

Learning About Students' Culture and Language Through Family Stories Elicited by *Dichos*

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Abstract Teachers' knowing about students and their families is critical to ensuring relevant classroom instruction. The *Family Storytelling through Dichos* approach is explored as a culturally and linguistically appropriate mechanism for learning about students' backgrounds. This article posits that this approach may be a viable one, since it is rooted in the Hispanic culture and language and integrates three critical elements (a) familism, a core Hispanic cultural value; (b) storytelling, a vehicle for exploring families' identities; and (c) *dichos* or popular sayings in the Spanish language, authentic cultural constructs present in Hispanics' everyday oral discourse.

Keywords Family storytelling · Hispanic oral tradition · Spanish popular sayings · Dichos

The integration of students' culture and language into instruction is paramount to effective teaching practice. In order for this integration to occur, teachers must be familiar with students' backgrounds and experiences. To many practitioners, especially those who may not share their students' language or culture, this is easier said than done. How, specifically, can one learn about students and families beyond the information one finds in school files? This article proposes the use of *dichos* or popular sayings in Spanish as a tool to explore Hispanic Spanish-speaking

families' culture and language through family storytelling. A key component of the Hispanic oral culture and Spanish language discourse, *dichos* are examined as culturally and linguistically appropriate tools for eliciting family stories and promoting teachers' learning.

The Family Storytelling Through Dichos (FSD) Model

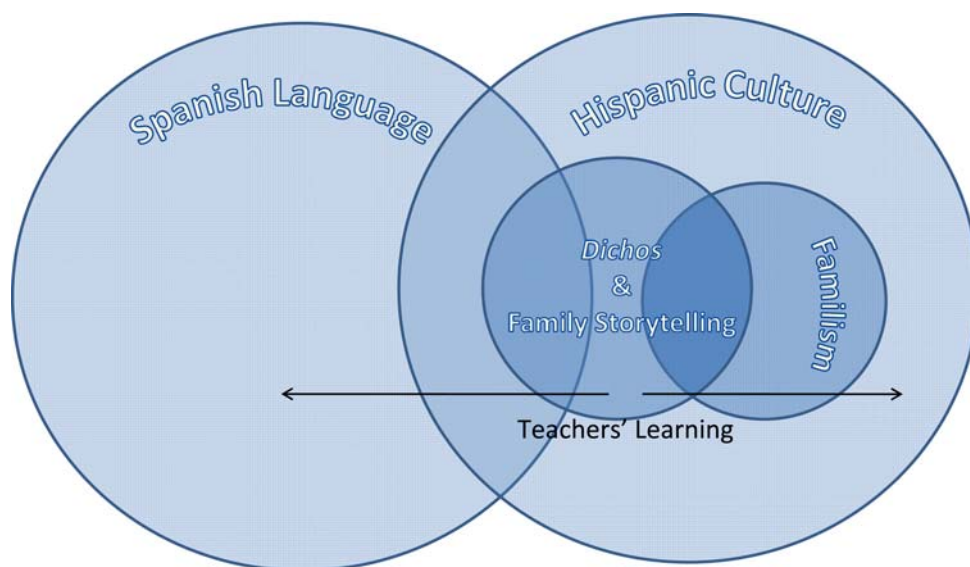
The Family Storytelling through Dichos (FSD) model (see Fig. 1) depicts the theoretical framework for storytelling elicited by *dichos* as a learning tool for teachers. The two large, intersecting circles represent the Spanish language and the Hispanic culture, two components of Hispanics' identity. The small circle to the right located within the Hispanic culture circle represents Hispanics' high regard for family or familism, a core cultural value. Finally, the fourth circle located at the center of the diagram contains the approach proposed in this article. This circle intersects the three other realms in the model: the Spanish language, the Hispanic culture, and family. The arrows going from the fourth circle towards the family, culture, and language realms represent teachers' learning. The model suggests that family storytelling elicited by *dichos* may be an effective tool for learning about students and families, since it integrates critical elements of the Hispanic culture and language. The following section elaborates on the three key components of the FSD model: familism, family storytelling, and *dichos*.

Familism

A Hispanic cultural value, familism or familismo is a vital frame of reference for Hispanics (Condon 1985; Paz 1961;

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Fig. 1 The Family Storytelling through Dichos (FSD) Model



Zinn 1982). It is the belief that family (nuclear and extended) is central to one's life. Thus, family solidarity, family integration, intra- and inter-generational support, and a commitment to family members are all priorities over the needs of the individual (John et al. 1997; Gamble and Modry-Mandell 2008; Sabogal et al. 1987). Although studies suggest that familism may be more or less prevalent among Hispanic generations, a recent study found that it remains most frequently cited in the published literature as a key factor to understanding Hispanic family processes and issues (Gamble and Modry-Mandell 2008).

Family Storytelling

Family stories affect and reflect family culture (Kellas 2006). Through family storytelling, a family's identity is constructed, at least in part, by the stories in its repertoire (Kellas 2006). A family's collection of stories, including its themes, are instrumental in understanding who the family is in terms of its norms, values, and goals. Aside from the cultural value of family stories, they have been explored as an approach to developing biliteracy skills in bilingual classrooms based on the assumption that knowledge from the students' homes and communities is a valuable resource for academic work (Dworing 2006). Family storytelling involves children in speaking, listening, and exploring through meaningful conversations (Gest et al. 2004; McVicker 2007; Sipe 2002), thus encouraging vocabulary development. In sum, family stories are rich sources of knowledge teachers can tap into for learning about their students and families, and for developing students' literacy skills through a culturally and linguistically relevant approach.

Dichos

An integral component of the Hispanic culture, *dichos* may prove effective in eliciting family stories or summarizing lessons learned by Hispanic Spanish-speaking families. Rooted in the Hispanic oral tradition (Zuñiga 1992), *dichos* or popular sayings are commonly used by Spanish-speaking people to express their values, attitudes, and perceptions (Espinoza-Herold 2007). *Dichos* are often present in Spanish-speaking families' everyday oral discourse. They are also widely used in Spanish-speaking television and radio shows both in the United States and Spanish-speaking countries. As short, traditional guides of conduct, *dichos* endorse moral and ethical values (Delgado-Gaitán 2004) as well as transmit cultural values and beliefs to younger generations by teaching lessons about life, offering advice, summarizing ideas, and expressing a specific perspective on a given situation (Chahin et al. 1999; Zuñiga 1992). These metaphorical images of Hispanics' cultural values and beliefs are spontaneous, brief, and often developed with rhyme (Zuñiga 1991, 1992). *Dichos* are funds of knowledge of a people, and are part of the historically accumulated body of knowledge essential for household functioning and well-being among native speakers of Spanish (Gonzalez et al. 2001; Moll 1992). Most of the published literature on *dichos* available to date comes from the field of counseling psychology, where *dichos* have been explored to enhance counseling approaches with Hispanic Spanish-speaking clients (Altarriba and Santiago-Rivera 1994; Iterian and Diaz-Martinez 2006; Zuñiga 1991, 1992). Given their cultural and linguistic relevance among Hispanics, *dichos* may encourage family storytelling. Interestingly, the review of extant literature revealed that

Table 1 Ten common dichos found in popular bilingual resource books

<i>Dicho</i>	English translation/Interpretation
“ <i>El que busca, encuentra</i> ”	“Seek and you shall find”
“ <i>El que persevera alcanza</i> ”	“He who perseveres, accomplishes his goal”
“ <i>En la unión está la fuerza</i> ”	“Patient men win the day”
“ <i>La práctica hace al maestro</i> ”	“In unity, there is strength”
“ <i>Lo que bien se aprende nunca se olvida</i> ”	“Practice makes perfect”
“ <i>Más vale prevenir que lamentar</i> ”	“That which someone learns well, one never forgets”
“ <i>No dejes para mañana lo que puedes hacer hoy</i> ”	“Better safe than sorry”
“ <i>Nunca es tarde para aprender</i> ”	“Don’t put off for tomorrow what you can do today”
“ <i>Preguntando se llega a Roma</i> ”	“You’re never too old to learn”
“ <i>Querer es poder</i> ”	“Ask and you shall receive”
	“Where there is a will, there is a way”

the use of *dichos* as a tool for examining family stories or promoting family involvement approaches has not been documented to date.

Table 1 shows 10 common *dichos* found in popular bilingual resource books that can assist non-Spanish speaking teachers in understanding and interpreting most commonly used popular sayings in Spanish. With regard to *dicho* interpretation, it should be noted that not all popular Spanish *dichos* translate into popular sayings in English. *Dichos* are in fact more prevalent and more widely used in the Hispanic culture than English popular sayings are in most English speaking cultures. Some books that can assist in interpreting *dichos* with and without an equivalent in the English language are the Dictionary of proverbs, Spanish/English and English/Spanish (Carbonell-Basset 1996); Folk wisdom of Mexico/*Proverbios y dichos mexicanos* (Sellers et al. 1994); 101 Spanish proverbs (Aparicio 1998); Mexican Sayings: A treasure of a people (Ballesteros and Ballesteros 1992), and My first book of proverbs/*Mi primer libro de dichos* (Gonzalez et al. 2002).

Learning About Families Through Storytelling

This article contends that *dichos* may have the potential to help teachers learn about students and families by eliciting family stories. The implementation of a family storytelling mini-project would involve the interaction between students and an older generation such as parents or grandparents. In short, the purpose of a project of this kind is to elicit family stories or anecdotes based on storytellers’ interpretation of favorite *dichos*. Throughout the school year, students can add stories to family anthologies that can be shared with parents, grandparents, and other family members. To introduce the project in the

classroom, the teacher explains the project’s purpose and instructions to students and families. Families work on their projects at home, and after projects are completed, the whole class shares their family stories. The following section describes the family storytelling approach in detail.

Eliciting Family Stories

The child and family member communicate in the language of their choice. The storyteller (for example, parent or grandparent) is asked to tell a favorite *dicho* and to explain its meaning to the child. The child writes down the *dicho* and its meaning. Then, the storyteller is asked to think about a family story or episode where the storyteller could have heard, said, or thought of the chosen *dicho*. The storyteller takes a few minutes to think about the story. When the storyteller is ready, the child states the selected *dicho* again, and tells the storyteller he/she will proceed to ask yes and no questions to guess the main character in the story. After the child has guessed the identity of the main character, the storyteller shares the whole story from beginning to end. Once the storyteller is finished, the child reconstructs the story in writing and prepares to share it with the class.

Example 1

The following excerpt illustrates a conversation between Elenita, a third grader in a bilingual program, and Don Carlos, her grandfather. Both speak in their native language. Elenita elicits a story based on her grandfather’s selection of a *dicho*. After the excerpt, the translation of the story Elenita wrote appears followed by her original work in Spanish (Figs. 2, 3).

Fig. 2 Translation of Elenita's first family story

Dicho: Where there is a will, there is a way.

Meaning: If you want to do something, you can do it.

Title of the Story: The little girl who learned how to ride a bike

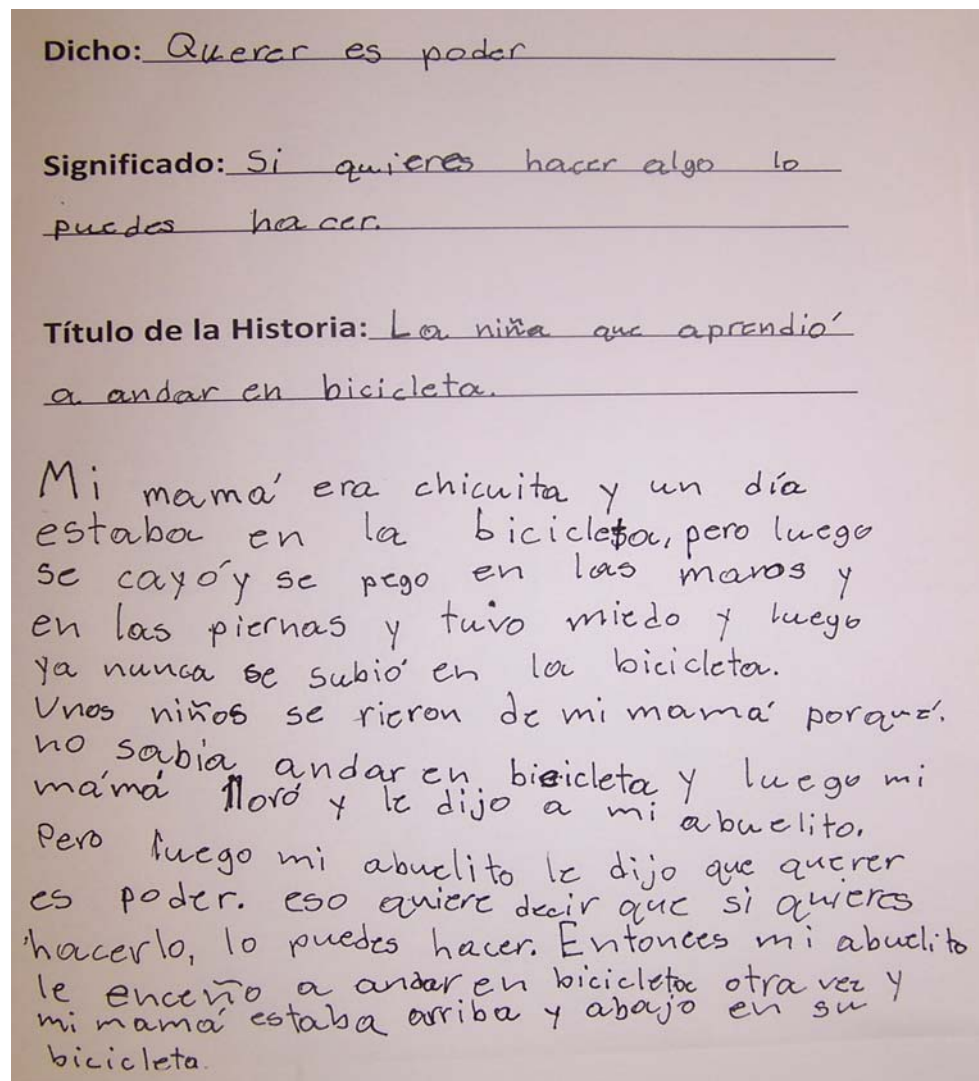
My mom was a little girl and one day she was on her bike, but then she fell and she hurt her hands and legs and then she was afraid and then she never wanted to get on a bike again.

Some children laughed at my mom because she did not know how to ride a bike and then my mom cried and she told my grandpa. But then my grandpa told her that where there is a will there is a way. This means that if you want to do it, you can. Then my grandpa taught my mom how to ride a bike again and my mom was up and down on her bike.

<i>Elenita: Abuelito, dime un dicho que te sepas y explícame lo que quiere decir</i>	Elenita: Grandpa, tell me a <i>dicho</i> you know and explain to me what it means
<i>Don Carlos: A ver... (thinks for a minute). Querer es poder. Eso quiere decir que si de verdad quieres algo, lo puedes lograr</i>	Don Carlos: Let's see...(thinks for a minute). Where there is a will, there is a way. This means that you can achieve anything you really want
<i>Elenita: Ahora piensa en una historia en la que escuchaste, dijiste, o pensaste este dicho, y dime cuando estés listo</i>	Elenita: Now think about a story where you heard, said, or thought of this <i>dicho</i> , and tell me when you're ready
<i>Don Carlos: Déjame pensar...a ver...(thinks for a minute). Ya, ya estoy listo</i>	Don Carlos: Let me think...let's see...(thinks for a minute). Okay, I'm ready
<i>Elenita: Ahora voy a adivinar quién es el personaje principal de la historia. Te voy a hacer unas preguntas y tú solamente puedes responder sí o no. ¿Estás listo?</i>	Elenita: Now I'm going to try to guess the main character in the story. I'm going to ask some questions and you can only answer yes or no. Are you ready?
<i>Don Carlos: Muy bien. Pregúntame</i>	Don Carlos: Good. Go ahead, ask
<i>Elenita: Este personaje, ¿es un hombre?</i>	Elenita: Is this person a man?
<i>Don Carlos: No</i>	Don Carlos: No
<i>Elenita: Entonces es una mujer. ¿Es menor que yo?</i>	Elenita: Then it's a woman. Is she younger than me?
<i>Don Carlos: No</i>	Don Carlos: No
<i>Elenita: Entonces es mayor. ¿Es una hija tuya?</i>	Elenita: Then she's older. Is she a daughter of yours?
<i>Don Carlos: Sí</i>	Don Carlos: Yes
<i>Elenita: ¿Es mi mamá?</i>	Elenita: Is she my mom?
<i>Don Carlos: Sí. ¡Adivinaste!</i>	Don Carlos: Yes. You got it!
<i>Elenita: Bueno, ahora cuéntame la historia por favor</i>	Elenita: Great. Now please tell me the story

Table a continued

<p><i>Don Carlos: Pues fíjate que hace muchos años tu mamá era una niña muy chiquita y trataba de aprender a andar en bicicleta, pero un día se cayó y se hizo daño en las manos y las piernas, así que después tuvo miedo de subirse a una bicicleta y ya no quiso volver a intentar. Unos años más tarde tenía más o menos tu edad, como nueve años, y un día llegó a la casa llorando</i></p>	<p>Don Carlos: Well, long time ago your mom was a very little girl and she was trying to learn to ride a bike, but one day she fell and hurt her hands and legs. As a result, she became afraid of riding bikes and did not want to try ever again. A few years later, she was already about your age; she was about nine years old and one day she came home crying</p>
<p><i>La razón era que unos niños de la escuela se rieron de ella porque no sabía andar en bicicleta. Yo le dije, mi hijita, querer es poder. Si tú de veras quieres aprender a andar en bicicleta, claro que vas a poder. Y si no quieres saber nada de bicicletas, entonces ya no llores. Ese día tu mamá me pidió que le volviera a enseñar a andar en bicicleta, y unos días más tarde ya andaba en bicicleta para arriba y para abajo, como si nunca hubiera tenido miedo. Tu mamá aprendió a andar en bicicleta porque entendió que querer es poder. Y esta fue la historia</i></p>	<p>The reason was some children at her school laughed at her because she didn't know how to ride a bike. I told her, baby, where there is a will, there is a way. If you really want to learn to ride a bike, of course you can do it. Now, if you'd rather not hear anything about bikes, then stop crying. That day your mom asked me to help her learn to ride a bike, and a few days later she was riding her bike up and down just as if she had never been afraid before. Your mom learned to ride a bike because she understood that where there is a will, there is a way. And this is the story</p>
<p><i>Elenita: Gracias, abuelito. Ahora voy a escribir la historia antes de que se me olvide y voy a dibujar a mi mamá en su bicicleta. ¿De qué color era?</i></p>	<p>Elenita: Thanks, grandpa. I'm going to write the story before I forget, and I'm going to draw my mom riding her bike. What color was it?</p>

Fig. 3 Elenita's first family story (original piece)

A variation of this approach consists of using *dichos* as morals in family stories. The storyteller is asked to tell a favorite *dicho* and explain its meaning while the child writes down this information. Next, the storyteller is asked if he/she can remember a lesson he/she learned where the chosen *dicho* could play the role of the moral to the story. The storyteller thinks about this question for a few minutes. If no story is remembered in relation to the chosen *dicho*, the child and the adult move on to another favorite *dicho* until the right match between a *dicho* and a moral to a story is found. Once the match is found, the storyteller explains the lesson he/she learned and its connection with the selected *dicho*. Finally, the storyteller shares the whole story from beginning to end and the child reconstructs the story in writing.

Example 2

The following excerpt illustrates a conversation in Spanish between Elenita and Doña Esperanza, her grandmother. Elenita asks about a favorite *dicho* of her grandmother's and a story learned that would be associated with it. A translation of the story Elenita wrote appears after the dialogue, and then her original work appears written in her native language (Figs. 4, 5).

Learning from Elenita's Family Stories

Based on Elenita's family stories, we know Elenita seems to have a close relationship with both grandparents who participated in her project. The grandparents seem to be native speakers of Spanish. They are familiar with the meaning of *dichos* and use them with ease when telling their stories. Elenita communicates in Spanish with both grandparents, who seem to be strong role models for her Spanish language development. Both grandparents selected stories about the importance to overcome obstacles, so we may assume they have a positive, optimistic outlook on life. Elenita's grandmother lived in the country and has experience growing vegetables. She also has high regard for education and seems to have been involved in one of the child's early school grades.

Elenita's teacher could use the information gleaned from both stories in at least three ways. First, she could relate to the child's grandparents by finding ways to use the grandparents' favorite *dichos* in face-to-face conversations with the family. The teacher's use of these *dichos* would send a message to the family that the grandparents and the teacher are on the same page with regard to their perspective on overcoming obstacles. Second, the teacher could encourage specific academic-related behaviors at

Elenita: Abuelita, dime uno de tus dichos favoritos y dime qué quiere decir

Doña Esperanza: Déjame ver... (thinks for a minute). Nunca es tarde para aprender. Este dicho quiere decir que uno nunca es demasiado viejo para aprender algo nuevo

Elenita: ¿Y te acuerdas de la historia de alguna lección que aprendiste en donde este dicho pueda ser la moraleja?

Doña Esperanza: Pues no sé, a ver...déjame ver (thinks for a minute). Sí, creo que sí

Elenita: ¿Me cuentas esa historia?

Doña Esperanza: Pero claro que sí. Cuando yo era niña, vivía en el campo con mis hermanos y mis padres. Como no había escuelas en el campo en esos tiempos, pues no pude ir a la escuela. Así que me la pasaba ayudando a mis padres en la labor, sembrando, cosechando, y vendiendo nuestras verduras en el mercado. Cuando crecí, me casé con tu abuelito, tuve mis hijos, y ellos sí pudieron ir a la escuela, así que aprendieron a leer y escribir y estudiaron muchos años. A mí ya de grande me daba vergüenza no saber leer ni escribir, ni poder firmar papeles y cosas de esas. Luego tú naciste, y fuiste mi primera nieta, y una de tus maestras del kínder me dijo un día que nunca era tarde para aprender. Me recomendó una escuela para adultos. Así que así de grande, abuelita y todo, me decidí y fui a la escuela de adultos y aprendí a leer y escribir. Después de muchos años regresé a la escuela, y ahora me siento feliz de que sé leer y escribir.

Elenita: Yo no sabía que había kínder de adultos. ¿A tí te gustó ir?

Elenita: Grandma, tell me one of your favorite dichos and tell me what it means

Doña Esperanza: Well, let me see...(thinks for a minute). It's never too late to learn. This dicho means that one is never too old to learn something new

Elenita: Do you remember the story of some lesson you learned where this dicho can be the moral?

Doña Esperanza: I don't know, let me see... (thinks for a minute). Yes, I think I do

Elenita: Can you tell me the story?

Doña Esperanza: But of course. When I was a little girl, I lived in the country with my brothers and sisters, and my parents. Since there were no schools in the country back then, I could not go to school. I spent my time helping out in the fields, growing vegetables, harvesting, and selling them in the market. When I grew up, I married your grandpa, we had our children, and they could go to school, so they learned how to read and write and they went to school for lots of years. As a grown-up woman, I was embarrassed that I did not know how to read or write, and that I could not sign papers and things like that. Then you were born, and you were my first grandchild, and one of your kindergarten teachers told me one day that it wasn't too late to learn. She recommended a school for adults, and so although I was already an old grandma, I decided to go to that school to learn to read and write. I went back to school after many years, and now I feel happy I know how to read and write

Elenita: I didn't know there was a kindergarten for adults. Did you like going?

Fig. 4 Translation of Elenita's second family story

Title of the Story: My grandma and school

My grandma was embarrassed because she did not know how to read and write because there were not classes in the country where she lived, and she planted and grew [vegetables] and then she was an adult and she got married and she had children and her children could go to school. And then my kindergarten teacher told her that it was never too late to learn. And my grandma went to the school for adults and learned how to read and write, and now she is no longer embarrassed and she is happy.

Moral: It's never too late to learn.

Meaning: You can keep on learning things even when you are old.

home by applying the *dichos* grandparents chose to school-related scenarios. For example, both grandparents' *dichos* could be used to instill or strengthen the family's belief that their child can excel academically and become a fluent speaker and writer of two or more languages. Therefore, the family's help with supervision of homework and daily reading time, for instance, could be promoted by using the *dichos* as mottos in face-to-face conversations with the family or in classroom newsletters. Third, Elenita's teacher could find a great ally in the child's grandmother, who could play the role of leader in promoting Elenita's family involvement at home.

Other Applications of Dichos

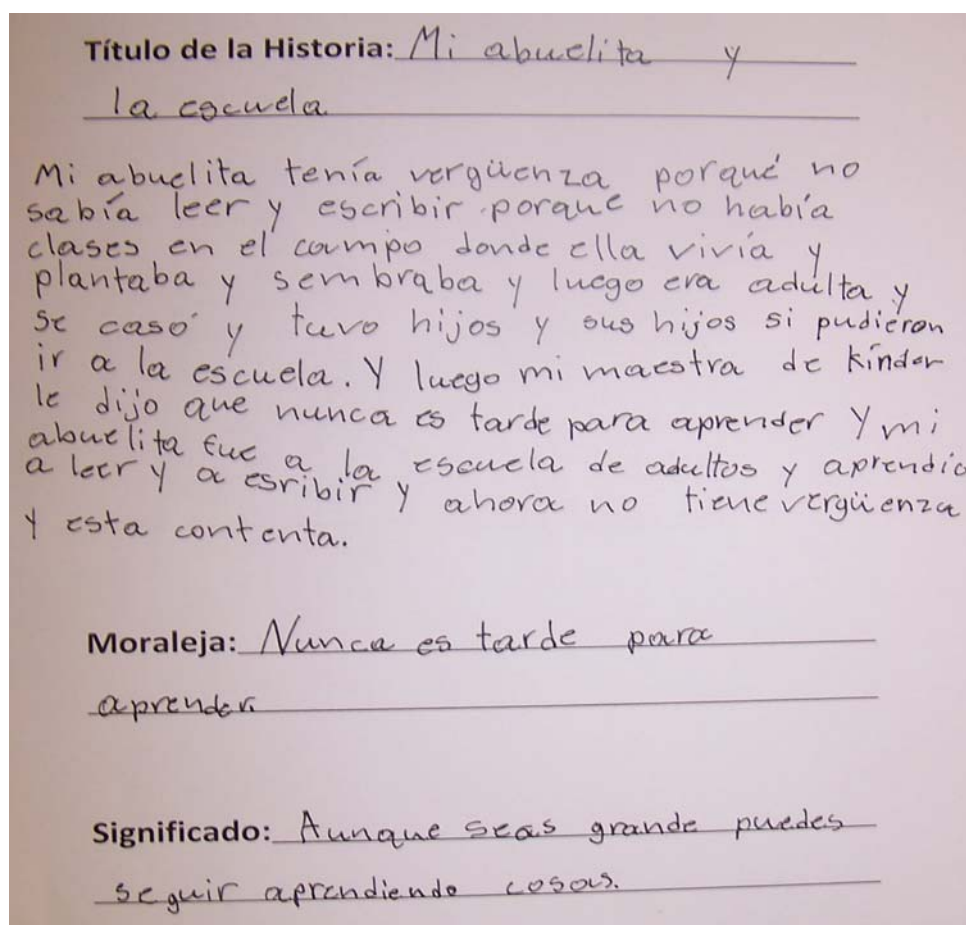
In addition to serving as authentic vehicles for eliciting family stories, *dichos* can be used for multiple purposes. For example, they can serve as tools for parental involvement. Since they validate the language and culture of the home, they can potentially hearten family participation in children's education (De Gaetano 2007; Fernandez 2000; Hamilton et al. 2003). *Dichos* can also help to develop children's and adults' literacy in the English or Spanish languages. For instance, *dichos* can be the focus of projects

where students research popular sayings that convey similar meanings in various languages. In addition, given their prevalence as a people's brief traditional guides of conduct, *dichos* lend themselves as themes for discussion regarding cultural values and inter-cultural understanding. Finally, *dichos* can also provide themes for biographies or creative writing in elementary school classrooms and adult literacy programs alike.

Conclusion

To be able to integrate students' language and culture into instruction, teachers must find ways to learn about families and their backgrounds. A viable way to do this may be by using *dichos* to elicit family stories that children can write and share in the classroom. This approach is culturally and linguistically appropriate for three reasons. First, it relies on *dichos*, a culturally and linguistically relevant tool for oral communication among Spanish speakers. Second, the approach incorporates a Hispanic cultural value, familism, in that it encourages interaction and dialogue among family members from different generations for the completion of a school-related project. The third reason family storytelling through *dichos* is a viable approach is that storytelling has

Fig. 5 Elenita's second family story (original piece)



the power to reflect family culture, thus providing insights into family norms, values, and goals. Not only has the family storytelling through *dichos* approach a great potential as an effective tool for helping teachers learn about families, it can also support the development of children's literacy skills by engaging students in a meaningful, collaborative project.

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