

6-2018

# Somali-English Bilingualism: Somali Parents' Beliefs and Strategies for Raising Bilingual Children

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**Somali-English Bilingualism: Somali Parents' Beliefs and Strategies  
for Raising Bilingual Children**

by

Abdirahman Ikar

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in

English: Teaching English as a Second Language

June, 2018

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## **Abstract**

The American Midwest is home to a large number of refugees from Somalia. Numerous studies have explored immigrant communities' beliefs and strategies for bilingual development of their children. However, there has only been one study (Abikar, 2013) that explored this topic from the perspective of Somali parents. The aim of this qualitative study was to look at first-generation Somali parents' beliefs and strategies for bilingual development of their children. 10 first-generation Somali parents were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions. 14 major themes related to their beliefs and strategies were found. Parents in this study perceived a strong relationship between their children's heritage language and family communication and identity. While acknowledging their important role in children's heritage language maintenance, parents perceived school as a major factor in their children's subtractive bilingualism. They expressed their beliefs about the positive impact of bilingualism and their desire for their children to also be literate in Somali. Parents also discussed the role they believed Somali weekend schools should play. Their strategies for bilingual development included requiring only Somali to be spoken in the home, exposing kids to media in Somali, and trips back to Somalia.

### **Acknowledgements**

All praise and thanks are to Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. James Robinson, for being a valuable source of knowledge on heritage language maintenance. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Choonkyong Kim, for her essential insight on qualitative studies and my third reader, Dr. Rami Amiri, for providing a unique perspective from outside the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). I thank all the members of my thesis committee for their encouragement, time, and feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Marya Teutsch-Dwyer for providing excellent reading material in the field of bilingual development. I thank my mentor, Abdulaziz Mohamed, for introducing me to this program and advising me throughout my coursework. I thank all of the TESL faculty at St. Cloud State University for their commitment to producing the next generation of ELL teachers and my colleagues for their encouragement and counsel. I also thank my participants for sharing such personal information with me and making time to meet with me.

While the coursework for this program took two years to complete, there are many people who made this educational endeavor possible. I would like to thank my father, Mohamed Ikar, for establishing a culture of education in our home. I would also like to thank my mother, Fatma Buwe Sidi, for her endless strength in raising me and valuable advice throughout my life. Additionally, I would like to thank all of my older siblings for supporting me and being excellent role models. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife and closest friend, Madiha, for her encouragement and support throughout this program and our two daughters, Maryam and Aasiyah, for inspiring me and having patience with me.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction/Problem Statement**

### **Introduction**

Minnesota is undoubtedly home to the largest Somali community in the United States. Of the 83,844 Somali-born residents living throughout the United States, 25,027 live in Minnesota (American Community Survey, 2015). Many Somalis who are parents want their children to be bilinguals who speak Somali and English. Some of these Somali parents have expressed sadness when discussing that their children are no longer able to speak Somali (Minnesota Department of Education, 2003). Bilingualism also has many potential advantages in areas such as communication, culture, cognition, character, curriculum, and employment (Baker & Sienkewicz, 2000). These are areas that educators also take interest in. In other words, bilingualism can offer benefits to parents who want to preserve their culture and educators who want children to succeed academically. Parents play a large role in developing bilingual students, so it is important to understand their beliefs toward bilingualism and what practices they establish in accordance with their beliefs.

### **Research Questions**

Currently, there is a dearth of information available through academic studies on what first generation Somali parents' beliefs are about bilingualism and how they conduct themselves with their children based on these beliefs. Up to now, there has only been one small-scale study on Somali parents' perceptions of the language maintenance of their children (Abikar, 2013). However, this study did not explore the parents' views in depth. There are studies that explored bilingual children in communities other than the Somali community (Kung, 2013; Lao, 2004; Lee, 2013; Schechter & Bayley, 1997). However, these studies may or may not be generalizable to Somali-American children. These studies will be discussed further in the literature review

section of this paper. The goals of this particular study are to identify what Somali parents believe about bilingualism and how these beliefs manifest themselves in the home-life of their children. These goals are summarized in the following research questions:

1. What are first generation Somali parents' beliefs regarding bilingualism?
2. What strategies do these parents use with their own children to encourage the bilingual development of Somali and English?

These research questions will be answered by interviewing parents who are members of local mid-sized Midwestern cities. The methodology of this study will be discussed in detail later in the methodology section.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore first-generation Somali parents' beliefs and attitudes about bilingualism. The first section of the literature review will give background information on Somalia. The second section will gloss over Somali family structure followed by a discussion on Somali immigration to the United States in the third section. The fourth section will discuss bilingual development. The fifth section will look at the causes of language loss, and the sixth section will discuss the consequences of language loss. The seventh section will discuss literature on Somali perceptions of language loss in their children. The eighth section will discuss parents from other language communities' beliefs about heritage language maintenance and the ninth section will discuss strategies for heritage language maintenance. The 10<sup>th</sup> and final section will briefly summarize language policies in the United States.

### Somalia

Somalia is a nation in East Africa east of Ethiopia. Somalia also borders Djibouti to the northwest, Kenya to the southwest, the Gulf of Aden to the north, and the Indian Ocean to the west. Putman and Noor (1983) discussed the earliest mentions of this region thoroughly. They asserted that the first mention of the area that constitutes modern-day Somalia in writing was in the year 60 CE in a Greek manuscript titled, *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, which served as a guide for sailors wishing to explore the region famous for its frankincense and myrrh. They further stated that Ptolemy's *Geography* noted that there was contact between people of modern-day Somalia and merchants of various nationalities including: Egyptians, Phoenicians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, migrants from the Arabian Peninsula began to settle in the coastal areas, and Mogadishu became a large seaport that facilitated the transfer of goods between Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East (Lee, 2014). Ibn Battuta, the prolific traveler,

visited Mogadishu centuries later in 1331 and described an enormous city whose inhabitants were largely commercial traders (Hamdun & King, 1975.)

In 1869, the Suez Canal was opened and European interest in East Africa led to Somalis being ruled by foreign powers by the end of the century; the British ruled north-central Somalia and northeast Kenya (which is inhabited by Somalis), the French ruled the area that is now known as Djibouti, the Italians ruled southern Somalia, and the Ethiopians ruled over the Ogaden (Putman & Noor 1983). In 1949, after World War II, the UN decided that Italian Somaliland would be under an international trusteeship for 10 years followed by independence (Lewis, 2004). In 1960, British Somaliland also gained independence and united with Italian Somaliland to form an independent democratic civilian-run Somalia (Lewis, 2004).

In 1969, after almost 10 years of Somali democracy, General Muhammad Siyad Barre led a bloodless coup against the civilian government and established the authoritarian Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) which would adopt Scientific Socialism and ally with the Soviet Union (Lewis, 2003). An important accomplishment of the Siyad Barre regime was the introduction of written Somali. Up until that time, Somali had been written in various orthographies, while all official government correspondence and education was in Italian, Arabic, or English (Andrzejewski, 1974). In 1972, the SRC announced the introduction of an official orthography for Somali which would be based on the Latin script (Andrzejewski, 1974). A highly successful urban literacy campaign ensued. Government officials were compulsory to take intensive literacy courses after which they would be assessed and required to pass in order to retain their positions (Lewis, 2003). Somali became the only language of instruction in elementary schools and was emphasized as a subject in intermediate schools, secondary schools, and the national university (Andrzejewski, 1974). Adult literacy classes in urban areas attracted

large numbers of attendees, and the following year, thousands of secondary school students and teachers were sent to nomadic areas as part of the rural literacy campaign (Lewis, 2003). A year later, the literacy rate improved from about 5% to almost 70% (Hoben, 1988, p. 118).

Although the Siyad Barre regime enjoyed popular support from Somalis in the early years of his rule, eventually, rebel groups formed with the aim of replacing him. In 1991, the United Somali Congress (USC) kicked Siyad Barre out of Mogadishu, his last remaining stronghold (Lewis, 2003). Competing parties attempted to fill the power vacuum and destroyed all public institutions in the process (Abdi, 1998). Mogadishu became a war zone where thousands were killed and the starvation spread throughout the rest of Somalia.

### **Somali Family Structure**

Strong family relationships are seen as an integral part of Somali culture (Heitritter, 1999). However, the Somali notion of family differs from dominant view in American society. To Somalis, a family traditionally included what is seen as extended family in mainstream American society such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and others (Boyle & Ali, 2009). Somali society was traditionally patriarchal with respect for elders being essential since elders were seen as authority figures (Lewis, 2003). It is important to note, however, that immigration to the US has had an effect on Somali family structure and there are noticeable differences between Somali-American families and Somali families in Somalia (Boyle & Ali, 2009).

### **Somalia Immigration to the US**

Somali immigration to the US can be described as occurring in two distinct waves. The first wave of Somali immigrants to the US arrived in the 1980s as international students, refugees, and asylum seekers to area areas such as Washington D.C. and New York City (Kapteinjs & Arman, 2004). At this point, armed rebel groups existed but the turmoil in Somalia

had not yet reached the capital, Mogadishu. Once the capital went into anarchy in late 1990, the second substantially larger wave of Somali refugees was forced to leave Somalia and live in refugee camps in neighboring countries for years before many of them arrived in the US (Katpeijns & Arman, 2004). In Minnesota, it was not until 1993 that the first Somalis arrived directly from refugee camps (Darboe, 2003). In 2015, 7% of the worldwide Somali migrant population live in the US (Conner & Krogstad, 2016) and Minnesota is undoubtedly the state with the most Somali immigrants.

### **Bilingual Development**

There is more than way for a child to become bilingual. Paradis, Genesee, and Crago (2011) posited that bilingual children can be characterized as simultaneous bilinguals or successive/sequential bilinguals. Simultaneous bilinguals refer to children who are exposed to two languages from birth and develop them at the same time, while successive bilinguals are children who master one language and then afterward, learn another language (p. 6). Paradis et al. (2011) asserted that bilingual children can additionally be separated by whether they belong to a majority ethnolinguistic group or a minority linguistic group. Children who belong to a majority ethnolinguistic group speak the language that most members of the greater community speak and/or belong to the ethnic or cultural group as the majority of the community (p. 5). On the other hand, children who belong to a minority ethnolinguistic group speak the language of a minority group who belong to a minority culture that is part of the greater community (p. 6). Distinguishing between these subgroups is important because the type of bilingual development has various implications on the eventual bilingual development of the child.

Lambert (1981) was the first to distinguish between additive bilingualism and subtractive bilingualism. He defined subtractive bilingualism as “a route toward bilingualism that essentially

subtracts the home language by shifting the focus to the new, usually more prestigious, language of the host culture” and additive bilingualism as characterizing “those who are at home and well rooted in their own language and culture but who delve seriously into the mastery of a second or foreign language” (p. 5). In the first case, the native language is eventually subtracted, while in the latter, the native language is maintained.

Language minority immigrants who arrive as children to the US are often in subtractive bilingualism environments in which English functions as the prestigious language of the host culture. In this study, Somali-Americans are examples of language minority immigrants in subtractive bilingualism environments. Paradis et al. (2011) mentioned two specific examples of a child in an additive bilingual environment. The first example was of an American-born child born to monolingual English speakers that attended a Spanish-speaking daycare center and eventually was enrolled in a Spanish immersion program. The second example was another American-born child born to monolingual English speakers that lived as expatriates in Germany where the child attended a German school. Both of these children have no risk of losing their first language, English, while continuing to learn and speak their second languages.

### **Causes of Home Language Loss**

Language loss can happen both within a community and within an individual (Kouritzin, 1997). Language loss is described as happening with a community when the researchers are referring to the gradual loss of language through generations while, on the other hand, individual language loss refers to an individual losing the ability to speak a language regardless of which generation that individual is. Kouritzin (1997) describes the process of community language loss as typically beginning with the first-generation of immigrants who, at first, are monolingual in their minority language. The second generation typically develops bilingually, learning to speak

the home language if the parents use it. The third generation usually learns English first, but have some knowledge of the native language, and the fourth generation most likely becomes monolingual in English. Fillmore (1991) pointed out that this process began to occur even faster in recent decades with American-born children of immigrants rarely being fully proficient in their parents' language despite it being the only language they knew before entering school and the only language their parents speak.

### **Consequences of Home Language Loss**

Fillmore (1991) conducted a nationwide survey of language-minority families whose children had been enrolled in preschools that utilized English as the language of instruction. The goal of the survey was to find out how these preschool programs impacted children's language patterns. There were 1,100 families interviewed across the US. Three hundred eleven Spanish-speaking families whose children attended preschool in their primary language were also included as a comparison group. The researcher found that children in the main group spoke their home language poorly or were entirely unable to speak their home language six to eight times more than the children in the comparison group. One of the families surveyed expressed that their children were unable to communicate with their parents, and as a result, the children became alienated. The parents reported that they were ashamed of speaking their home language even though it was the only language their parents knew. Other families reported that the children no longer respected the parents because of the lack of communication between them.

Guardado (2002) conducted a qualitative study exploring the home language maintenance of Spanish (from the perspective of the parents) among Hispanic children in Vancouver. The participants in this study were two families with at least one child that was deficient in Spanish and fluent in Spanish and two families with at least one child that was fluent in both English and

Spanish. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to elicit data from the parents. The findings regarding negative consequences of home language loss were that parents thought children who lost their ability to speak their native language lost their identity, culture, moral values, and heritage. These results echoed the findings of Fillmore (1991).

The above results should not be surprising, especially as it relates to loss of identity. It is important to discuss what factors are involved in minority groups defining their ethnic identity. Schechter and Bayley (1997) listed three interacting factors: “the way individuals locate themselves within a particular social and cultural framework, the orientation of representatives of dominant groups to individuals and groups who display expected lifestyle differences, and official characterizations, such as those contained in census documents” (p. 514). Schechter and Bayley (1997) also mentioned that linguistic minority populations additionally must constantly make decisions regarding language use daily as they navigate between the dominant and minority culture. Unquestionably, language is a “powerful socializing medium” through which information such as how a society is organized and essential social knowledge is conveyed (Schiffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 172)

Kouritzin (1997) examined first language loss among 21 Canadian subjects by collecting linguistic life histories through interviews. The goal of this study was primarily to look at the consequences of losing a first language among linguistic minorities. The researcher found that losing a first language resulted in losing touch with extended family. Many of the participants said they were no longer able to keep in touch with relatives who stayed in their home countries or relatives who eventually immigrated to Canada but never learned English. Some of the participants expressed frustration at losing touch with their relatives. Numerous instances were mentioned of relatives becoming frustrated and angry at the participants for not speaking their

native language. Some participants mentioned that they began to reject their native language, and as a result, avoided spending time with relatives who insisted on speaking only the native language.

An interesting finding of Kouritzin (1997) was that participants who had been speaking their first language with their parents would sometimes be shocked that they could not communicate with other people outside of the family. Apparently, their parents had been modifying their speech so that the children could understand. One of the participants expressed shock when recollecting that she had watched home videos of herself speaking Cantonese when she was younger and couldn't understand anything from them. In situations where one of the parents did not speak English well, it became more difficult for the parents to be a part of their children's lives. Parents could no longer influence their children or just discuss their daily lives with them. One of the participants expressed his frustration and not being able to explain to his Russian non-English speaking parents what his major was because he lacked the Russian language skills to do so. Eventually, his parents passed away without ever knowing what he did for a living. Many of the participants expressed anger toward their parents for not doing more to make sure they never forgot their first language. Participants also mentioned that they felt reluctant when they were younger to associate with new immigrants that had the same cultural and linguistic background as them.

Language is undoubtedly an essential tool for cultural transmission to occur between a parent and a child (McKay & Weinstein-Shr, 1993). First-generation immigrants, in particular, have plenty of information to share with their children about their original home countries, cultural practices, and their remarkable journeys to the US. When the languages these stories are



told in our lost, so are the legacies of these immigrants. These stories cannot be transmitted and remembered without a shared language between elders and children.

As mentioned above in the previous studies, language is much more than a tool for sharing stories. McKay and Weinstein-Shr (1993) asserted that language is also a tool for leading. Sun and Edgerly mentioned (as cited in McKay & Weinstein-Shr, 1993), a purportedly bilingual meeting of the Cambodian American Association in Massachusetts. The meeting was led primarily by young Cambodian-Americans who mostly spoke English. The elders rarely said a word unless they were asked to by the younger English-speaking leaders. This led to the community losing its cultural identity by silencing the traditional wisdom and its relationship with cultural customs. McKay and Weinstein-Shr (1993) explain the result of this marginalization of the elders: “channels for cultural transmission are correspondingly diminished to the detriment, we believe, of elders and children alike” (p. 415). This is especially important in our study because of the traditional role of the elders in Somali culture. Somali elders were traditionally expected to play a large role in the community and in the education of young children (Lagacé, Charmarkeh, & Grandena, 2012).

In summary, the negative consequences of home language loss are devastating on a minority language group on a community and an individual level. While home language loss is a phenomenon that occurs often in countries such as the US where yearly immigration levels are high, it is important that these negative consequences are mitigated. Minority language communities in the US are at risk of their cultures and stories not being transmitted. Individual minority language speakers are at risk for alienation from their community and parents, frustration as a result of not being able to communicate with relatives and parents, resenting their home language, and facing identity issues. These negative consequences are similar to the impact

of mandatory boarding schools on Native-American children in which they were prevented from speaking their native languages (Adams, 1995).

### **Somali Perceptions on Somali Language Maintenance**

As mentioned in the introduction, there has only been one small-scale study done on Somali parents' perceptions of Somali language maintenance (Abikar, 2013). This study was done in the UK and involved two families. One of the families had three children (ages 4, 8, and 9) who newly arrived to the UK and other the family also had three children (ages 4, 8, and 9), but had been established in the UK for 2 years. When asked to retell two picture stories in Somali, the second group of siblings showed strong indicators of language attrition. When the researcher interviewed the parents, two main factors emerged: maintaining Somali is important and results in children retaining their identity, and Somali can be maintained by teachers teaching the children Somali and having the children visit back home. Parents specifically mentioned that Somali is important in allowing the children to communicate with their family and relatives and so that they can use Somali if they go back home. One of the parents also mentioned the importance of Somali being spoken in the home and visiting community venues where Somali is spoken. The suggestions of having Somali teachers teach Somali to the children and taking your child to venues where Somali is spoken are quite important. Kouritzin (1997) suggests that data on language attrition reveals that the strong effort a linguistic minority family to speak the first language may not be enough.

While there has been only one small-scale study focusing on Somali parents' perceptions of Somali language maintenance, the Minnesota Historical Society has collected interview data from first generation Somali immigrants of various ages on the topic of cultural preservation. The focus of this project was not specifically language loss among Somalis, but valuable insight

regarding this topic was shared by various interviewees. One of the narrators for this project, Abdisalam Adam (Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 2004a) expressed his concern for losing the Somali language:

Right now, I'm worried that when it comes to the Somali language, we seem to be losing it, and we have not done much about preserving it. I'm not aware of any institutions that the community have formed to teach it. I have not seen material being written to preserve it, so I see a real challenge there. (Transcription section, para. 1)

Another narrator, Maryan Del (MHS, 2004b), echoed the same concern for losing the Somali language:

For me, I think seventy-five percent of my time I speak English. I think maybe that is part of where we're losing a little bit of our culture. I don't blame the kids if they lose their language because when you go to American schools, you speak English *all day!* (Transcription section, para. 4)

These interviews demonstrate that Somalis are concerned about preserving the Somali language among Somalis.

### **Other Language Minority Parents' Perceptions of Bilingualism**

Multiple studies have discussed the perceptions of linguistically diverse parents regarding bilingualism and heritage language maintenance and loss. Lao (2004) conducted a study seeking to find out the main reasons why Chinese-American parents enrolled their kids in bilingual Chinese-English schools. Her findings indicated that Chinese-American parents promoted bilingual education for their children to increase career opportunities, enhance their self-image, and to be able to communicate effectively with Chinese-speaking communities. Hashimoto and Lee (2013) found that Japanese-American parents promote their children's heritage language

maintenance in order to maintain familial ties. Yan (2013), which collected data from four different groups of language communities, found that linguistically diverse parents who enrolled their children into heritage language schools wanted children to maintain their heritage language for the following reasons: “(1) To maintain cultural and religious heritage; (2) to strengthen family ties and moral values; (3) to keep connections to their own cultural and language communities; and (4) to promote bilingual skills for better job opportunities” (p. 99).

Maintaining cultural or ethnic heritage was a strong theme in studies that looked at parental perceptions on language maintenance and language loss. Schechter and Bayley (1997) mentioned a parent in their study that would correct their child whenever they did not speak the heritage language at home by saying, “no: son speak to me in Spanish, your- your language is Spanish, I'd like for you to know the language of your origin” (p. 525). Lee (2013) discussed how Korean-speaking parents in her study stated their children should speak Korean because they are Korean.

Recent research has demonstrated numerous cognitive benefits of bilingual development (Baker & Sienkewicz, 2000), and studies have shown that minority language parents sometimes acknowledge this. In Yan’s (2003) study, 83% of Arab-American parents, 68% of Chinese-American parents, 50% of Spanish-speaking American parents, and 38% of Hebrew-speaking American parents said that students maintaining their heritage language for important or very important for their academic success (p. 104).

### **Other Language Minority Parents’ Strategies for Maintaining the Heritage Language**

One of the most common strategies parents have used to maintain the heritage language for their children is by requiring them to speak only the heritage language at home. Two of the

Mexican-American families in Schechter and Bayley (1997) used this strategy to promote the heritage language. One of those families made an exception for that rule when assisting their child with homework. The researchers noted that despite the strict policy from the parents, the focal child in this study still spoke English when speaking to her brother. Kung (2013) also documented this as a strategy with Chinese-American parents and Kang (2013) discussed similar strategies Korean-American parents used. Other strategies parents used in the home included listening/watching programs in the heritage language and reading books in the heritage language (Kung, 2013; Lao, 2004; Schechter & Bayley, 1997).

Studies on heritage language have shown that there is sometimes a gap between what parents say they want and what they practice. Guardado (2002) found that some Spanish-speaking American parents said they valued their children's heritage language maintenance, but did not take steps towards that goal. Lao (2004) found that almost all Chinese-American parents in their study expected their children to speak primarily Chinese or code-switch between Chinese and English at home. However, almost half the parents spoke English some or most of the time with their children. Schechter and Bayley (1997) mentioned two families who hoped their children would be bilingual, however, the actual practices of the families did not support that goal. In both families, the parents spoke primarily English with their kids. One of the families used two strategies that resulted in limited effectiveness: they required their daughter to speak only Spanish one day a week and required her to take weekly Spanish lessons from her grandmother. The daughter made an attempt to speak Spanish the one day she was required to but struggled greatly. With her friends who did speak Spanish, she typically spoke English. Her parents disliked the lack of support from the public schools in assisting with their daughter's language maintenance. Regarding school support, the mother said:

I would think that a class, even just 30 minutes a day, where they can go in and speak only Spanish and the correct Spanish. And learn spelling and writing it and reading it. I think that would be a great impact on the children. I think as long as it's consistent that it would be wonderful. (p. 531)

The other family primarily used English to converse with their children, with the exception of endearments and specific items around the house that held importance to the family. This family described their children's Spanish abilities as a "staircase" in which the eldest child had the most exposure to Spanish and each child afterward spoke less Spanish than the previous one (p. 5.33). Brown (2011) gave some possible explanations for this *staircase* phenomenon. The first explanation she gave was that, as parents became more comfortable with their English, they spoke English more with the children. The second explanation was that parents felt disheartened about their children's heritage language maintenance as the children began to speak English more often. She pointed out that there was strong evidence in her study that the parents' language practice had changed despite what parents claimed in the interview.

Language minority parents also use outside resources to maintain their children's heritage language. The three main ways minority parents have been documented to use outside resources for language maintenance are sending their children to heritage language schools, using the church as a community resource for their children to interact with fellow heritage language speakers, and visiting the home country where the heritage language spoken. Lee (2013) mentioned how heritage language schools were appealing to parents, not only as places where the heritage language is taught, but as places where children could socialize with children who speak the same heritage language. Park and Sarkar (2007) discussed the role of the church in the heritage language maintenance of Korean-Canadian children. Korean-Canadian parents in this

study saw the church as a space for their children to enhance their Korean speaking skills.

Multiple studies (Kang, 2013; Kung, 2013; Schechter & Bayley, 1997) mentioned examples of families traveling back to their origin country which created opportunities for children to practice speaking the heritage language.

### **Language Policies in the United States**

The United States has a long history of language policies negatively impacting language minority children. Santa Ana (2004) summarized these harmful effects on the three major groups of language minority students within the US: Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos. Concerning Native Americans, he mentions that they were subjugated to English-only teaching to teach them the Anglo-American way of life for 250 years (p. 87). He went on to state that Native American children were subjugated to boarding schools where they were civilized according to the Europeans. To this day, English-only teaching is dominant in Native American educational institutions. Africans that were forcibly brought as slaves were also forbidden from speaking their native languages and isolated from others who spoke similar languages thereby accelerating their language loss (Pac, 2012). Although the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe was intended to protect the property and civil rights of Mexican-Americans, Anglo-Americans considered Mexican-Americans as a conquered people who, in Texas, were not even allowed to vote (Santa Ana, 2004). Furthermore, in Puerto Rico, the Anglo-American colonizers prioritized assimilating the native people and requiring all educational instruction to be in the English language, and by 1907, more than 80% of the island's schools used English as the only language of instruction.

These three major groups mentioned above were not the only minority language populations negatively impacted by English-only policies. Until after the Civil Rights

Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, English-only policies also targeted other linguistic groups such as Chinese, German, Irish, Eastern and Southern European immigrants, who were seen as threats to normal American values because they wanted to maintain their home languages (Pac, 2012). In 1968, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the Bilingual Education Act, acknowledged the needs of minority language students thereby giving them increased access to the curriculum and required the training of educators in ESL and bilingual education (Santa Ana, 2004). Thirty-four years after the Bilingual Education Act, in 2002, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which discouraged bilingual programs by requiring students that lacked English proficiency to be taught only in English, was signed into law (Pac, 2012). Several states have even passed specific laws that restrict the language of instruction English language learners are instructed in (Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005).



## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### Research Questions

As stated earlier, the aim of this study to investigate the following two research questions:

1. What are first-generation Somali parents' beliefs regarding bilingualism?
2. What strategies do these parents use with their own children to encourage the bilingual development of Somali and English?

### Participants

The participants in this study were 10 first-generation Somali parents in a Midwestern city whose children had attended school in the United States for a minimum of 4 years. The participants' ages ranged between 34 and 50. All the participants were married and the gender make-up was fairly even (6 males and 4 females). To protect participant confidentiality, participants were assigned letters A through J. Male participants were labeled with the letter M after their participant letter and female participants were labeled with the letter F after their participant letter. I chose 4 years as a minimum age for their children's arrival in the United States because I wanted our participants be parents of children who were proficient or nearly proficient in English and previous studies have shown that grade school L2 English learners take 4-7 years to achieve adequate oral and written skills to succeed in regular classrooms (Collier, 1987; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Selected participants were required to have indicated that they would like their children to be bilingual in order to ensure that our second research question regarding parental strategies for bilingual development could be explored.

## **Instruments and Procedures**

In order to find candidates for this study, the researcher contacted parents from a Midwestern Islamic weekend school that primarily has Somali-American students. The researcher was given contact information for parents from the principal of the school who was aware of the inclusion criteria of the study. Additionally, the researcher contacted potential candidates already known to him through his involvement with Somali-American communities in Midwestern cities. Potential candidates were then screened by the researcher over the phone to ensure they met the inclusion criteria for the study. If they did meet the criteria, individual 60 minute mostly semi-structured interviews were then scheduled.

Before the interview begins, participants signed a consent form which was also verbally explained by the researcher in English or Somali depending on the participants' language preferences. The interview was also conducted in the participants' preferred language. Participants were then asked if they have any questions or concerns before the interview began. Interviews were audio-recorded on the researcher's voice recorder smartphone application and then uploaded to the researcher's private OneDrive online account. The interview data was subsequently transcribed by the researcher and stored on the researcher's password-protected laptop. The interview questions began with demographic questions including, but not limited to: sex, age, education level, age of children, and years in the United States. These demographic questions were followed by semi-structured open-ended questions (Appendix). The interview questions were developed to focus specifically on the research questions in our study. Interviews were used as our method of data elicitation because they allow the researcher to explore issues that are difficult to observe, they allow the researcher to ask additional questions if initial answers are insufficient, and they are more likely to result in extended answers as opposed to

writing (Mackey & Gass, 2016, p. 225). Afterward, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher

### **Data Analysis**

This study utilized the grounded theory approach in order to guide the analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews. Rather than forming a hypothesis before the data is collected, the grounded theory approach encourages the development of theories based on the data that are collected; in other words, the data paves the way for the analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2016, p. 231). In accordance with this approach, the researcher did not formulate a hypothesis before conducting interviews. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher read the transcribed interviews to find emerging themes and create categories of data. As a proficient Somali speaker, the researcher decided to translate all Somali utterances from interviewees into English during the transcribing process. Themes were identified by initially reading through all the notes and transcripts and noting possible themes and topics. The researcher then considered which pieces of data fit together and whether independent categories emerged. Eventually, the researcher developed an organizational system of the interview data and developed a narrative based on this data. The steps above are an example of “open coding,” which is a process in which researchers find emerging categories and themes as they look at the data (Mackey & Gass, 2016, pp. 137-138).

## Chapter 4: Discussion/Findings

A number of themes related to the two research questions were identified in the data analysis process. Those themes will be discussed below in this section. Additionally, there will be excerpts from the interviewees provided as evidence to substantiate these themes. The following 14 themes were identified: 1) heritage language maintenance and ethnic identity, 2) school as a reason for their children's heritage language loss, 3) Preschool's immediate impact on children 4) parents' role in heritage language maintenance, 5) family relationships as a motivation for heritage language maintenance, 6) language loss and returning to Somalia, 7) bilingualism and increased employment opportunities, 8) intellectual benefits of bilingualism, 9) heritage language literacy, 10) the role of weekend Quranic schools, 11) the role of English, 12) the heritage language only policy, 13) other home strategies for heritage language maintenance, and 14) trips back home as a heritage language maintenance strategy. The first eleven themes relate to the first research question we had regarding parents' perceptions of bilingualism. The last three themes address the second research question regarding parents' strategies for bilingual development.

**Theme One: First-generation Somali parents want their children to maintain their heritage language because they see associate heritage language with identity.** The theme of heritage language maintenance and ethnic or cultural identity appeared with nine of the participants. Participants reported that they want their children to maintain Somali because their children are Somali. They consistently connected their children speaking Somali to their Somali identity. This theme was expressed throughout many of the interviews, sometimes more than once.

**Participant A-M:** We come from Somalia, and I don't want them to lose their identity. If they lose my language, they might also lose their identity. Most of the children living in the United States who are Somali, they did not fully convert to the American culture and they leave their parents culture behind and that makes them confused. If you do not know where you come from or who you are—if you lose your identity, you are almost nothing. It is very important that they maintain their culture.

**Participant B-M:** I've been trying to saying to my children that this is your language, and you need to speak it...I want my children to be bilingual so that they don't forget their culture.

**Participant D-F:** I want my children to be bilingual so that they don't forget their heritage, their identity, their mother tongue, and who they are...A person has to speak their mother tongue because, if you lose your mother tongue, you lose your heritage. These children—they will get married and when they get married, maybe we won't be here. Then when those children grow up, if both parents don't speak the language of where they come from, then they lose it—kind of like the dinosaurs, it comes to an end—so that's what we are fighting for now: for our identity for our language.

**Participant E-M:** Their parents are Somali. Where they are from is Somalia. It connects them to their culture and history. It's good that children speak the language of where their parents are from.

**Participant F-F:** My children—even if they were born here—they are still Somali, and I want them to speak their language...It is a part of their identity, and it is a part of their culture.

**Participant G-M:** We came here to another world, that speaks a different language, but we have our own heritage language, and we have to keep it. I want my kids to speak Somali so they do not lose their heritage.

***Participant H-M:*** I want my children to be maintain Somali because they are Somali, and this is their roots. This is where they are from.

***Participant I-M:*** I want my children to be bilingual because it is important that a person knows their origin and where they're from. I do not want that if I died today that my child says I don't know where my dad was from. Even Obama went back to Kenya to meet his relatives.

Somali parents' perception of the strong relationship between language and identity in this study echo the previous findings with regard to Somali parents in Abikar (2013). Other immigrant groups expressed similar perceptions. These findings match previous studies on parental perceptions of Korean-American parents (Lee, 2013) and parental perceptions of Mexican-American parents (Schechter & Bayley, 1997).

**Theme Two: Some first-generation Somali parents perceive school as one of the reasons for their children's heritage language loss.** Four of the participants mentioned school as a reason for their children's heritage language loss. Additionally, parents also identified school as the first reason for heritage language loss in the family.

***Participant A-M:*** Kids go to school and then go to after-school programs that use English... so they cannot maintain Somali.

***Participant B-M:*** Before going to school they used to speak Somali, especially the oldest one. When the first one started school, he started speaking English, and the next child started speaking English even at home. Then they started speaking English with the first child... The children are going to school and gone at school for almost 8 hours. The time between children coming home and then going to sleep is so short and children still have to prepare school work for the next day.

***Participant C-F:*** The biggest issue when it comes to maintaining Somali is starting school. Because it's a new language, kids want to practice or showing off speaking English, so when they come home, they want to speak more English which takes them away from speaking Somali, and if there are younger kids, then this creates a problem.

***Participant F-F:*** An obstacle to children maintaining Somali is school. Monday through Friday, they go to school, so they are away about 6 to 8 hours a day. During the time they are at school, they are speaking English.

These findings reiterate Maryan Del's (MHS, 2004b) statement about children understandably losing their Somali as a result of being in school speaking and English so much of their time. One of the parents suggested that Somali be taught in school as a subject in order to help the children maintain their heritage language. Participant F-F stated "I think Somali should be taught at school. The city next to us, they teach Chinese language. Because our children are gone at school 6 to 7 hours, they should learn Somali at school as a subject." This statement is similar to Schechter and Bayley (1997) which mentioned a parent who disliked the level of school support in maintaining their children's heritage language and recommended their heritage language be taught as a subject.

**Theme Three: First-generation Somali parents quickly realize the impact preschool has on their children's heritage language maintenance.** Four of the parents mentioned preschool having an immediate negative impact on their children's heritage language maintenance. This led to parents making tough decisions about whether or not the next child that becomes preschool age should attend preschool. Parents discussed the factors that they considered as they made these difficult decisions. This demonstrates the dilemma that immigrant parents face. Preschool does prepare children for school, but at expensive cost: the children's

loss of their heritage language which then has several of the negative consequences documented by multiple studies we previously discussed (Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 1997; McKay & Weinstein-Shr, 1993). Additionally, parents see letting their children attend preschool as a mistake they cannot undo. Participant B-M discusses how he eventually sent the youngest child to preschool because the home already became dominated by English. Ironically, he explained that the home was already dominated by English because the previous children had gone to preschool.

**Participant B-M:** My children attended preschool. At that time, I didn't know this will affect their Somali but after my oldest ones went to preschool, I realize that it led to them forgetting Somali quickly. With my youngest child, I tried to not send him to preschool because I had bad experiences with the older ones forgetting Somali. I didn't send him to preschool when he was 3, but at 4, I didn't see any improvement in his Somali because the older children were speaking to him in English, but then I said this isn't working for me. If I hadn't sent the older ones to preschool, maybe this would help the youngest one, but now they were all speaking English at home. When my youngest was 4, and I saw that he was already dominant in English, I realized there was no point in having him at home. The kids were already speaking English, so I thought he might as well go to preschool and at least learn to share and sit in a classroom. There was no additional benefit of having him stay at home.

**Participant D-F:** My oldest was speaking fluent Somali until the age of 4 because I refused for her to go to preschool and I would only speak Somali to her at home. We did preschool activities at home.

**Participant G-M:** I thought preschool would be good for them. When the kid is preschool age, they call you and recruit you. Preschool is a problem with maintaining the home language. I



send my child at 3.5 to preschool. That was a mistake. The good thing about preschool is that the child learns how sit in a classroom and make lines, but the downside is that they are going away from your own language. I noticed this with my youngest child. They would come back from preschool speaking English.

*Participant H-M:* I had the younger go to preschool because the older one had a tough time adjusting to school so we thought it might stop those struggles. We felt like if she went to preschool, she'd comprehend English better. She didn't need to go EL classes after a year, but this caused her Somali to disappear.

**Theme Four: First-generation Somali parents believe they have a large role in their children's heritage language maintenance.** While some Somali parents identify school as a reason for their children's heritage language loss, all of the parents reported that they themselves have a large role in the heritage language maintenance of their children.

*Participant A-M:* I play a big role in my children's Somali and English development. I try to teach them both languages. Both parents need to do that.

*Participant B-M:* My role as a parent is to show them that Somali is important to them—that it's something that has value—that it's not something that is useless and lowly. I have to show them by example by speaking Somali. The role of mom is the same.

*Participant C-F:* Parents play a big role in our children's Somali development. It's up to you early on to decide what language you are going to communicate with your children in.

*Participant D-F:* My job is to encourage my children with their Somali and to help them if they need help. I do think that I play the most important role. That should apply equally to their dad.

**Participant E-M:** It's our responsibility to make sure the children maintain Somali. Mom and dad have an equal responsibility.

**Participant F-F:** I play a big role in my children speaking Somali by speaking Somali to them, reading in Somali to them, taking them to places where Somalis congregate, and taking them to see their extended family. I have the biggest role in my children maintaining Somali.

**Participant G-M:** I am the head of the household so I have to supervise that the child's language is not going away. Mom's role is also very important because she has to do the same thing.

**Participant H-M:** The role that I play is speaking Somali at home. I have to implement techniques so I can teach them Somali and have more Somali spoken in the home.

**Participant I-M:** My role as a parent is to speak Somali to my children to make sure that they can maintain it. Children look up to their parents and do what they do. It is important for us to give the child a basis when the child is young, so that way things will be easier when the child gets older. For example, if you tell your child not to lie or not to smoke and you smoke and you lie then it doesn't work. God criticizes those in the Quran who command others to do what they themselves do not do. The language maintenance is up to the parents and not up to the community. The community begins at home. I need to do my role so that I can affect change on the community. Then that is how the community is built.

**Participant J-F:** My role is to speak Somali to them and tell them stories in Somali. This responsibility is also on the father.

First-generation Somali parents believe they have an important role in making sure their children maintain Somali. Most of the parents specifically mentioned speaking Somali to their children as one of their responsibilities associated with this role. Furthermore, the data

demonstrated that Somali parents believe that speaking Somali will lead to their children maintaining Somali. Despite this belief, many Somali parents reported that they speak to their children in Somali, yet their children reply in English. While all the participants highlighted the role of the parents in children maintaining their heritage language, they differed as to who how important the role of the parents is when in comparison to the roles of others. Participant I-M, differing from the other participants, asserted that only the parents had a role in the children's Somali language maintenance.

While all of the Somali parents emphasized the importance of their role in maintaining the heritage language, some parents stated that the mother's role was more important than the father's role with respect to heritage language maintenance. This might be because many Somalis have traditionally viewed women as more dominant in managing the home, while men were dominant in the public sphere (Heitritter, 1999). Out of the three participants who stated that mothers have a larger role, two of them (Participants D and F) are mothers themselves.

**Participant D-F:** I do believe that moms play a bigger role in the language development of their children. The native language is called the *mother tongue* because the mothers are closer to the children, especially when they are young. That's when they learn more.

**Participant F-F:** From my experience, the mom always has a bigger role in the child speaking Somali regardless of how much the husband loves his kids. Even if moms are working, they are more involved in their children's lives than husbands and fathers. This is all moms in general and not just Somali moms.

**Participant G-M:** Most of the kids are closer to their mom, so if she speaks English, they will speak English.

**Theme Five: First-generation Somali parents want their children to maintain Somali so that they can communicate well with other members of their family.** Seven of the participants mentioned the importance of their children maintaining Somali in order to communicate with their family and extended family. Participants saw communication with family as critical and associated that with children maintaining Somali. They mentioned how children's loss of their heritage language led to a breakdown in communication.

*Participant B-M:* There are a lot of problems and a lot of difficulties because children are not speaking Somali, especially when the parent doesn't speak English. Even if they communicate, they communicate in a bad way. The parent might give commands and the children don't understand... With family that live outside of the United States, they have difficulty communicating with them. They have difficulty communicating with my brothers and sisters in Somalia. These miscommunication problems are caused by them not being comfortable speaking Somali and because they don't have the language ability to speak Somali.... I feel shame when they are speaking to their grandfather. They would like to speak to their grandfather more but because of the language barrier they don't speak that much.

*Participant C-F:* If I didn't speak English, there would be a very big communication problem if the kids learned English and forgot Somali... I had a friend who does not speak any English and her kids only speak English. There were issues at school with behavioral problems. They felt like they couldn't talk to their kids so they would ask me to talk to them and ask them what issues they're having at school which is just you know... You're the parent—it's kind of sad that you're not able to do that.

**Participant D-F:** My children misunderstand me when I speak in Somali. They do literal translations when I speak Somali, which causes them to sometimes think I am being harsh when that isn't the case in Somali.

**Participant F-F:** The main thing that I used to think about when they were younger was how they would communicate with their grandmother. How would they communicate with their grandmother in English? Their grandmother doesn't speak English. I used to always think to myself that they have to speak Somali. How will they speak with their elder relatives? I personally prefer speaking Somali and I don't want a language barrier between me and my children... My sister likes to talk about what Somali looks like and what life was like back home and sometimes my daughters have some difficulty understanding it. If their grandmother tells them a story about Somalia and what life was like back home, they might have difficulty understanding. This results in them losing a connection with Somalia.

**Participant G-M:** If the parents try to speak Somali and require the kids to speak Somali, the kids will not understand what the parents said so they just assume what you meant to say so it leads to miscommunication... One day my dad called our house and my son brought me the phone and said "your dad called" instead of my grandpa called. Family relationships are very important in Somali culture and they are losing that.

**Participant I-M:** The biggest problem when kids forget Somali is that you cannot understand each other. Your main language is Somali while their main language is English, therefore you cannot communicate well with each other... The child has so much exposure to English that they will quickly learn English quickly, but you as a parent—you will not learn English at that same rate so when you come home, the child does not speak Somali well and you speak Somali well. The child becomes bored with you when you talk because when someone

speaks, and you don't understand them, you stop listening...I know a child whose parents only speak Somali and he only speaks English. I can see they are talking to him, but he doesn't understand. The older siblings have to interpret what the parent is saying to the child.

*Participant J-F:* When my youngest tells his dad something in English, the dad thinks he is saying something else, so then I intervene and tell him to speak Somali.... If you and your child don't speak the same language, the kid comes home and tells you what he did at school and you don't understand him. If you don't understand each other, you become distant from each other and then other people will influence your kids.

Participants frequently talked about the importance of communication within the family and how children maintaining Somali is essential for that communication to take place. These communication issues affected the relationships between children and their parents and the relationship between children and their extended family. With regard to the relationship between children and parents, two of the participants (Participants C and I) mentioned issues where other people had to become involved in the parent-child relationship because the ability for the parent and child to communicate was diminished to that extent. Multiple participants mentioned how this breakdown in communication affected the level of authority they had over their children. This was the same finding of Fillmore (1991). Participants B and F mentioned the loss of generational knowledge as a result of the children losing their ability to comprehend Somali. Participant B-M discussed the shame he feels when his children are not fully able to communicate with their grandfather. Participant G-M mentioned the example of his son referring to his grandfather as "your dad." These are other examples of generation knowledge being cut off. This is especially damaging because of the strong emphasis on respecting elders in Somali culture as noted earlier (Lewis, 2003). Moreover, Somali culture has a rich tradition of oral

literature in the forms of poems, proverbs, and songs which were traditionally passed down from generation to generation (Lewis, 2003). This breakage of cultural transmission from one generation to another is reminiscent of what McKay and Weinstein-Shr (1993) described taking place in the Cambodian American Association meeting in which the elders were silenced because the youth conducted the meeting in English. The result is the same—the community losing its cultural identity.

**Theme Six: First-generation Somali parents are concerned that their children will return to Somalia and not be able to communicate with Somalis because of their heritage language loss.** Six of the participants expressed concern that their children will visit or return to Somalia in the future and not be able to communicate with Somalis there. Although only some and not all participants imagined their children would want to live in Somalia, it was still surprising that parents, some of whom had been in the United States more than 20 years, held that belief.

*Participant D-F:* One day they will go back to Somalia and I don't want them to be strangers and foreigners because they can't communicate...I'd like for them to live there one day.

*Participant E-M:* When they go back to Somalia, they need to be able to speak Somali. When they go back to Somalia, I want them to be able to communicate with people and understand them.

*Participant F-F:* One day if we go to Somalia, that is the language that they will speak, and that is the reason that they speak should speak Somali.

*Participant H-M:* I feel like it is very important for them to speak Somali. I imagine that they will eventually go back to Somalia permanently... and if they need to go back to Somalia

and visit, they will be total foreigners, and they will have a hard time talking to who they are dealing with.

*Participant I-M:* If a child loses his language he might lose all of his rights back home in Somali. The child will lose what he had in Somalia. For example, I have a house and land back home. If they don't speak the language, then they lose their rights to that. If they can't speak the language, they can't even say that they are supposed to inherit that.

*Participant J-F:* We don't own this country, so if we leave, I want them to be able to speak their language with their people. Now, I want to put more effort into my youngest son. I hope one day that they will return to their country.

Participants demonstrated that it is important to them that their children are able to communicate with other Somalis if they return to Somalia. They fear that their children will be like foreigners who are unable to communicate with and understand people there. Participant I-M also expressed the fear that his children would not be able to inherit his land and property in Somalia if they lose their Somali language ability.

**Theme Seven: Some First-Generation Somali parents believe that their children's bilingual ability will lead to future job opportunities.** Half of the participants expressed that their children being bilinguals will give them more job opportunities in the future.

*Participant A-M:* If my kids can speak good English and good Somali, it is a profession. I mean they can get a job with that. Even if they don't finish high school, if they speak two languages I feel like you are a diamond.

*Participant B-M:* People who speak two languages can get more job opportunities.

*Participant D-F:* I think that speaking Somali and writing Somali will give them an advantage when they apply for jobs.



*Participant G-M:* Somalis can find jobs as translators by being bilingual.

*Participant I-M:* If a person maintains their Somali, then there is more opportunity. If a person is bilingual and speaks Somali, they can help their Community. There are newcomers coming they can help. They can open up a business helping people who are newcomers.

This belief of increased job opportunities is definitely true in the Midwest where there are large numbers of Somali immigrants who have arrived as refugees. As more Somali refugees arrive, more jobs are created, especially for bilinguals who speak Somali and English. First-generation Somali parents see that this is a skill that is either required for jobs, or will only make their more desirable candidates. This belief supports the findings of Lao (2004) and Yan (2013).

**Theme Eight: First-Generation Somali parents believe that bilingualism has intellectual benefits.** The theme of bilingual development and intellectual benefits appeared in four of the interviews.

*Participant A-M:* I believe that if you speak more than one language, it increases the intellect.

*Participant C-F:* Children should maintain Somali because of the educational intellectual benefits of bilingual development.

*Participant D-F:* I think of a child who speaks two languages as very smart and very talented because the brain is exercising when you're going back and forth between two languages, so it's more trained than another brain to speak.

*Participant F-F:* Speaking two languages is good for children's brains

These parents expressed their belief that bilingual development benefits children intellectually. As discussed previously as a finding in Yan (2013), some minority language parents see maintaining the heritage language as important for academic success. These findings

are substantiated by Baker and Sienkewicz (2000) which asserted that bilingual development does have cognitive benefits.

**Theme Nine: First-Generation Somali parents want their children to be able to read and write Somali.** A frequently mentioned theme throughout the interviews was the desire of parents for their children to also be biliterate. Nine of the participants aspired for their children to be able to also read and write Somali. There was only one participant who stated that she was indifferent to this. Participants varied in their stated reasons for wanting their children to be biliterate.

*Participant A-M:* I want them to be able to read and write Somali for the sake of getting a job in the future.

*Participant B-M:* I want them to be able to read and write Somali because if they want to communicate with Somalis, many aunts and uncles don't understand English, so he can write messages to them in Somali.

*Participant C-F:* We don't also want our children to be biliterate because even me myself, I have a tough time reading Somali. I'm very slow at it.

*Participant D-F:* I want them to read and write somebody because I want them to completely understand the language whether it's written or spoken. Being able to write Somali will give them an advantage for jobs and it is a great way for them to challenge themselves.

*Participant E-M:* I want them to be able to read and write Somali.

*Participant F-F:* Right now, they can't write Somali, but I would like for them to be able to read and write.

*Participant G-M:* I wish my children could read and write Somali. Some of them can read but they cannot write Somali. I'm glad that they can at least read. I want them to read

Somali because this is their language. If you are literate in your mother language it will be easier for you to learn to write in another language. When a child can read and write his language he can learn more by reading about his culture. There are a lot of books that they can read because they are in Somali.

***Participant H-M:*** I want my children to be able to read and write Somali .... If they can read Somali, then they can read Somali books and read them to their own children.

***Participant I-M:*** I want my children to be able to read and write Somali... I don't force them to read and write Somali because as long as they can speak it, then reading and writing isn't a big deal, and it's something that they can easily learn later.

***Participant J-F:*** I want my children to be able to read and write Somali. I really would love that. Speaking by itself is not enough. It is better if they can read and write so that you can be independent and not have to rely on others when it comes to reading and writing.

Participants varied in their reasons for wanting their children to be able to read and write Somali. Their motivations included: future employment opportunities, communication with monolingual Somali relatives through messaging, ease in learning a second language, learning more from books written in Somali, passing cultural knowledge to their own children, freedom from having to rely on others when seeing written Somali. Nearly all parents shared this desire for their children to be able to read and write in Somali. This finding was surprising at first considering the fact that many Somalis are illiterate in Somali. However, many parents further explained that because of the Somali using the same alphabet as English, this is not something that would be very difficult.

***Participant H-M:*** And the good thing is that English and Somali share letters because we also use the Latin alphabet.

**Participant D-F:** For reading Somali, they can just read the way it looks. English is difficult, you're always skipping the pronunciation of a letter.

**Participant I-M:** If you can read and write English, it's pretty easy to learn how to read and write Somali because the alphabet is similar. In fact, in Somali, you spell things the way you pronounce them.

**Theme Ten: First-generation Somali parents believe that weekend Quranic schools (Dugsi) should play a role in their children's Somali language maintenance.** Weekend Quranic school, referred to as *Dugsi* in Somali, was mentioned by four of the participants. Participants reported that they felt Dugsi should play a role in their children's maintenance of Somali. However, some of the parents were disappointed that Dugsis did not do enough to support their children's Somali language proficiency.

**Participant D-F:** When they used to go to Dugsi, the teacher always used to speak English and I said to the teacher, "here is a place where we have all Somali children—why do we not speak Somali with them?" I heard one of the students say, *maclin* [teacher], I'm *kabax* [going to read to you]. I asked him, what is "I am *kabax*?" I told the teacher, "it's better that we speak Somali, we have to be strong." I wrote the correct way to say that on the board, and I said I never want to hear "I'm *kabax*" again. We need to tell the Dugsi teachers that especially in the summer that the teachers should require the children to speak Somali so the children can learn it together.

**Participant G-M:** The teachers in the Dugsi can also play a role. They are an important factor as well.

**Participant H-M:** Dugsi should play a role in maintaining Somali. Most of the teachers speak Somali.

*Participant J-F:* Even the Dugsi teachers, I want to speak Somali to the Dugsi teacher, but she speaks English with me. So now, even at Dugsi, they speak English with the children.

Two of the participants expressed disappointment that Dugsi classes were conducted in English. As a result of Somali immigration to the Midwest beginning in 1993, some current Dugsi teachers in this region are second-generation Somalis who will likely be dominant in English instead of Somali. This may also be the case with generation 1.5 Dugsi teachers. The participants' comments demonstrate the frustration of first-generation Somali parents, that even spaces that are entirely Somali ethnically use English as a medium of communication.

**Theme Eleven: First-Generation Somali parents want their children to speak English so their children can perform well in school and have employment opportunities later in life.** Nine of the participants communicated that they want their children to be proficient in English for the purpose of doing well in school and acquiring employment. While participants expressed their desire for their children to maintain Somali, they also mentioned the importance of their children speaking English. It is clear that Somali parents want their children to be successful academically and in their careers. Because of this desire for their children's success in the future, they want their children to be fluent in English.

*Participant A-M:* If they speak better Somali than English that's not good because here at work Somali is not the main language. So they can also lose a lot if that's the case. I would like them to speak Somali and English very well.

*Participant B-M:* It's important that they are balanced in their ability to speak both languages. we don't want them to be behind in school.

*Participant C-F:* Because we live in a country that primarily speaks English, if they speak Somali better than they speak English, they might have a hard time functioning in school and jobs.

*Participant D-F:* I don't mind if my children reject speaking English...As long as they don't need it—like if they go live in Somalia [laughing]. But if they stay here, it won't be possible for them to function without English.

*Participant E-M:* Speaking Somali better than English will create a problem because they need to speak both well. If the children refuse to speak English, they will have a big problem in terms of school and work.

*Participant F-F:* It is important for them to speak English because this is the main language that school is taught in and the main language you speak at your job.

*Participant H-M:* The formal language here is English and if they don't have good English skills, they may not do well and drop out. At this moment, yes, I need Somali more for my kids, but English is the key to their success.

*Participant I-M:* If my kid wants to go to college he has to be able to speak English. If he doesn't speak good English, then he has to have a manufacturing job. The child has to have a balance and learn both languages.

*Participant J-F:* If they speak English way better than Somali, then they are lost. They shouldn't just put emphasis on one language. They should know both.

**Theme Twelve: Some First-Generation Somali parents have used or are currently requiring their children to speak only Somali in the home.** Half of the participants reported that they have required only the heritage language to be used at home previously or currently use that rule now. Previous studies discussed (Kung, 2013; Schechter & Bayley, 1997) have shown

that language minority parents use this aggressive strategy as a way of maintaining the heritage language. However, having a rule does not mean children will follow it. Some participants also reported only having heritage language only policies when the children were younger and ending the policy once children got older.

***Participant A-M:*** My wife and I planned ahead for the children to speak Somali at home and English outside. Inside our home, we only speak Somali. At home if they say a word of English they have to interpret it. We ask them, “what does that mean in Somali?” For example, today my son said “okay” and I asked him in Somali, “how do you say okay in Somali?” He said “*hagaag*.” If they say an English word, they don’t get in trouble but they do have to interpret it. Sometimes, even the siblings catch each other and say “can you interpret that into Somali.”

***Participant B-M:*** We do have a rule for only Somali being spoken at home, but the children don’t follow this rule.

***Participant C-F:*** The main strategy that I use for my children to maintain Somali is me speaking Somali at home. We don’t have any actual rules for it now. The main thing was that kids speak Somali and only Somali until they start school. Now, the children naturally switch between the two languages by observing the preferences of whoever they are speaking to: they speak Somali to their dad and grandparents and speak English to their English-dominant cousins.

***Participant F-F:*** The rules when they were younger were that they speak Somali during meal times and during bedtimes...Now there are no rules. They are both able to communicate in Somali now.

***Participant G-M:*** We don’t have rules at home about speaking Somali. You can encourage them, but you can’t require it. For me, I can’t do that. It’s kind of like torture to say

don't speak English, speak Somali... What do you about a 15-year old who says "I'm not going to speak Somali." Are you going to kick him out?

**Participant I-M:** The trouble isn't the child--the trouble is the parent. If the parent attempts to stop a child from speaking English, then the child will see that they have to speak Somali. In our house we have a rule that when you come into the house, English stops. If you do that, then the language will be saved for them and they're not going to forget English because they are at school all day. The children also have to make sure that they speak to each other in the home language.

Participants C and F reported that they previously required the children to speak Somali at home all the time or at specific times, but no longer implement that rule. Both participants explained that they no longer have this rule because the children now are able to communicate in Somali at an adequate level. Participant G-M clarified the reason why he felt it was difficult to require his children to speak English at home. He felt that only encouragement can play a role because rules such as these are too harsh and difficult to implement. For the parents who instituted this rule, it seems that consistency and starting early was the key to the success they perceived with their children. Participant C-F reported that her children now communicate in Somali comfortably with monolingual Somali speakers. However, it is not clear why Participant G-M stopped implementing this policy because she also reported that her children misunderstand Somali at times. Additionally, Participant F-F reported that one of her children speak Somali at a level of about 40% of that of a native Somali speaker, and the other child, only slightly more.

**Theme Thirteen: First-Generation Somali parents use other strategies in the home to promote their children's heritage language maintenance.** All of the participants reported using other strategies in the home to promote the usage of Somali. These strategies often had



other purposes as well. For example, one common way of exposing the children to Somali was by reading traditional Somali folk stories to the children, which also functions to teach children about their heritage. Some parents designed activities that also included a religious component so that children would practice their heritage language while also reviewing religious concepts. Technology also played a role in a few of the activities. Parents reported using YouTube to introduce children to Somali poetry and plays. Another strategy using text messaging as a way for children to practice their Somali literacy skills while also maintaining ties with family and extended family, an important aspect of Somali culture. Several of these activities demonstrated the desire of parents to pass on the rich oral traditions of Somalis, such as proverbs and poetry.

***Participant A-M:*** Sometimes we read a book of English and I asked them to interpret passages of it into Somali. We might also read a book in Somali and I ask them to interpret passages into English... When we were in Somalia, we brought Somali books home. These were books from schools in Somaliland. We use them by sitting in a circle and reading and after each paragraph, stopping and asking questions.

***Participant B-M:*** I would repeat certain phrases to them. For example, I would ask my son to say good morning in Somali and then every morning I would say to him good morning. The other strategy that I would use is finding YouTube videos in Somali, especially Somali cartoons. We don't have that much but they are there. I asked them to listen to it and tell me what they understood from it. In the summer, I'll ask them to explain a certain concept like the 5 pillars of Islam in Somali. Whoever can do it, I'll give a prize to them. I expect them to try something instead of saying, "dad, we didn't find anything." My expectation is that they have to at least come up with something.

**Participant C-F:** Another strategy that we use is having them communicate with relatives in Somali over the phone.

**Participant D-F:** My older daughter and I communicate in Somali over text message. We started texting in Somali when my daughter saw that I was replying to her text messages in Somali. Then I asked my daughter, “hey, what do you think about us continuing to text in Somali?” My daughter said “I might mess up”, and I said, “don’t worry, I’ll correct you” ...We also watch Somali plays on YouTube and we watch videos of Somali plays and poetry. After we watch the video, I would ask them to tell me the meaning, which they would do well...When they were little, if I saw them do something that I don't like, I used to tell them a proverb in Somali which means “your stick is already coming from the tree.” So I would use proverbs at times... every Sunday night, we discuss one topic in Somali. For example, a topic might be what we used to do when we were in Somalia. Another day we might talk about body parts and organs and everyone has to say them in Somali. Sometimes we have a lot of fun with this event...We also sit down as a family once a week and read the Quran together. One of my children read the Somali translation of the Quran.

**Participant E-M:** My only strategy is me speaking to them in Somali. Their responses are always in English. Sometimes I ask them to translate some words for me from Somali to English.

**Participant F-F:** I do have Somali folk stories books from Somalia at home. The books I read are compilations of traditional Somali folk stories.

**Participant G-M:** I tell my children traditional Somali stories.

**Participant H-M:** I have some traditional Somali stories that I’ve printed out for them and I read it to them at night sometimes.

*Participant I-M:* My children also speak to my side of the family on the phone in Somali.

*Participant J-F:* I use Somali when I text my children and some of them respond back in Somali.

**Theme Fourteen: First-Generation Somali parents use trips to Somalia or plan to use trips to Somalia as a strategy for heritage language maintenance.** Seven of the participants reported taking their children back home to Somalia or planning to do so in the near future for extended visits in order for their children to maintain or learn Somali. The main reason motivation for this was their desire for their children to maintain their heritage language. Parents see this is a solution because the children will have no choice but to speak Somali. Multiple studies (Kang, 2013; Kung, 2013; Schechter & Bayley, 1997) have shown that parents use this strategy to aid their children in maintaining the heritage language.

*Participant A-M:* We sent our kids to live in Somalia for 3 years... We wanted a culture for them where they speak 100% Somali. They did lose their English little bit when they were in Somalia but I don't think that it will affect them. The main reason we went to Somalia was for their language.

*Participant B-M:* My plan is that with the coming year, they go to Somalia and stay there the entire summer for 3 months.

*Participant D-F:* Next year we will all be going together to Somalia as a family.

*Participant E-M:* I sent one of my children back to Somalia for two years to learn the Somali language and culture.

*Participant G-M:* I took my son to Somalia for a summer so that he could learn Somali

*Participant H-M:* I think they should also visit Somalia. This is what I would suggest. To be places where there is no English and only Somali spoken. One of my relatives was raised in

Canada and recently went back to Somalia for the summer and came back with her Somali very much improved...I want to take them to Somalia some summers in the future to stay there and make their Somali better.

***Participant I-M:*** I would like to take my children to Somalia over the summer to help their bilingual development.

### **Summary of Themes**

The 14 themes identified in this study covered a wide range of issues related to first-generation Somali parents' beliefs and strategies for the bilingual development of their children. From the first theme, we learned that Somali parents promoted heritage language maintenance for their children because they see a strong relationship between the heritage language and their children's identity. Parents associated the Somali language as an inextricable part of Somali identity. Somali parents saw the Somali language as *their* language and they expect their children to also see the Somali language as *their* language.

The second theme reflected Somali parents' perceptions of school as a factor for their children's language loss. Parents realize their children are at school for so many hours a day while the medium of instruction is English. The third theme focused on the impact of preschool in children's heritage language loss. Parents understand that their kids are being exposed to English for extended periods of time at a tender language before their children have mastered their native language. At the same time, parents realize the benefits of preschool, so they are faced with a tough predicament.

The fourth theme concentrated on parents' perceptions of their role in their children maintaining Somali. While parents identify school as having a negative impact on their children's heritage language maintenance, they also believe they have an important role in their

children maintaining Somali. Some of the participants also relayed their thoughts on mothers having a more dominant role than fathers when it comes to heritage language maintenance.

The fifth theme identified one of the parental motivations for children maintaining the heritage language: maintaining communication within the family. Parents expressed their fears of children losing the ability to communicate with elders and other members of the extended family. They also discussed how miscommunication can have a strong negative impact on generational knowledge and the authority of the parents. Some of the parents mentioned instances where parents and children were unable to communicate because of the language barrier that eventually developed between them.

The sixth theme discussed the fear Somali parents have that their children will return to Somalia one day and be foreigners in their parents' country of birth because of their heritage language loss. Parents see themselves as still attached to their country of birth and imagine that their children will one day want to return. The seventh theme discussed parents' beliefs that bilingualism will lead to more job opportunities in the future.

The eighth theme reflected the belief of Somali parents that bilingualism has intellectual benefits. The ninth theme discussed parents' wishes for their children to also be able to read and write Somali. Parents expressed that this would have numerous benefits. They mentioned that Somali literacy would lead to future job opportunities, allow their children to communicate with relatives through messaging, make it easier for them to learn to read and write English, learn more about their culture from books written in Somali, teach their own children about Somali culture, and give them independence rather than having to rely on others when they come across Somali books.

The tenth theme examined Somali parents' beliefs that Dugsi should have a role in their children's language maintenance. Parents were disheartened that Dugsis run by Somalis with only Somali students still used English as a medium of instruction. This theme, along with many others, demonstrates the dominance of English that parents perceive. The eleventh theme considered the parents' motivations for their children to speak English. Participants associated English with success in school and in the workplace.

The twelfth theme looked at how parents required the use of only the heritage language home to maintain the heritage language. Parents differed in their implementation of rules such as this. Some of the parents reported using this policy in the past and abandoning it once the children got older. There were also parents who maintained this rule with differences in compliance. Parents also used other language maintenance strategies in the home. These strategies included reading traditional Somali folk stories to children, watching videos of Somali poetry and plays, and using text messaging to message relatives in Somali. The last theme discussed the strategy of sending children back home in order to maintain or learn Somali and Somali culture. Many participants either used this strategy or planned to use this strategy in the near future.

These themes demonstrate the dilemma that Somali parents face with their children's bilingual development. Ideally, Somali parents expressed that they want their children to be bilingual. They want their children to maintain Somali for to retain their identity, culture, and be connected to their parents' home country. Parents also want their children to speak English so they can function in society and they believe that being bilingual will lead to even more benefits that monolinguals will not experience. However, they see the dominance of English in the US and feel that it is difficult for them to have this ideal. However, as we can see from the data of

the parents, Somali parents are hopeful and have not given up. While they see that their children are acquiring English fluently and forgetting Somali, they have not given up on implementing strategies to maintain Somali.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore two issues regarding first-generation Somali parents: their perceptions of bilingualism, and their strategies to promote the bilingual development of their children. Interviews were used to elicit data from participants and fourteen different themes were identified in relation to these two issues. The goal of this study was not to generalize specific findings to all first-generation Somali parents. The goal was to explore the topic of bilingualism from the perspective of first-generational Somali parents in order to lay a foundation for future research. This study adds valuable insight on Somali parents' beliefs about bilingualism and their strategies to encourage the bilingual Somali-English development of their children.

### **Somali Parents' Perceptions of Bilingualism**

Somali parents in this study perceived a strong relationship between their children's heritage language and identity. While they perceived school, and especially preschool, as a factor for their children's subtractive bilingualism, they believe that parents play a large role in their children maintaining the Somali language. Somali parents see their children being proficient in Somali as a way for them to maintain communication with their family, including the extended family and elders which play a large role in Somali culture. They also saw being proficient in Somali as essential in order to not be seen as foreigners if their children do return to Somalia. Parents expressed their beliefs that bilingualism has intellectual benefits and will lead to more job opportunities for their children. They perceived Somali literacy as a means for their children to further their knowledge of Somali culture and strengthen relationships with their extended family. While parents emphasized their own role in their children maintaining Somali, they also expressed that Dugsis should play a role in their children's Somali language maintenance.



Additionally, parents viewed their children's English proficiency as essential for their children succeeding in school and the workplace.

### **Somali Parents' Strategies for Encouraging Bilingualism**

Somali parents in this study primarily used three different strategies for preventing subtractive bilingualism of their children. A common strategy parents used was to require children to speak only Somali at home. Parents differed in their specific implementation of this policy. Other strategies in the home included reading Somali folk tales to children, introducing kids to Somali media, and communicating with relatives over messaging in Somali. Parents also used the strategy or planned to use the strategy of visiting Somalia with their children. They saw this as a way to ensure their children were in an environment where they spoke only Somali.

### **Recommendations**

While many may look at the process of community language loss described by Kouritzin (1997) as a natural process that every linguistic minority group goes through, it's important that institutions acknowledge the consequences of language loss and partner with Somali parents to reduce the negative impact of language loss or find ways to slow the rate of language loss. One of the most important ways this can happen is by communities working together to establish preschools that use the home language as a medium of instruction. Parents should also be aware of the consequences of preschool education to the children's heritage language. Preschool is often recommended, especially to minority language parents. However, educators should look at studies such as these to understand the full effect of preschool in English on minority language communities.

Additionally, there should be an increased presence of Somali speakers in the field of education. This can be done by recruiting Somali speakers to become educators at the grade

school level and providing educational resources for them. ELL teachers that speak Somali can help encourage Somali parents to utilize effective strategies at home for their children's language maintenance. They can also educate Somali parents on the consequences of home language loss. Although this encouragement can come from any teacher, Somali-speaking ELL teachers reduce the changes of language and other communication barriers.

ELL educators can also support Somali-American parents' efforts by creating opportunities in the classroom for Somali-speaking students to use Somali. This can be difficult in ELL classrooms where students speak a variety of native languages. However, with appropriate planning, this is possible. While this may not reverse the shift of language loss, it can show students that their heritage language is respected, spark an interest in the students to maintain or learn their heritage language, and strengthen the relationship between ELL teachers and students.

Schools can assist children with maintaining their heritage language by promoting heritage languages and cultures. This can be in the form of projects or events where students are given the role of presenting information on their language and culture. Initiatives such as these can demonstrate to students that their language and culture are respected within the school. Students can also feel more comfortable with their culture and teachers and peers can have the opportunity to learn more about minority language students.

Somali parents whose children have experienced these negative consequences of language loss can educate Somali parents whose children have not yet attended preschool about the negative impact English-medium preschools can have on children who have not yet been exposed to English. This effort can be organized by Somali organizations and galvanize the

Somali community to create Somali language preschools and teach Somali in Dugsis, Somali heritage language schools, or in the public schools as a second language.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study relied on a small sample size of ten participants across three Midwestern cities, so these findings may not be generalizable to all first-generation Somali parents. Additionally, with interviews being the method of data elicitation, it is possible that information was withheld as a result of participants being uncomfortable about revealing certain pieces of information. Future research can expand the sample size and look at first-generation Somali parents from a greater number of cities. Quantitative studies can also be conducted in the form of surveys to look at trends over time on this particular topic.

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## Appendix

### Demographic Information

1. What is your sex?
2. What is your age?
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed, and in what countries?
4. When did your child begin school in the US, and how many years have they attended?
5. What is your marital status?
6. Have you lived in other countries besides Somalia and the United States and for how long?

### Interview Questions (adapted from Enstice 2012)

1. Do you and/or your family face any obstacles in your daily lives regarding your child(ren)'s home language loss? If so, what are they and what do you think causes these obstacles?
2. What challenges do you think other first generation Somali parents face when attempting to maintain the home language?
3. How do you perceive bilingualism? What comes to mind?
4. What have others told you about bilingualism and maintaining the home language?
5. What strategies do you use to ensure your children will be bilinguals and why?
6. Why do you want your children to be bilingual?
7. Do you also want your children to be biliterate?
8. What role do you think you play as a parent in your child(ren)'s language proficiency in Somali and English?
9. Who else plays a role in your child(ren)'s bilingual development?

10. What do you think will happen to your family if your child(ren) are more dominant in English than Somali?
11. What do you think will happen to your family if your child(ren) are more dominant in Somali than English?
12. What do you think will happen if your child(ren) reject speaking English?
13. What do you think will happen if your child(ren) reject speaking Somali?
14. What language do you speak with your children? Has that changed since you arrived in the US?
15. Did your children attend preschool? Why or why not?
16. What languages do your children speak at home? Are there rules regarding this?
17. Do you children interact with extended family? If so, in what language?