Latinx Children's Spanish and Translanguaging Perceptions and Strategies for Writing

Kathy Bussert-Webb
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Hannah Masso
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

This qualitative study focuses on 19 Latinx children's Spanish and translanguaging perceptions and strategies regarding writing. Sources included artifacts, surveys, reflections, and interviews in a Texas colonia. Using grounded theory for data analysis and the language ideology framework, we found children resisted Spanish and translanguaged writing, but used English as an aid for less-developed Spanish writing. They used few Spanish aids in English writing. Implications relate to supporting children's full linguistic repertoires.

Keywords: Latinx, translanguaging, Spanish, writing, bilingual, children

Este estudio cualitativo se enfoca en las percepciones y estrategias de 19 niños en la escritura en español y en "translanguaging". Los datos incluyeron artefactos, encuestas, reflexiones, y entrevistas en un barrio Latino de Texas. Utilizando la ideología de lenguaje como teoría y un análisis cualitativo, encontramos que los niños se resistieron a escribir en español y al uso de "translanguaging". Sin embargo, usaran el inglés para apoyar la escritura en español menos desarrollada. Las implicaciones se relacionan con el apoyo de repertorios lingüísticos de los niños.

Palabras clave: Latino/a, translanguaging, español, escritura, bilingüe, niños

Introduction

Our study focuses on Latinx children's Spanish and translanguaging perceptions and strategies for writing. Many non-dominant languages face marginalization in high-powered spheres, perhaps schools (Fishman, 2001). Thus, studying perceptions and strategies of children who live near Mexico can provide insight into language ideology and identity processes. We asked, "What are bilingual children's dispositions and strategies regarding Spanish and translanguaging in writing?"

Framework

Humans internalize, embody, and articulate language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2004) and dominant groups engage in power-laden discourses to promote their interests over others (Woolard, 1998). Language ideologies include instruction and curriculum (Poza, 2016). Also, children's writing reflects teachers' beliefs, resources, practices, and

assessments (DeFord, 1981). Much code-based U.S. education for low-income emergent bilinguals relates to English-focused high-stakes tests (Poza, 2016). Bracketing is another ideology that attempts to segment languages in time and space (García, 2009).

Conversely, translanguaging ideology honors bilingualism (Mazak, 2016). Translanguaging, common in bilingual continua (Hornberger & Link, 2012), relates to language ideology because people adopt or contest normative language beliefs and practices (Anzaldúa, 2007), such as bracketing, while others have varying degrees of awareness (Kroskrity, 2004).

Translanguaging constitutes a linguistic strength for sense-making (García, 2009). Perceiving language as a right and a resource represents a shift from the dichotomous, monoglossic ideology of minoritized languaging as a problem (García & Sylvan, 2011; Ruíz, 1984). Translanguaging is part of borderland people's identities and practices in a liminal space, not quite the USA, not quite Mexico. This liminality pulsates through our research site (Anzaldúa, 2007).

Language ideologies connect to socio-political-historical contexts, also. "… For generations of border residents, Spanish literacy has been banished from school as early as possible" (Smith & Murillo, 2012, p. 637). Yet, leaving our cultures and languages proves difficult. As Stewart and Hansen-Thomas (2016) stated about a high school student from Mexico,

> Paula cannot be defined as a citizen of just one country, a speaker of one language, or a member of one cultural group … Translanguaging represents her complete transnational being (p. 465).

Velasco and García (2010) studied five translanguaged writing samples and found translanguaging helped children with writing development, usage, audience awareness, and self-regulation. Next, Canagarajah (2011) explored the translanguaging of Buthainah. This graduate student code-meshed to persuade her readers and to challenge biases about Saudi Arabia; Buthainah demonstrated metalinguistic awareness regarding why she translanguaged.

Methods

Setting

This study occurred in a South Texas colonia, an unincorporated U.S./Mexico border settlement lacking basic services, e.g., paved roads (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2017). This colonia represents the poorest neighborhood for its size; 99% are native Spanish-speaking and Latinx (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Within this colonia, *Grace,* an after-school tutorial agency, serves children who attend for homework help. (All names are pseudonyms.)

We focus on data from Bussert-Webb's 2017 summer class at *Grace*. During this 2017 site-based course, TCs taught children, provided homework assistance, and helped youth create an electronic newsletter. Each child wrote an article in Spanish,

English, and then purposeful translanguaging; we wanted to ascertain languaging experiences, dispositions, and strategies.

Participants

Respondents included 19 children, ages 6 through 13 (12 females and 7 males). One child had attended school in Mexico, but others attended only U.S. schools. Also participating were their eight mothers, *Grace's* two female staff members, and TCs (12 female and 3 male). Parents, children, and *Grace's* coordinator lived in the colonia. All participants were Latinx from Spanish-speaking homes. Bussert-Webb and Masso are Spanish/English bilingual, but Masso is Latinx and grew up speaking Spanish.

Data collection

Data gathering for this case-study took place in a bounded place (a colonia) and bounded time (May and June of 2017). Bussert-Webb kept detailed field notes of participant observation. Child sources included: daily electronic learning logs and newsletter articles, handwritten hobby essays (see Figure 1), a 5-question language motivation survey (on a 5-point Likert scale), and a 15-question rapport-building activity with TCs. We audio-recorded and transcribed semi-structured child interviews (with 15 questions) and a 9-question TC focus group. Parents and staff completed different 10-question surveys. Data sources, open-ended, focused on children's language, literacy, and schooling experiences and dispositions.

For member-checking, we and asked participants for changes, deletions, or additions to our transcriptions. For peer debriefing, our field notes included conversations with *Grace* staff and each other.

Data analysis

Because we explored children's perceptions and strategies for writing, we chose to use the grounded theory methodology of data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We open-coded data, highlighted initial themes, re-read all data, joined related concepts, and compared similarities and differences vis-à-vis our framework until key themes reoccurred.

Our study abided by Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness guidelines of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. We read data and manuscripts separately and together, included member-checking and peer debriefing, read and included diverse literature, and explained our methodological processes.

Findings

Spanish writing perceptions

Surveys showed 84% of the children reported disliking writing in Spanish. Many expressed unease, characterized Spanish as difficult, complained about writing in Spanish, and wrote less in Spanish than in English; see Table 2. Their negative Spanish-language ideologies related to their reports of English-focused practices in school.

Moreover, we saw no homework assignments or notes to parents in Spanish. Although homework does not present the full curricular landscape, it can influence children's language ideologies. Monoglossic pedagogies strip students of voice and reproduce "racial normativity by expecting language-minoritized students to model their linguistic practices after the white speaking subject" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 151).

Although most mentioned participating in bilingual education, only two children said they read and wrote in Spanish in U.S. schools. Similarly, Smith and Murillo (2012) found schools did not support colonia children's writing in Spanish; thus, parents were "less inclined to resist English-only instruction or advocate for Spanish instruction in their children's schools" (p. 647). Parents may believe their children's U.S. academic success depends on mastering English at the expense of other languages; this relates to schooling and socio-historical contexts (Bussert-Webb, Díaz, & Yanez, 2017).

However, Eliza, age 11, who attended kindergarten in Mexico, told Bussert-Webb, "I love writing in Spanish." Eliza learned to read and write in Spanish during kindergarten. This experience appeared to shape Eliza's positive Spanish-language ideology. Indeed, we internalize, embody, and articulate what we have experienced, heard, and felt, and Eliza's one year in a Mexican school may have influenced her positive articulation of Spanish writing. Furthermore, Eliza's case demonstrates *Grace's* children possessed divergent language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2004).

Translanguaged-writing perceptions

The children's perceptions of written translanguaging appeared negative. They reported feeling uncomfortable because they said teachers told them not to mix languages when speaking and writing. Perceptions are important aspects of language ideology (Kroskrity, 2004). Red, age 12, associated written translanguaging with punishment. He said his bilingual-education teacher wanted his Spanish essay to contain only Spanish. She made him rewrite his entire essays if she found translanguaged words, such as *trocka* [truck] and *lonche* [lunch]. Red said this caused him to feel "*mal"* [bad].

When asked how she felt about written translanguaging, JoJo, age 9, said "I don't like it because the STAAR test might now know it." JoJo believed she would get a lower essay score on this Texas standardized test if she translanguaged. Her statement demonstrates how high-stakes testing, bracketing, and correctness ideologies influenced her translanguaging ideology. Poké, 10, also internalized this correctness ideology. When asked what he thought of written translanguaging, Poké said, "I feel kinda nervous because I might mess up." Messing up relates to lower-order concerns.

The children appeared to equate writing with correctness, an ideology one might internalize in classrooms focused on decodable texts (phonics) and related activities (DeFord, 1981). Vic, 8, consistently brought passages to read aloud for speed, not comprehension. Most homework we saw consisted of English test-preparation and discrete-skills worksheets in English.

Blue, age 13, conveyed a negative translanguaging ideology; he made a distasteful face and called it "Spanglish." Some reported not liking translanguaging "because sometimes [we] get confused when reading it" and others "felt weird writing it," but did not know why. Perhaps they felt weird engaging in purposeful translanguaging because they reported experiencing monoglossic ideologies in school.

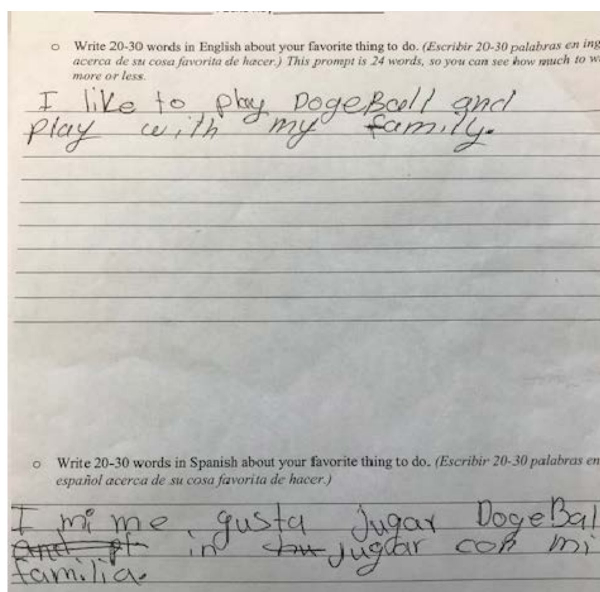
Languaging strategies

Although most reported disliking translanguaging, they used English as an aid for their Spanish hobby essays and newsletter articles. Their language strategies include: context and conciseness, using one language to help another, and correctness ideology. We focused on these strategies: syntactic (grammar, verb conjugations, and sentence structure), orthographic (spelling), semantic (meaning), and lexical (word used).

Context and conciseness. The children's written translanguaging appeared connected to context and conciseness. Regarding the context of academic vocabulary, Blue wrote in his newsletter article, "*Estos elementos acen atoms*" [These elements make atoms]. Perhaps he used "atoms" versus "*átomos*" because he did not know the chemistry term in Spanish since his science classes were taught in English.

Next, some youth may have used English words to save time, which relates to conciseness. Writing "dodgeball" is more efficient than explaining it in Spanish. In her Spanish hobby essay (see Figure 1), Ele wrote: "*A mi me gusta jugar ~~and pl~~ DogeBall in ~~hu~~ jugar con mi familia*" [I like to play dodgeball and play with my family]. *In* could be an orthographic and/or semantic influence of *and* e.g., "Ann -n- Bob." Ele attempted and then crossed out "and pla" [play], which indicates her initial thinking in English.

Figure 1. *Ele's English and Spanish Hobby Essays*



o Write 20-30 words in English about your favorite thing to do. *(Escribir 20-30 palabras en ingl acerca de su cosa favorita de hacer.) This prompt is 24 words, so you can see how much to wri more or less.*

I like to play DogeBall and play with my family.

o Write 20-30 words in Spanish about your favorite thing to do. *(Escribir 20-30 palabras en español acerca de su cosa favorita de hacer.)*

~~I~~ mi me gusta Jugar DogeBal ~~and pl~~ in ~~hu~~ jugar con mi familia.

Likewise, Fula wrote in her Spanish essay, "*Me gasta jugar football, learer, audar a mi mama, audar a mi papa, y mirar basketball*" [I like to play football, read, help my mom, help my dad, and watch basketball]. She engaged in lexical-translanguaging, e.g., football and basketball. Next, *leer* means read, but Fula wrote *learer,* which may constitute orthographic influences from English (e.g., learn or read). Her writing choice may relate to knowing how to spell *read* and *learn*.

Furthermore, *mirar basketball* may be lexical translanguaging. In English we would say *watch basketball,* but in Spanish we might say *ver baloncesto*. Similarly, Fula wrote in her Spanish newsletter article, " … *En futbol tienes que calcular la correcta fuerza y ángulo en orden para hacer el touchdown. Las yard lines también involucran matemáticas porque van por decenas*" [In football you have to calculate the correct force and angle to make a touchdown. The yard lines also involve math because they go by tens]. Fula used lexical translanguaging, e.g., "touchdown … yard lines." She may have searched on her iPad for some terms, e.g., *decenas*. However, Fula kept "touchdown" and "yard lines" in English, perhaps because Spanish explanations take longer. See Table 1 for more examples. Participants used their full linguistic resources for sense-making (García, 2009). These young sociolinguists showed their resourcefulness because most said they did not learn how to write in Spanish when they entered school.

Table 1. *Translanguaging in Participants' Spanish Hobby Essays*

Pseudonym	English Influence in Spanish Essay	English Words in Spanish Essay
Bat	"*Mey mam*" may be English orthographic and lexical influences.	"I like to be with my family too when I get out of school i see my mom happy too and I happy too I love my mom too and gamau too Ke ko mey mam."
Sofi	English orthographic knowledge may have influenced "belota" versus "*pelota*." The onset begins with [b], as in "ball."	Bollyboll, bolly, volleyboll
Supa WW	"My ola mama." "*Me gusta a salir*" may be influenced by English syntax, e.g., "I like to play."	My

Using one language to help another. Inadequate Spanish literacy instruction may explain the children's stated struggles with writing in Spanish and translanguaging. Usually, one's mother tongue is stronger and assists one's target-language (Cummins, 2007). We expected more translanguaging in the children's English writing because participants grew up in Spanish-speaking homes and in 99% Spanish-speaking neighborhood. However, most children reported being stronger in English reading and writing. Thus, when the children wrote in Spanish, they used English to help their lesser-developed Spanish writing skills.

When JoJo wrote her hobby essay in Spanish, she used "I am" in English as a jumping-off spot, "*I am me gusta comer y me gusta cosas*" [I like to eat and I like things]. English lexical items and syntax also emerged in her newsletter article:

> *Mi favorito canción para bailar es Ariana Grande's canción llamada es Problems. Desde que tenía 7 años yo danzado a Ariana Grande's música con mi familia y amigos* [My favorite song to dance to is Ariana Grande's "Problems." Since I was 7, I danced to [this] music with my family and friends].

While "*danzar*" is similar to "*bailar,*" "*danzar*" is more common in the arts. JoJo's use of *danzado,* similar to "dance" in English, appears to be lexical translanguaging. JoJo also used English syntax, e.g., *es* [is] before *Problems* and *favorito* (versus *favorita)* before (versus after) *canción*. Interestingly, the pop song, *Problems*, is in English by Ariana Grande, demonstrating an out-of-school English influence in pop music.

We noticed some Spanish-influenced lexical items when children wrote in English. Ele wrote: "I learn kids need … activities and about my news" (versus news article). In Spanish, one would say, "*mi noticia.*" In the English hobby essays, we noted one case of syntax-related translanguaging, Supa wrote, "I like eat." Standard English is: "I like eating" or "I like to eat." In Spanish, this would be, "*Me gusta comer*". Similarly, Edelsky (2006) found little lexical translanguaging in bilingual children's English writing, but more translanguaging in their Spanish essays.

Monoglossic and correctness moves. Most of the children's English essays lacked voice. Blue and Free, both 13, wrote on separate occasions: "Run, play, fun, happy" and "I like to sing and dance. It is fun." Similarly, Garan (2004) discussed two second grade Latinx; the boy in a discrete-skills classroom wrote simple sentences, e.g., "The dog is good." (p. 114). The boy in a holistic classroom wrote a cohesive account of his dog, "His name is spade and he gots brown dots" (p. 114).

We analyzed erasures in the hand-written hobby essays. Erasures can reflect children's language moves, correctness ideologies, and writing confidence. Saliani (2016) defined erasure as erasing or crossing-out letters or words and then changing spelling, punctuation, or other conventions. In Table 2, participants' erasures focused on usage and spelling; this suggests they internalized strict rules regarding appropriateness, the converse of risk-taking, creativity, and complexity (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Participants had 40 erasures in English and 55 in Spanish. They wrote 464 words in English, but only 375 in Spanish; see Table 2. Although quantity may not

determine quality, Table 2 may demonstrate participants' confidence and skill in written English over Spanish.

Table 2. *Erasures and Language Influences*

Pseudonym and Age	Word Attempt-English Essay	Word Attempt-Spanish Essay	Erasure-English Essay	Erasure-Spanish Essay	Spanish Influence-English essay	English Influence - Spanish Essay	Spanish Words in English Essay	English Words in Spanish Essay
Bat, 7	29	4	1	0	0	38	0	36
Blue, 13	20	19	0	3	0	0	0	0
Día, 10	8	11	3	5	0	1	0	1
Ele, 9	10	11	0	3	0	4	0	3
Eliza, 11	27	28	1	0	0	1	0	1
Free, 13	23	21	0	1	0	0	0	0
Fula, 10	16	16	1	1	0	3	0	2
JoJo, 9	30	38	4	2	0	12	0	12
Messi, 11	14	13	7	1	0	1	0	0
Moa, 9	22	16	2	1	0	0	0	0
Pink, 8	14	15	6	3	0	1	0	0
Poké, 10	98	74	6	17	0	0	0	0
Red, 12	27	25	1	2	0	1	0	1
Rena, 8	26	31	3	12	0	1	0	1
Sofi, 10	38	39	0	3	0	4	0	3
Supa, 6	7	3	1	1	2	1	0	1
Sup, 7	12	0	4	NA	0	NA	0	NA
Vic, 8	22	0	0	NA	0	NA	0	NA
WW, 8	21	11	0	0	0	1	0	0
Total	464	375	40	55	2	69	0	61

Conclusions and Implications

Most children participants internalized beliefs that English was superior to Spanish. When they wrote in English, they had few errors in lower-order concerns.

However, most of their English essays lacked voice, demonstrating an appropriateness ideology (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Although spoken translanguaging is common in our region, most children participants adopted bracketing and English-only ideologies from their schools (Smith & Murillo, 2012). When asked to purposefully translanguage, they expressed difficulty and discomfort, perhaps perceiving translanguaging was incorrect. However, they engaged in written translanguaging (perhaps not realizing it) to assist their lesser-developed Spanish writing.

We recommend interviewing parents and teachers regarding language ideologies. Moreover, exploring translanguaging multimodal literacies with children and parents can be beneficial.

References

Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Bussert-Webb, K., Díaz, M. E., & Yanez, K. (2017). *Justice and space matter in a strong, unified Latino community*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Canagarajah, S. (2011). Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *Modern Language Journal*, *95*(3), 401–417. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01207.x

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *10*(2), 221-240. Retrieved from https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/CJAL/article/view/19743

DeFord, D. E. (1981). Literacy: Reading, writing, and other essentials. *Language Arts*, *58*(6), 652-658. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41961383

Edelsky, C. (2006). *With literacy and justice for all*. Mahwah: NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fishman, J. A. (2001). *Can threatened languages be saved? Reversing language shift, revisited: A 21st century perspective*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, *85*(2), 149-171. https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149

Garan, E. M. (2004). *In defense of our children: When politics, profit, and education collide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

García, O., & Sylvan, C. E. (2011). Pedagogies and practices in multilingual classrooms: Singularities in pluralities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 385–400. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01208.x

Hornberger, N. H., & Link, H. (2012). Translanguaging and transnational literacies in multilingual classrooms: A biliteracy lens. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 15(*3), 261-278. doi: 10.1080/13670050.2012.658016

Kroskrity, P. (2004). Language ideologies. In A. Duranti (Ed.) A Companion to linguistic anthropology (pp. 496–517). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Mazak, C. M. (2016). Introduction. In Mazak, C. M., & Carroll, K. S. (Eds.), *Translanguaging in higher education: Beyond monolingual ideologies* (Vol. 104). (pp. 1-9). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Poza, L. E. (2016). "Puro spelling and grammar": Conceptualizations of language and the

marginalization of emergent bilinguals. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, *13*(1), 20-41. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1103877

Ruíz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *National Association for Bilingual Education Journal, 8,* 15-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/08855072.1984.10668464

Saliani, E. C. (2016). *Revaluing writers in a value-added world: An exploration of the writing of emergent bilingual students.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest. (10149239.)

Smith, P. H., & Murillo, L. A. (2012). Researching transfronterizo literacies in Texas border colonias. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *15*(6), 635-651. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2012.699945

Stewart, M. A., & Hansen-Thomas, H. (2016). Sanctioning a space for translanguaging in the secondary English classroom: A case of a transnational youth. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *50*(4), 450-472. Retrieved from http://www2.ncte.org/resources/journals/

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *American FactFinder*. Washington, DC.: Author. Retrieved from http://factfinder.census.gov

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2017). State community development block grant colonias set-aside. *Hud Exchange*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/cdbg-colonias/

Velasco, P., & García, O. (2014) Translanguaging and the writing of bilingual learners, *Bilingual Research Journal, 37*(1), 6-23, doi: 10.1080/15235882.2014.893270

Woolard, K. A. (1998) Introduction: Language ideology as a field of inquiry. In B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard, & P. Kroskrity (Eds.), *Language ideologies. Practice and theory* (pp. 3–50). Oxford, UK: Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics.