This article is a companion to "Family Language Planning with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children: Fostering Multilingual Development" on page 8 of this issue.

Grandparents, Parents, Children—and Four Languages: A Deaf Family's Story

By Norma Morán and Franklin C. Torres

Despite different childhood experiences—primarily differences centered around language access—both of us felt included in our large Spanish-speaking families and grew up with a strong sense of cultural identity and values. Now as we raise our three children together, this is what we want for them as well—a sense of cultural identity and pride … and fluency in at least four languages.

Franklin's Story

I grew up in Lima, Peru, a deaf boy in a Deaf family. Our home language—the language of my younger brother, my parents, an aunt, and a cousin—was Lengua de Señas Peruana (Peruvian Sign Language, or LSP). I went to La Inmaculada on the outskirts of our city. Established in 1936, it was the first deaf school to be established in our country. Naturally I was bilingual, learning informal spoken Spanish as I socialized with hearing children near my home; using LSP within my home; and using written Spanish in formal interactions with hearing people, including hearing family members. I enrolled in a hearing high school as La Inmaculada offered only primary education and there were no high schools for deaf students, and I tried to succeed that first year without interpreters. However, this proved impossible. At age 17, I immigrated alone to the United States. First, I attended St. Rita School for the Deaf in Cincinnati, Ohio, then I transferred to the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) in Washington, D.C. Learning English and American Sign Language (ASL) simultaneously required a steep learning curve; however, I was armed with a strong linguistic foundation as I was already bilingual in LSP and Spanish. These helped me in learning ASL and

Photos courtesy of Norma Morán and Franklin C. Torres

Norma Morán, MA, is an active member of several organizations, including the National Advisory Group for the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), the Maryland/DC chapter of Hands & Voices, the National Advocacy Organization for Parents of Deaf/Hard of Hearing Children, the Latino Deaf Hard of Hearing Association of the Metro Area DC, and the Kendall Parent Teacher Association. She has worked in the Peace Corps in Kenya, the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., and at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. She currently contracts with Linguabee, a sign language interpreting agency. In 2018, Morán co-authored *Universal Design for Learning to Help All Children Read: Promoting Literacy for Learners with Disabilities*, a toolkit for USAID and the Global Reading Network. She has given numerous presentations to a wide variety of organizations and institutions.

Above: Torres and Morán often share storybooks written in Spanish with their children to support their sons' growing vocabulary. Here, Torres shares a story that offers the text printed in both Spanish and English.

English.

I graduated from MSSD and went on to attend Gallaudet University, earning a bachelor's degree in Spanish with a minor in education, a master's degree in deaf education, and, eventually, a doctoral degree in postsecondary and adult education.

Norma's Story

I was born deaf to a hearing family in Santa Ana, El Salvador. My young mother did not know I was deaf until I was 2 years old, just as El Salvador was beginning its descent into a chaotic civil war. Determined to do what was best for me, my mother took me to visit the school for the deaf in San Salvador, an hour south of Santa Ana. I can't remember much about the visit. However, the school was not what my mother thought, and the conditions there appalled her; she could not bear the thought of sending her young daughter to that school.

Faced with the deepening civil war and a school that appeared woefully inadequate, my mother decided to seek better opportunities in the United States. My family immigrated to Reno, Nev., when I was 3.5 years old. Almost immediately, I began attending preschool, part of a public school program in which the Total Communication philosophy was supported. Having received no systematic linguist input at all, I was language deprived. Nevertheless, I learned quickly; on the second day, I was apparently able to begin to express myself, signing "cookie." My mom began learning sign language, and then my sister—my parents' second deaf child—was born.

I began college at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y., where I had my first life-changing exposure to ASL. After graduation, I joined the Peace Corps, serving in Kenya. For three years, I worked in a deaf school in a small town using Kenyan Sign Language with my students. Upon completing my service, I returned to the United States for graduate education at American University in Washington, D.C.

Franklin C. Torres, PhD, assistant professor in the English Department at Gallaudet University, teaches developmental English and general studies. He is a native of Peru and came to the United States when he was 17 years old. Torres obtained his doctoral degree in postsecondary and adult education from Capella University in Minneapolis, Minn. His doctoral dissertation, *An Examination of Literacy Experiences in First Generation Deaf Latino College Students*, is the first known study that explores the experiences of deaf first generation Latinos who have graduated from college. Torres has presented at local, national, and international conferences and recently published an article related to deaf Latino/a/x college students. He is actively involved in various organizations at the local, national, and international levels.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at *Norma.Moran@gmail.com* and *Franklin.Torres@gallaudet.edu*, respectively.

Today—Children, Work, Activism, and Four Languages

We are determined to give our children the languages that are their birthright. Reyna, our first child, was born hearing. She attended a Spanish immersion program in elementary school, speaks Spanish with her maternal grandparents, and signs with us. Ramón, our second child, was born deaf. Accordingly, we agreed that each of us would use our native sign language with him—Mama would use ASL and Papa would use LSP. However, when Teófilo, our third child, was born deaf, we realized that we needed to develop a plan for being more intentional and thoughtful with our children's language exposure. We agreed that we wanted all our children to achieve native fluency in LSP, ASL, and English and become comfortable in Spanish. We would continue with what we had started—Papa would continue to use LSP at home while Mama would continue to use ASL. Ramón and Teófilo, now in kindergarten and preschool, respectively, would also learn English as well as be exposed to ASL on a daily basis at their school and through their friends in the Deaf community.

We have found that our hearing daughter and our deaf sons require different strategies for Spanish language learning. Reyna has been learning and using Spanish since elementary school. Ramón and Teófilo have focused on learning the written form of Spanish, and this has occurred mostly within our home. We have been using multiple children's books and flashcards, all in printed Spanish, to support our sons' growing vocabulary. We plan to adapt our language planning to increase the sophistication of their printed material as they begin achieving reading ability in English.

Our children also use LSP with Franklin's father, who lives in our home, and they refer to him with the LSP sign for "grandfather." At 3 years old, both Ramón and Teófilo were able to fingerspell and write *abuelo*, the Spanish word for "grandfather," as well. Their abuelo is their secondary caregiver so they have a close bond with him, resulting in their continuous exposure to LSP. His wife, Franklin's mom and their *abuela*, passed away before our children were born. Perhaps it shows the depth of their linguistic understanding that when they refer to her, they do so with LSP signs.

Our children use ASL to refer to Nana and Tito, Norma's parents. They can fingerspell their names in ASL and write their names in Spanish. When writing cards, they know to write "Nana" and "Tito" instead of "Abuelo" and "Abuela." We encourage our children to fingerspell in both languages, knowing that fingerspelling is an important skill. Whether they are learning English or Spanish—or any other written language—fingerspelling helps deaf and hard of hearing children to master reading in the targeted language. The alphabets are nearly identical, with the primary difference being the addition of shape or motion to signify Spanish accent marks (e.g., ñ).

Although bilingual and multilingual children may mix

Below left and right: Teófilo signs "abuela" (grandmother) as his mama looks on.

Right: Ramón chats with his mama about his *abuelo* (grandfather).

languages, this does not mean they are confused (Reguenaud, 2009). For instance, occasionally Ramón and Teófilo would fingerspell "Abuela" when they meant "Abuelo," then they would self-correct by fingerspelling the correct word. Similarly, they would fingerspell "Abuelo" when they meant Tito, then again correct themselves. In bilingual homes, children typically use one language more than another. At this time, ASL remains Ramón and Teófilo's primary language due to attending a bilingual school and being involved in events in the Deaf community. We understand at this point not to expect our children to be balanced bilinguals; that is okay because we encourage active learning of languages in various ways. Ramón and Teófilo already know the difference between LSP and ASL, and they will become more sophisticated with their multi-language usage as they grow older. English, we recognize, will be another primary language for them as they grow and begin to read and develop fluency.

Historically, there has been robust research and initiatives in bilingual education for deaf students, yet minimal research has been done on multilingualism in deaf children (Pizzo, 2016). Despite this, we are convinced that there is no limit to the number of languages a child—deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing—should learn. There are benefits to being a multilingual family. Being able to converse with all family members in their preferred languages allows our children to develop strong relationships with both sides of our family and maintain connection to the culture and community that is their heritage. Further, research shows that children who are bilingual or multilingual demonstrate better self-control than their monolingual peers (Kovács & Mehler, 2009).

Both of us feel fortunate to have grown up in culturally accessible households. This culminates in possessing a strong cultural identity that we want to pass on to our children—along with ASL, LSP, English, and Spanish.

References

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