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Factors Impacting Heritage Language Maintenance in Children

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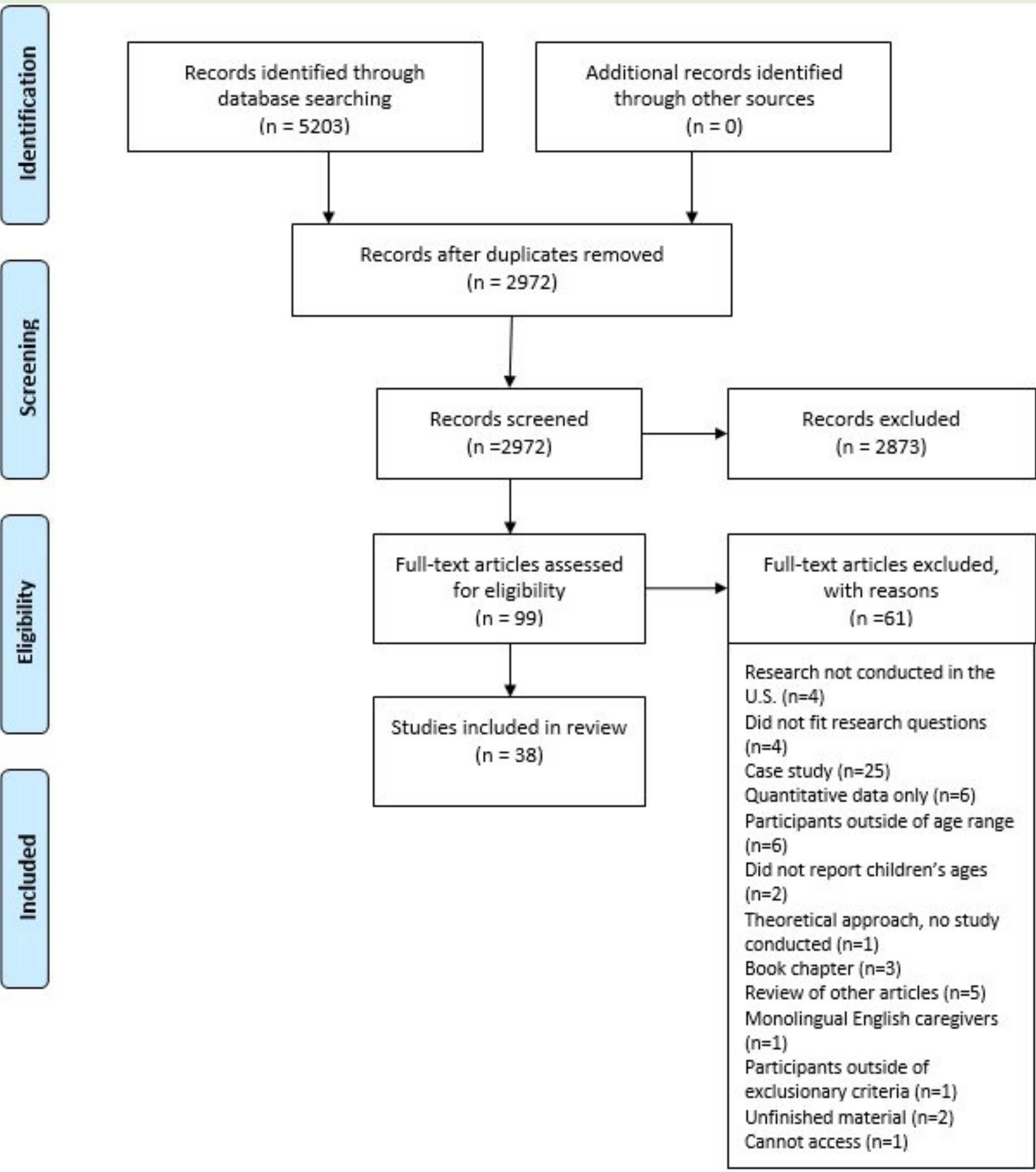
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Background

- Heritage language maintenance, as well as heritage language loss, begins at home. Several studies have shown that heritage language exposure at home is the strongest predictor of children maintaining their home language into adulthood (Winsler et al, 2014).
- Research indicates that there is often a 3-generation linguistic pattern that occurs with language shift. The first generation speaks the heritage language as their first language and actively use it in the home. The second generation, known as the “transition” generation, becomes some degree of bilingual, quickly acquiring the dominant language. The third generation speaks the dominant language as their first language, with limited to no knowledge of their native language (Qiong, 2016; Jia, 2006; Shifrina-Piljovin, 2019).
- Foreign Language Proficiency (FLP) is a conceptual framework centered around three main factors: ecology, agency, and ideology (Seo, 2017).
- Ecology is the implicit and explicit sociocultural environment and linguistic culture and environment of the family.
- Agency is what parents actually do for heritage language maintenance at the practical level, such as the choice to send children to a heritage language school or participate in ethnic community activities, as well the balance of languages spoken in the home.
- Ideology refers to the idea of the importance of language as connection, culture, and capital.
- All three of these factors come together to predict whether families successfully maintain their HL across generations.

Methods

- The systematic review of literature focused on heritage language maintenance across generations in the United States. Articles were included if they were published between January 2005 and February 28, 2020 (when the review was initiated).
- Searches were performed in 4 electronic databases (Google Scholar, Web of Science, ProQuest, and EBSCO) for articles related to heritage language maintenance and heritage language loss in relation to parental beliefs, outside influences, and the language status in society. Search terms included: *language maintenance, heritage language, caregiver beliefs, parent beliefs, multilingual, parent attitudes, language attrition, language status, immigration status, bilingual*, and *early childhood*.
- A total of 38 articles met the inclusion criteria. The researchers examined the reference lists of those 38 articles to identify other articles for inclusion in the review, but this yielded no further articles that met the search criteria.



Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) flow diagram of the process to identify and screen included studies.

References

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Pearson, B. (2007). Social factors in childhood bilingualism in the United States. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 28(3), 399-410.

Seo, Y. (2017). Early Bilingual Development: Expanding Our Understanding of Family Language Policy in Heritage Language Maintenance [Master’s thesis, University of Washington]

Yu, B. (2013). Issues in bilingualism and heritage language maintenance: Perspectives of minority-language mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 22, 10-24.

Results

We have found that a languages’ social status is closely tied to economic status, and English is viewed as the “key” to academic success. Bilingual families face pressure to support their children’s English learning and accommodate English-dominant societal expectations. These families are then more likely to maintain heritage languages when professionals express positive views of bilingualism. Strong community and cultural ties can also predict higher heritage language retention.

Discussion

- Currently, Spanish and Chinese remain the two most common groups of heritage languages (HLs) in the United States, with their prevalence having grown rapidly over the last 30 years. Consequently, due to the sheer size of the linguistic populations, these two languages achieve the closest language status in relation to English in U.S. society when compared with other HLs.
- In the United States, English dominates the public school system, and parents perceive English learning as a requisite for their children’s academic success (Ikar, 2018; Yu, 2013). Therefore, when parents prioritize academics, they feel pressure to promote children’s English development (Qiong, 2016).
- One of the themes that emerged in several papers is a strong association between heritage-language proficiency and communication and cohesion within the family.
- While parents strive to support their children’s attachment to their heritage culture and community, they also seek to ensure their integration into mainstream society. Families across ethnicities expressed a desire for children to participate and interact with individuals in the broader social community (Mitchiner, 2012; Yu, 2013).