

## Bilingual playground

Toys that utter phrases in foreign languages meet a growing interest in teaching children a second tongue.

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Odra Heitmann hauled the heavy package labeled "Dora's Talking Kitchen" off a Toys R Us shelf and set it on the floor for a better look.

Splashed on the box was a promo: "Says Phrases in English and Spanish!" The purple blurb sealed the deal for Heitmann, who scooped up the gift for her 1-year-old niece Ashley.

"I made a big mistake by not teaching my kids Spanish," said Heitmann, 37, on a recent Saturday afternoon in the Burbank store. "I'm not going to make the same mistake with my niece."

Say *hola* and hello to the latest toy fad. Spurred by a growing immigrant population in the U.S. and a push to teach children a foreign language at an earlier age, toy makers and consumers are going bilingual.

Spanish-English bilingual toys have become especially popular in the last few years, thanks in part to Fisher-Price's wildly successful Dora the Explorer product line, based on the Nickelodeon cartoon about Dora Marquez, a 7-year-old bilingual Latina girl.

During the last holiday season, Toys R Us Inc. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. highlighted bilingual toys as one of the biggest shopping trends, listing products by Mattel Inc.'s Fisher-Price division, LeapFrog Enterprises Inc. and VTech Holdings among the most popular. And this year, bilingual toys are poised to become even hotter.

"There's been a shift in the culture, where speaking two languages is more popular," said Reyne Rice, a trend specialist with the Toy Industry Assn. "And now, second- and even first-generation Americans are saying, 'No, we're proud of our heritage, and we want our kids to embrace our language,' " she said.

For the first time, Latinos — the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the country at 42.7 million — will flex more spending power than any other minority group in the U.S., according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business. Latino disposable income will swell to \$863.1 billion this year, up 8.1% from 2006, the Selig Center estimates.

"You couple that with the fact that the average Latino household has four kids per household — compared to the average household, which has 2.3 — and you're looking at a huge opportunity," said Carlos Conejo, president of Multicultural Associates, which specializes in helping companies sell to multicultural markets in the U.S. "It's a huge, untapped market."

In the \$22-billion-a-year toy industry, forays into multicultural markets are nothing new, but improving technology has allowed playthings to chatter in any number of languages, giving shoppers more to choose from than ever before. Toy manufacturers are unveiling bilingual phones, globes, dolls, books and laptops.

In some cases, they are giving mainstream characters multilingual makeovers.

Fisher-Price's Bilingual Elmo belts out both "Sunny Day" and "*Dia Soleado*." Play Along's Tele-Friend Amigo Bear, the newest member of the Care Bears clan, teaches numbers, colors and phrases in English and Spanish. To alternate languages, children switch an accompanying cellphone from one paw to the other.

Toy makers and retailers won't divulge sales numbers, but some say the bilingual products have exceeded expectations.

Fisher-Price said its Dora's Talking Dollhouse was the bestselling dollhouse in company history.

At KB Toys Inc., sales of these dual-language products have accelerated over the last few years, said Chief Marketing Officer Ernie Speranza, who expects to see more headed to the company's 600 stores.

"This category of merchandise is growing much faster than the toy industry as a whole," he said. "In the near future, it could be 8% to 10% of our sales."

While larger companies cater to mainstream multicultural consumers, smaller manufacturers are mining niche markets, sometimes striking a surprise consumer goldmine.

Geri Grobman, president of New York-based Language Littles, attracted the attention of the foreign-adoption community seven years ago when she introduced a line of four bilingual plush dolls, including Ling, a rosy-cheeked, Mandarin-speaking girl.

Adoption agencies and parents carried the doll to China when they picked up children as a way to bridge the gap between the two countries.

"The adoptive community was a surprise for us," said Grobman, who later added Russian and Korean to the Littles entourage. "We weren't aiming for that community, and when we found it, it was wonderful."

Now, Grobman sells 12 bilingual dolls in 10 languages, including German-speaking Emma, Hebrew-speaking David, and Alexa, a girl who gabs about gymnastics in Greek. They are sold online and in specialty shops, such as Riginals, a Century City children's clothing and gift store.

"When they're in the window, they sell. It really grabs people's attention," said store owner Rhonda Redman, who started selling the toys three years ago. "We try to carry them all, but we run out."

Five years ago, Martha Barrios began selling bilingual books and stuffed toys, called Frijolitos, at book fairs and small shops in Southern California. Each time, she said, Albondiga the mariachi dog and Picadillo the armadillo sold out. The company also has received orders from around the country through its website, at <http://www.frijolitosinc.com> .

The tiny, family-owned company finally broke even last year, and Barrios said that fiscal rewards were sure to follow as long as there was a need for bilingual books and toys.

"We couldn't say we're successful at this point," Barrios said, "but we're successful in the concept of what we have."

Some companies have seen their share of bumps on the multicultural road.

In 1997, for instance, Mattel's Puerto Rican Barbie — packaged under the banner "Hola (Hello) I'm Puerto Rican Barbie!" — set off an Internet debate over the doll's cultural and political implications. Some objected to the island's depiction on the back of the box and to the doll's features, saying her skin was too white, her features too Caucasian and her clothing too suggestive of colonial oppression.

More recently, bilingual toys have prompted blogger arguments about whether development is slowed by teaching young children more than one language.

At the Luna home in West Hollywood, there is no such debate. Before their daughter Emily was born, Damarys and Samuel Luna decided she would speak English and Spanish. Now, the 20-month-old plays regularly with Leapfrog and VTech bilingual toys, reciting words in both languages.

"Both my parents speak Spanish, so I want her to communicate with her grandparents," said Damarys, 26, who started buying the toys when her daughter was 6 months old. "We wanted her to learn just because it's going to be useful to her in her future — in school, at home, at work."

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