritage language transmission among African immigrant families in the U.S. Midwest is Kigamwa (2016), which indicates that family dynamics, school dynamics, and a reduced use of the language in the home negatively impact heritage language transmission. Kigamwa's (2016) study is critical for the present inquiry because it points to the significance of the sociolinguistic challenges and literacy practices of African immigrant families. In view of the limited extant research on African immigrant populations, the present study seeks to investigate the home bilingual, cultural, and literacy practices of Yoruba families from Nigeria living in the Midwestern U.S.

Heritage Language Literacy, Identity Construction, Language Maintenance & Intergenerational Language Transmission

The home is the foundational setting for a child's cognitive, social, and emotional growth (The Urban Child Institute, 2013). Home literacy activities involve parents and children interacting socially, situations in which parents play the role of teachers. Schwartz & Verschik (2013) maintain that parents play a crucial role in heritage language maintenance. Homes are spaces for abundant literacy practices, typically guided by the family's cultural heritage and norms (Dixon & Wu, 2014). Families are aware of the benefits multilingualism and multilingual literacy carry, which influence their beliefs and

ideologies. For instance, Wilson (2021) found that parental ideologies concerning language learning seem to have evolved towards more positive attitudes related to language mixing and more flexible language practices. Heritage language literacy provides children with access to their history and culture (Creese et al., 2006); parents' positive attitudes towards the heritage language can strengthen children's intrinsic motivation to learn more (Kagan, 2005, as cited in Samarth, 2013). A strong identification with one's heritage language may lead to increased self-esteem, academic success, and family cohesion.

For heritage language learners, constructing identities at the intersection of two or more languages and cultures differs from the process of someone acquiring a foreign language, as heritage language learners are "socio historically connected with the target culture and yet experientially displaced from it" (He, 2009, p. 11; see also Canagarajah, 2021; Tovaes & Kamwangamalu, 2017). Language proficiency also influences the way others position a heritage language learner, and this, in turn, influences the learner's opportunities for enacting certain social identities within a society that may be permeated by the dominant language (Li, 2005).

Ethnographically-informed studies and research in sociolinguistics have highlighted the general trends characterizing "language maintenance and the strong tendencies towards language shift in the second generation of immigrants" (Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015. p. 320; see also Li, 1994; 2012; Touminen 1999; Luykx 2005). Research has shown that one of the challenges parents face when "following through with their intentions to use the heritage language with their children on a daily basis" is that while they aim to "apply particular language practices, they also have to juggle the complex task of both providing input in heritage languages and managing everyday tasks" (Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015. p. 322; see also Gafaranga 2010; Meyer-Pitton 2013). Common tensions involve a struggle between their desire to raise their children in their heritage language and the dominant language, and their desire to create emotional bonds and to allow for their children's preferences (Fogle 2013; Fogle 2012). Furthermore, a dynamic perspective on language socialization indicates that children's language choices and interaction shape parental language behavior significantly (Luykx 2005; Gafaranga 2010). Thus, children play an active role in language maintenance (Paugh 2005) or language shift. For example, Gafaranga's (2010) study of intergenerational use of Kinyarwanda in an immigration context showed how children-initiated negotiation of language choice for adult-child interaction by displaying their problems in understanding the heritage language. The adults then adopted the child's selected code to settle language negotiation. This study points to the various dynamics involved in the process of heritage language learning.

Lastly, extensive research has highlighted significant differences in language maintenance and intergenerational language transmission among various ethnic minority communities in countries with a high number of immigrants, such as the U.S. (Fishman 1989; 1991; 2001; 2013; Schrauf, 1999). Here, it is important to make a distinction between language maintenance and intergenerational language transmission because each one points to different aspects of the intersection of immigration and language use. According to Borland (2006), "language maintenance in an immigrant context is taken to mean the continued use by a migrant person in the country of their settlement of a language that they have used prior to their migration" (p. 24). Intergenerational language transmission (ILT) refers to the process involved when the migrant person then passes the "language down to the next generation, either through informal learning or formal teaching, or a combination of both" (Borland, 2006, p. 24). In our study, the parents in the focal families engage in language maintenance within the home and the broader community, which may facilitate ILT because it provides a "language-rich environment" for their children (Borland, 2006, p. 24).

Yoruba Immigrant Families

The Yoruba people constitute a significant portion of the African diaspora in the U.S. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a new wave of Yoruba immigration motivated by educational and professional reasons (National Park Service, n.d.). The Yorubas value tradition and education of their children (Omobowale et al, 2019). This often translates to a strong focus on academic achievement. Studies suggest that Nigerian immigrants, among whom the Yoruba people are well-represented, have higher college graduation rates compared to the U.S. national average (Joseph, 2018). Yoruba immigrants are also known for their entrepreneurial and professional accomplishments (Oloruntoba & Falola, 2022) and they are well-represented in various fields including medicine, engineering, law, and academia.

Yoruba language and cultural practices serve as a bridge between generations, identity, and community. The Yoruba culture emphasizes a strong sense of community and family, with respect for elders being a core value. Yoruba immigrant families usually try to integrate into the American society but also work to preserve their cultural heritage. (House-Soremekun, 2022). Heritage Language maintenance is one of the crucial ways the Yoruba preserve their culture and identity. There are thousands of Yoruba-speaking parents in the U.S who either migrated to the U.S with young children or gave birth to children in the U.S (Akintayo, 2009). However, the only place these children may learn the Yoruba language is in their homes since there is no formal Yoruba education in the country for young children; neither are there weekend nor summer schools to learn the language. These children have mostly acquired the English language and are being taught the Yoruba language as a heritage language at home.

Yoruba heritage families share common characteristics with other heritage families. For example, they have children who have either acquired partial command of the heritage language or who have not acquired the language at all. In the case of immigrants in the U.S., once the children enter the mainstream educational system, they receive their reading and writing instruction solely in English. As a result, acquisition of the heritage language is interrupted; the children do not generally develop the heritage-language literacy necessary to perform in an adult-like setting (Polinsky, 2011; 2016). They rarely receive sufficient input in their home language because it is not the dominant language (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007).

The Yoruba Language

Yorùbá is a tonal language with several varieties spoken across West Africa, most prominently in Southern Nigeria and the neighboring countries of Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Ghana and The Gambia (Forde, 2017). *Yorùbá* is spoken by the Yoruba Ethnic group, with about 55 million speakers, and it is one of the three official languages of Nigeria. Yorubas are also found in Brazil, known as the Lucumi people, in Sierra Leone, as the Aku people, and in various regions of North America, and Europe. Yoruba speakers can be found in almost every country of the world, as they have highly migrated to different parts of the world over the years. Several reasons account for these migrations including economic, education, intermarriage, trade and commerce (Akande, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study engages sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978) and New Literacy Studies theory (Barton, 2012) to explore the home literacy and cultural practices utilized by Yoruba parents to help their children develop bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Yoruba. In this study, a sociocultural lens

is adopted to conceptualize literacy within the contexts of bilingual literacies, cultural practices, and identity maintenance of Yoruba heritage speakers as a primarily social process.

New Literacy Studies theorists define literacy practices as a combination of “literacy events” and participants’ perceptions and beliefs about the events. Such theorists were specifically concerned with categorizing social interactions where text played an integral role as “literacy events,” as opposed to spoken language as “speech events” (Barton, 2012). According to Barton (2012), a “literacy event” is rule-governed, not confined to formal education settings, and can occur anywhere. It represents the social context in which participants interact with each other and written texts via reading and writing activities (Barton, 2012).

Literacy practices are distinct from literacy events because practices span multiple literacy events and incorporate the participants’ perceptions of the literacy events and their own literacy (Barton, 2012). Scribner & Cole (1981) defined literacy practice as “a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge,” and as such being comprised of “technology, knowledge, and skills” (p. 236). In line with these definitions, in this study, literacy events are defined as intentional engagement of parents teaching/sharing their linguistic and cultural knowledge with their children; and literacy practices as the multiple literacy events that participants engage in, and their perceptions and beliefs about those events.

A sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978) was useful in this study because it allowed us to focus on the higher human cognitive processes, such as literacy learning, and how they can be seen as an activity that takes place within specific cultures and social contexts. Vygotsky's (1978) ideas are most recognized for identifying the role social interactions and culture play in the development of higher-order thinking skills, and they are especially valuable for the insights they provide about the dynamic “interdependence between individual and social processes in the construction of knowledge” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). One of the key contributions of sociocultural theory to the issue of language learning is that of “participation” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), which combines the social context with individual acquisition. In other words, mere personal effort would not result in mastery of a language unless the individual benefits from other people’s (especially adult) participation (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Immigrant families are engaged in the process of language socialization in the new place for a long time. According to Duff (2015), this process might take place “at home, in educational institutions and workplaces, and in other face-to-face and virtual communities” (p. 62). Language socialization is a complex, lifelong process, embedded in social interactions. In view of this, the combination of sociocultural theories and New Literacy Studies theory provided valuable lenses to better understand the various literacy events and broader literacy and cultural practices of the families participating in this study.

Methodology

This qualitative study used ethnographic methods to better understand the home literacy and cultural practices of Yoruba families as they supported the bilingual and biliteracy development of their children. The study took place over a period of eight weeks, between December 2021 and February 2022. Three families were recruited for the study through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014). The participating families originated from the Southwestern part of Nigeria and from the Yoruba tribe. All the parents spoke English and Yoruba fluently and used the languages consistently in their homes. The children spoke English fluently and were learning Yoruba as a heritage language.

Table 1. *Summary of Participants' Information*

Families' Pseudonyms	Jimoh	Oluronbi	Adebola
No. of children	2 (1boy, 1girl)	2 (boys)	2 (girls)
Parents' Occupations	Father – Student Mother-House wife	Father: IT/Accountant Mother: Dentist	Graduate Students
Children	Ages: 7, 3 Class: Grade 2, Pre-k Brought to the US	Ages: 11, 4 Class: Grade 6, Pre-k Born in the US	Age: 6, 5 Class: Kindergarten & Grade 1 Brought to the US

All data was collected by the first author, a member of the Yoruba community in the U.S. Being a member of the community provided the first author with an “insider” status that facilitated recruitment and data collection. Being friends with many of the parents who participated in the study helped in gaining access to the families and homes where the observations were conducted. Moreover, as a Yoruba immigrant living in the U.S., and a parent of the age group being considered, the first author shared many experiences and similarities with the participants in the study. She was raising her own children as an immigrant in a new context and was also committed to passing her language and culture down to her children. All these experiences provided a broad idea of the circumstances Yoruba parents may encounter with young heritage speakers in the U.S. During data collection, however, the first author was aware that despite all the connections and similitudes she had with the focal families, she needed to remember that there were many aspects of the phenomenon under study that she did not know. Thus, she strove to maintain a reflective disposition keeping in mind that as a researcher, she was still an “outsider” when she entered the researched space.

The second author joined the study in the final stages and was mainly involved in the writing of the manuscript. The second author is a Latina, multilingual speaker, who has lived and worked in various countries as a kindergarten English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. Her own experiences as an immigrant in the U.S. have provided her with a wide understanding of the diverging experiences of multilingual families in this nation and the pivotal role of language and culture in child-rearing.

The first author visited the home of the participating families and observed the parents, once a week for eight weeks, as they interacted with their children. Each observation lasted approximately one hour and was video recorded with participants' permission (24 observation sessions). The first author did not interact with participants while conducting observations aiming to avoid disruption of the natural interactions she sought to examine. In addition to the video recordings, the first author wrote detailed field notes, in which she documented participants' language use, actions, and families' use of artifacts during the observation sessions. The recorded field notes provided a broader context for data analysis. The recordings were in the language that was being spoken in the home during the observations (English or Yoruba).

In addition, one ethnographic interview was conducted with the parents in each family. These interviews allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences and opinions freely and provided the researcher with an opportunity to ask for clarifications on things that were observed during home visits (Denscombe, 2010). All interviews were recorded and conducted in English. Finally, pictures of participants' interactions and the different literacy and cultural practices they engaged in were taken while conducting observations. The first author also asked participating parents to share some of the

artifacts they used when supporting their children's bilingualism and literacy practices. These included home-made learning activities, books in Yoruba, and samples of children's writing.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was recursive and ongoing. Immediately, after each home visit, the first author reviewed the video recordings and added initial analytical notes and memos to the field notes. The video recordings helped her to add more details to the field notes. Once all data were collected, the first author conducted multiple reviews of all data sources and then proceeded to transcribe the recorded interviews. From the video recordings, the first author identified literacy events, and she then transcribed the selected events for further analysis.

Next, open coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to conduct the first round of data analysis. After this, axial coding was used to start drawing connections between the codes and to identify emergent categories (Nesteruk, 2010). In this stage of the process, the researcher took notice of highlighted points and memos included in the field notes. While analyzing the data, the researcher considered cultural practices, non-verbal communication, and the mood of participants during observations. Artifacts, such as the pictures taken during field observations, were particularly helpful during this part of the analysis because they provided pictorial data to examine the broader analytical context. Finally, theoretical coding was employed as the culminating step to integrate the categories identified in the previous coding cycles (Saldaña, 2013). Data triangulation was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

Findings

There are many elements that are part of the home literacy and cultural practices of the focal Yoruba families. Some of these practices were similar while others differed across families revealing the various ways in which the participants considered and understood the relationship between language and culture, engaged in literacy events, and supported the bilingual and biliteracy development of their children in English and Yoruba.

Literacy Practices

One strategy that all families used to support their children's biliteracy development was to watch Yoruba movies together. This family activity normally consisted of parents and children sitting together in front of the T.V. or computer screen and watching a movie in Yoruba. When children struggled to follow the plot or understand certain Yoruba words, the parents used the opportunity to help children learn new vocabulary and sentence structures in the Yoruba language. In addition, the parents also had the children watch educational videos with Yoruba content that taught specific aspects of the language such as letters, numbers, parts of the body, days of the week, and proverbs.

These families' literacy practices never separated the learning of Yoruba from English. These parents were invested not only in helping the children to learn and maintain their heritage language, but in the development of their children's biliteracy skills. For example, children usually learned the Yoruba meaning of English songs and nursery rhymes through videos that first presented the song in English and then sang it in Yoruba. These songs often included physical movement and everyday objects (e.g., clothes, numbers, furniture, etc.), which helped the children understand the meaning of the words. These videos also included content that connected language to the Yoruba culture. The

stories presented incorporated African history, culture, and values such as teamwork, friendship, and cooperation.

Beyond watching heritage language videos and movies, parents also spent time speaking to their children in Yoruba. All three families believed that speaking Yoruba daily to their children was a way to help them understand the language and connect to their cultural identity. Regarding this, the parents commented:

We speak Yoruba 80% of the time in the house [...] Yoruba is more important here [the U.S.] because there's nobody, they can speak it with, nor do they learn it in school and we don't want their Yoruba language to fade, so we speak Yoruba to them often.

(Jimoh family)

We speak Yoruba to each other. And we make conscious and continuous efforts to speak it to the children too. (Adebola family)

We want them to be able to speak it and we try to speak it to them. (Oluronbi Family)

An important aspect to mention here is that when speaking to their children, these parents engaged in what García (2009) has identified as translanguaging, or “the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (p. 140). While having conversations with their children or working on different activities, both parents and children in all families translanguaged using linguistic elements from English and the Yoruba language; this was their usual way of communicating. It was common to hear the families using expressions such as: “*Won wa sad*” (*they became sad*); “*a need lati wa contented*” (*we need to be contented*); “*Mo fe drink omi.*” (*I want to drink water*); “*omi ton come from the sky*” (*water (rain) that comes from the sky*). Translanguaging was a practice children and parents engaged in as they communicated, and especially as parents helped children to develop their bilingualism and biliteracy.

Translanguaging allowed family members to use their entire linguistic repertoire and, as children continued to learn Yoruba in an English dominant context, they used English to develop their Yoruba skills. Thus, when children were not able to understand when parents spoke to them only in Yoruba, parents translated to bridge the linguistic connections between the two languages. When children were watching movies or cartoons in English, parents made sure they included subtitles in Yoruba to support the biliteracy development of their children. Additionally, every time parents read books in English to their children, they translated them into Yoruba. Parents shared that they used this practice to help children acquire new vocabulary and make linguistic connections between English and Yoruba (interview).

Aside from the awareness of the linguistic processes that were at work in their children's learning, the focal parents demonstrated that they were also cognizant of the social benefits that learning two languages would accrue for their children. Commenting on this, they explained:

Learning the Yoruba language as well would allow the children achieve all they desire to achieve and be successful, at the same time allow them to communicate with family members, other Nigerians in the U.S. in their local language, people in their home country. Teaching the two languages to the children is beyond conversational benefit.

(Father, Adebola Family)

Since we are in the U.S., and English is the main language. So, I believe they should learn that effectively. (Mother, Oluronbi Family)

We learnt Yoruba while growing up in my family and we are all successful, so I want my children to do same. (Father, Jimoh Family)

These parents wanted their children to be proficient in English because they believed it was the language the children needed to be successful in the U.S. However, they also wanted their children to learn Yoruba because they wanted the children to still be connected to their roots, maintain their cultural identity, and for communication with family members at home (Toppelberg & Collins, 2010). They believed that supporting the development of their children's bilingualism in English and Yoruba went beyond the ability to converse, as mentioned in the interview. For them, helping their children to become bilingual represented access and opportunities for accomplishments in the U.S. However, it is interesting to notice how these parents associated the learning of Yoruba not only with their Nigerian roots and identity but also with success. All parents were committed to supporting the development of the bilingualism and biliteracy skills of their children. Nevertheless, there were differences in how they supported the learning process. For instance, the Jimoh and Adebola parents deliberately started conversations with their children in Yoruba. They purposely asked their children questions to enable them to have a better understanding of specific words such as parts of the body, objects, and numbers. An example of how these parents employed intentional literacy practices through the engagement in literacy events was how in the Jimoh family, the mother taught her children how to count 1 to 10, the body parts, and the names of animals in Yoruba. Below is the teaching process she followed as recorded in the field notes:

The mother read the numbers in English, then said them in Yoruba, and the children repeated them in Yoruba. The children could not pronounce the numbers properly in Yoruba as they were saying the words with incorrect tones, so the mother taught the children the correct pronunciation. She also taught the children about the body parts asking them questions like: "*Oju melo loni*" (*how many eyes do you have?*); "*Ika melo loni*" (*how many fingers do you have?*); "*Owo melo lo ni*" (*how many hands do you have?*). Then she moved on to teach them the names of some animals in Yoruba, *Aja* (Dog), *Ologbo* (Cat), *Ehoro* (Rabbit).

The mother in the Jimoh family expressed, "we may want to go back to Nigeria or visit Nigeria, and they also need to speak to grannies and families back home that do not understand English. And we want them to still be connected to our family" (interview).

In the Adebola family, the parents also used an intentional approach engaging in various literacy events to teach their children. Representative of this were the times when the father deliberately said some words in Yoruba and asked the children what the words meant in English. This was a common occurrence in this household and recorded multiple times in the fieldnotes. Below is an example of these recorded interactions.

The father in the Adebola family is teaching his children different words in Yoruba while they are in the kitchen. He starts with the word "rain," "Ojo." The children do not know this one, then he gave the children a clue by using his hands to demonstrate rain. Then he says another word: "Aso," which means "cloth." He asks Kemi, she gave some words that were not the correct answers. Dad gave her some clues and she got it after many tries. The last word he taught was "Isu," which means "Yam." Remi did not know this word. Dad asks her to go and touch different things that he bought from the grocery store; she touched different things until she touched the yam. Then she shouted "Yam" and she eventually got it.

In addition to the above-mentioned practices, the parents from these two families also engaged in literacy events through the reading of Yoruba books and the teaching of writing of specific words to the children to help them master word meanings and increase their vocabulary.

Since one important aspect in language acquisition is constant interaction with other language speakers (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), the parents in these families ensured that their children had constant interaction with their Yoruba community where the language was mostly used by Yoruba speakers. In this way, they guaranteed that their children were interacting with Yoruba speakers within and outside the immediate family setting. This concurs with what Polinsky & Scontras (2020) describe as “increased exposure to the heritage language will only get heritage speakers so far; they also need exposure from a variety of sources” (p. 17). However, even though all the families considered this important, the data shows that it was the Adebola family that really expressed strong opinions about living in a Yoruba-dominated environment and connecting with other Yoruba speakers as a main source of support for their children to learn their heritage language. This was especially important for them because, similar to what Wang (2018) found, as graduate students, they did not have much time to sit down with the children to teach them the language. The father from the Adebola family explained:

Keeping ourselves and the children where there are Yoruba speakers is very important to me and speaking it at home [...] They need cultural practices and mingling with Yoruba speakers.

In contrast to the other two families, the parents from the Oluronbi family explained that “speaking Yoruba to the children, engaging in cultural practices, and living and mingling with other Yoruba speakers” within a Yoruba-dominated community was enough for their children to acquire the heritage language. For these parents, creating an environment where children could use the Yoruba language was enough to help them develop their bilingualism and biliteracy skills. Thus, they were the only families that did not intentionally set time apart to teach the children new vocabulary or read with them.

Cultural Practices

Cultural practices cannot be separated from language learning/teaching practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Duff, 2015). Parents across the three families used cultural practices to support their children’s development of their bilingualism and biliteracy in Yoruba and English. At the same time, they also instilled in their children Yoruba ethics and cultural values. In this manner, these parents used their cultural practices to connect their children to their Yoruba identities and help them develop their language skills, especially because they were growing up in the U.S.

Moral Teachings, Poems, Proverbs, and Stories as Cultural and Literacy Practices

The focal parents used poems, folk tales, and proverbs to instill in their children the cultural values and ethics of the Yoruba community while also supporting the literacy development of their children. These parents described how their own mothers and fathers would reprimand them using proverbs in Yoruba whenever they made mistakes or offended them. Thus, they described that morally instructive proverbs, poems, and sayings were of high value for them, and as a result, this was a cultural and literacy practice they maintained with their own children.

In the Jimoh family, the father would usually start his moral teachings in English and later interpret them in Yoruba. He shared that for him a major way to help the children maintain their identity was

through instilling good morals and values in them. Below are some of the moral premises he shared with his children during observations.

- Do not shout at elders. Yoruba culture does not permit it.
- Don't say the 'P' word.
- Everyone should see you as a humble and respectful child: "Ogbodo ni irele" (you must be humble)
- Don't be stubborn; in Yoruba such children are called "Omo jagini jagan" (stubborn child)
- Ma te ile gau (do not behave like you own everyone)

In this family, the mother used poems to teach ethics to the children. For example, she used poems to teach her children about good behavior. She used both English and Yoruba to explain the overall meaning of the poem to the children and then proceeded to explain the meaning of each word in the poem.

The focal families also used folk tales to teach morals to their children. Below is a song story the mother of the Adebola family told her children. She used this song-story to teach the children the Yoruba language by explaining to them the meaning of each word. At the end of the story, the mother asked the children the moral of the story, and they replied both in English and Yoruba that it taught them to be obedient, contented, and not greedy.

The story of Ijapa and Yanibo

Ijapa is a male tortoise and husband, while Yanibo is a female tortoise and wife to Ijapa. Ijapa and his wife Yanibo did not have children, and they became worried. They went to a native doctor who told them that Ijapa should return in 7 days. Ijapa returned and was given a soup that nobody except his wife should eat. As Ijapa was going home, the aroma of the soup enticed him, and he disobeyed the native doctor and ate part of the soup, against the warning of the herbalist. Suddenly, his stomach began to swell up like a pregnant woman's. So, they went back to the herbalist to ask for forgiveness and a cure. Then, he started singing:

Baba alawo mo ma bebe (native doctor I have come to apologize)
Alugbirin - (onomatopoeic response)
Oni n mama, mu owo ba enu (you warned me not to put my hands in my mouth)
Alugbirin
Oni n mama mu ese bae nu (you warned me not to put my legs in my mouth)
Alugbirin
Gbongbo lo yo mi gere (the tree root made me fall)
Alugbirin
Mo mu owo kano be mo mu kan enu (then I touched the soup and put it in my mouth)
Alugbirinrin
Mo boju wo iku, ori gbento (then I looked at my stomach and it is growing)
Alugbirin
Baba alawo mow a bebe, alugbirin (native doctor I've come to apologize)

Then the native doctor told Ijapa that there was no cure for what happened to him. In addition, the families also used proverbs to teach the children about ethical values while helping them to learn new vocabulary and language structures. Below are some examples of proverbs used by focal families.

Eni ba jale leekan, to ba da aran bori, aso ole lo da bora.

(This proverb emphasizes that stealing is bad.)

Ijakumo ki rinde osan, eni a bire ki rinde oru.

(Children born in good homes do not wander around in the night.)

Agutan to b aba aja in a je igbe.

(You become like the friends you move with.)

Religious & Social Practices

Activities such as praying in Yoruba, studying the Bible and the Quran, and teaching religious practices to the children were also part of the ways Yoruba parents supported their children in learning their languages and developing their cultural and religious identities. In the Adebola Family, for example, since both parents were Christian, they taught their children how to pray the Christian way in Yoruba and how to sing Yoruba Christian songs, as the field notes below show:

Mom said, “clap for Jesus”- “E patewo fun Jesu” and she repeated it in Yoruba too. The children were asked to read their Bible in English and their parents translated it for them in Yoruba. Kemi read the story of Moses. Dad corrected the words she could not pronounce well and used the recast to correct words she had mispronounced.

In the Oluronbi Family, the parents also used the Bible to help the children learn new Yoruba words. In addition, their children watched cartoons with Christian messages. This was used, as the parents commented, to support literacy development and to strengthen Christian beliefs.

In the Jimoh family, religious teachings and practices were also intricately connected to the biliteracy development of the children. For instance, in this family, every time the father taught the children a new word or sentence structure, he always connected it to Yoruba culture and the Quran (field notes). The mother was in charge of teaching children their religious practices (for example, she taught children how to do ablutions, the act of washing one’s body as part of a religious ritual) and how to pray in an Islamic way. All these practices were taught in English and then translated to Yoruba for the children.

Discussion

For New Literacy Studies, a “literacy event” represents the social context in which people interact with each other and written texts via reading and writing activities (Barton, 2012). The data in this study shows how focal parents engaged in a range of literacy events that reflected their social contexts. These literacy events were rule-governed, as they involved specific desired outcomes; however, what is significant is that they were not confined to formal education settings but occurred around the home (Barton, 2012).

Within the practices examined in this study, an intricate link between language and culture is noticable. For instance, when the families watched Yoruba movies or cartoons, they were not utilizing this activity simply as entertainment, but parents were intentional in using this family time together to teach their children new words in Yoruba while connecting this language to English. Research has

shown, that T.V. shows, such as cartoons stimulate thinking processes, encourage discussion, and the development of communication skills (Özay Köse, 2013; Sezek et al., 2013). Children's exposure to Yoruba cartoons and movies was guided by parents, who carefully chose the content to support biliteracy and the learning of the Yorùbá culture, identity, and values (Adelowo, 2020; Melo-Pfeiffer, 2015).

He (2009) explains that heritage language learners are “socio historically connected with the target culture and yet experientially displaced from it” (p. 11); thus, in helping their children to develop bilingualism and biliteracy, all parents considered that speaking Yoruba to their children was a major way to help them learn the language and connect it to their identity. In addition, they related this language learning to Yoruba cultural knowledge through the teaching of poems, folk stories, songs and proverbs. This points to their understanding of language as key to identity building and as a means of cultural identification (Park & Sarkar, 2007; Canagarajah, 2021).

In addition, it was remarkable to witness the high regard these parents have for the Yoruba language, even while living in an English dominant environment like the U.S. For them, English was not the only language associated with success. From their own experiences, they had gathered that becoming bilingual was more important than learning English only. This understanding clearly goes against the prevalent monolingual ideologies espoused by many in the U.S. (Palmer et al., 2019), and adheres to the findings of researchers such as Falola & Afolayan (2020), who maintain that children who are able to speak in their native language and English (or the majority language) demonstrate higher academic achievement throughout their life.

Since these parents were all born in Nigeria and came to the U.S. as adults, it appears that their own engagement with literacy, diverse linguistic ideological understandings, and awareness of the important role of Yoruba in their own educational, personal, cultural, and academic trajectories had an impact on their consideration of the academic and linguistic prospects of their children. Noteworthy is how their actions point to a holistic view of language and a dynamic bilingualism (García, 2009) reflected in the way they engaged with language and literacy in their homes. The data shows that these parents viewed their children as bilingual speakers with a linguistic repertoire comprised of a variety of linguistic features. Thus, instead of trying to separate the learning of the two languages (English and Yoruba), these parents engaged in translanguaging. These parents drew on the languages available to the children to maximize their communicative skills and language learning potential. Rather than focusing on what the children could not do with the language, they provided many opportunities for them to engage with literacy through a myriad of literacy events (Barton, 2012); their focus was on how children were enacting their various practices (García 2016). Translanguaging helped families to maintain a smooth flow of communication at home by encouraging the speakers to use the linguistic tools they possessed to aid with comprehension and communication. In addition, the use of translanguaging may also be an indication that these parents, as bi/multilingual speakers themselves, may have understood the importance of supporting their children as they acquired a linguistic repertoire comprised of linguistic features from multiple language systems.

In all the recorded events, the focal parents demonstrated the use of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach centered on multilingualism (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021) that validated and humanized the bilingual and biliterate development of their children and their learning processes (García & Leiva, 2014). The focal parents showed preferences towards the children's bilingual ability, which concurs with what Wilson's (2021) study found regarding parental language ideologies. According to Wilson (2021), parental ideologies regarding language learning appear to have evolved in favor of more positive attitudes towards language mixing and more fluid linguistic practices.

The findings from this study offer possibilities to consider how the use of translanguaging at home can be a significant way to counter the monolingual bias present in U.S. school contexts and education policy (Fishman, 2013). As Palmer et al. (2019) state, “we must make ongoing efforts to interrogate and transform existing power structures, especially considering that U.S. schools operate within and are shaped by a context defined by English hegemony” (p. 124). We argue that the parents in this study were actively engaging in efforts to contest monolingual approaches to bilingualism, in which languages are kept strictly separated, by using their own bi/multilingual learning experiences to support their children’s development of bilingualism and biliteracy.

Another important aspect of the findings is how these parents considered language learning as part of engaging in the community. Since these families were living in the U.S., and the children were immersed in the language and culture associated with the English language while at school, the parents deliberately chose to focus on creating ways for the children to also engage with the language and culture of their homeland. Moreover, their consideration of language as a shared property of the community seems to have encouraged them to teach their children common values of their culture, at times relying on religious texts such as the Bible and the Quran. This was done to support their children’s understanding of their culture and community norms and ensuring their successful participation in it (Akintayo, 2009; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Salami et al., 2017). For these parents, there was no separation between learning the Yoruba language and engaging with the community of Yoruba speakers. In this regard, Clark (2009) reminds us that the complex interrelationship between globalization, multilingualism, and identity can be better appreciated by uncovering the multiple ways in which individuals engage and invest in representations of languages and identities in their everyday lives. As languages become detached from their traditional places, because they mobilize with people, the language resources and people’s repertoires play a significant role in individuals’ interactions and their acquisition of their culture and identity in their new environments (Borland, 2006; Canagarajah, 2021; Tovares & Kamwangamalu, 2017; Blommaert, 2003; Heller, 2003).

Finally, it is important to highlight how the support these parents provided for their children through home literacy practices, cultural practices, and community involvement was key in supporting the children’s bilingual and biliteracy development in an English-dominated environment (Schwartz & Verschik, 2013). These parents’ actions demonstrate how Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) sociocultural theory operates. In these families, the gap between their children’s current and future linguistic competence was bridged by assistance from others. Learning demands social interaction so that the learner can internalize knowledge out of external action and interactions. In the process of language learning, a variety of internal developmental functions are activated; however, this process can only happen when the child interacts with other peers or the adults in the surrounding environment (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Conclusion and Limitations

This study investigated the home literacy and cultural practices of three Yoruba-speaking families living in the U.S. Midwest. The study identified a range of home literacy and cultural practices employed by the focal parents to support the development of their children’s bilingualism and biliteracy while living in an English-dominant environment. Considering that there is a dearth of research examining the linguistic and cultural practices of African immigrant families living in the U.S., and even less research has been conducted with Yoruba speaking families, this study is of great significance.

This research inquiry opened a window that allowed us to see how the focal families devised different ways to support the bilingualism and biliteracy development of their children at home. These homes were spaces for rich literacy practices guided by the family's cultural heritage and norms (Dixon & Wu, 2014). The study shows how these parents understood the inextricable connection between language and culture and used this awareness to support the linguistic and socio-cultural development of their children. The findings from this study can be used as resources to support other immigrant families that might be experiencing similar circumstances in other sociocultural contexts. In addition, they can be helpful for school communities in the U.S. as they support the learning journeys of multilingual and multicultural learners.

Lastly, it is important to note that this study includes a very small sample of participants, who are living in a specific geographical region of the U.S. Thus, we do not intend to generalize the findings to other populations or locales. Nevertheless, we still consider that these findings advance the existent understanding of home cultural and literacy practices of African immigrant families and offer important knowledge to bridge the gap between school and home literacy practices. Further research is needed to investigate if there is a difference in the literacy and cultural practices of parents of African descent, who have been born in the U.S., versus those born in Africa. Research should also consider whether there is a difference in the investment of immigrant parents teaching children born in the U.S. compared with teaching children born outside the U.S. Finally, we deem important the research that investigates the experiences of African children to ascertain how they make sense of their own sociocultural and language learning processes.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interests were reported by the authors.

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