

## **Factors Influencing the Use and the Status of Spanish in Five Bilingual Preschool Classrooms**

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*This study investigates how preschool teachers and aides use Spanish with emergent bilingual children in the classroom. The importance that teachers and aides place on preschool emergent bilingual children's Spanish language development was examined. Teachers' and aides' were interviewed regarding their language orientations and backgrounds and classroom observations were conducted. Findings suggest that the use and status of Spanish in the classroom were influenced by curriculum, teacher leadership style, teacher and aide Spanish abilities, and to a lesser degree, teacher and aide language orientations. Policy and professional development recommendations are discussed.*

### **The Latino Population in the U.S.**

Given the Latino population increase in the United States, the educational needs of this population must be considered. More than 12.4 million Hispanics were enrolled in U.S. public pre-K through 12th grade schools in 2010. The nature of the growth is such that rather than immigrating to the U.S. as children, 70% of emergent bilingual children currently living in U.S. were born in the U. S. Krogstad & Lopez (2014) found that U.S. births, not immigration, are the driving force in Hispanic population growth.

According to the same study, 12.3 million (26%) of Hispanics aged five and older speak only English at home. These children are being exposed to English from birth and are potentially at a greater risk of experiencing Spanish language attrition/loss, unless home language development is supported in their immediate environments.

The Latino population continues to grow while access to bilingual education programs decreases. The 2002 No Child Left Behind Act drastically changed language policy. English acquisition became the priority and the number of bilingual programs in the U.S. decreased (Crawford, 2008; Evans & Hornberger, 2005), in spite of the many known benefits of bilingualism.

### **Benefits of Bilingualism**

Bilinguals show superior mental flexibility and conceptual development (Peal & Lambert, 1962) and enhanced metalinguistic awareness and problem-solving skills (Ben-Zeev, 1977; Feldman & Shen, 1971; Kessler & Quinn, 1980). Bilingualism can foster academic and cognitive advantages (Cummins, 2000), superior executive function (Bialystok, 2010; Martin-Rhee & Bialystok, 2008) and provide protective factors, such as staving off dementia (Craik, Bialystok, & Freedman, 2010).

Bilingualism not only offers significant individual benefits, but societal benefits as well, which are discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper.

Considering the nature of population growth, current political trends in education, and the myriad personal and societal benefits of bilingualism, educators and policy makers must understand attitudes and practices that foster and hinder Spanish development and maintenance. Our society would benefit from embracing a language-as-resource perspective in which all languages are perceived as inherently valuable. Examining the nature of language use in the classroom can provide insight into what fosters and hinders Spanish language development so as to improve the quality of education for young emergent bilingual children.

Spanish language maintenance must be addressed in education. It has been widely documented that immigrant populations often experience language shift towards the majority language (Kohnert & Bates, 2002; Kohnert, Bates, & Hernández, 1999; Montrul, 2005, 2008; Oller, Jarmulowicz, Pearson, & Cobo-Lewis, 2011; Valdés, 2001).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is framed through the lens of sociolinguistics and language orientations. Sociolinguistics informed the present study, as it examined who speaks what language to whom and when (Fishman, 1965; 1972) in order to gain insight into factors contributing to the promotion of Spanish maintenance. It also framed how classroom language was observed and analyzed. Language orientations, for its part, shed light on the factors that influenced the use of Spanish in the classroom, such as teachers' and aides' beliefs and attitudes about language. In this regard, Ruiz (1984) proposed that language orientations frame how people think and talk about language issues. In other words, language orientations legitimate certain attitudes concerning the value of a language. Ruiz (1984) critiqued the "language-as-problem" orientation, and the way the "connection of non-English language heritage and bilingualism with social problems has become entrenched in popular thought" (p. 6). The language-as-problem orientation views language as a social problem that must be identified and then remedied through treatments, such as transitional programs (whereby students transition to English away from Spanish). Efforts to counteract language-as-problem views are based on the language-as-right orientation.

Court cases based on a language-as-right orientation have addressed protections for language minority groups. However, Ruiz problematized language-as-right orientations as doing little to change public opinion, leading to non-compliance. Therefore, Ruiz proposed a third orientation to address the problems inherent in the language-as-right orientation, claiming that language should be viewed as a valuable resource.

Bilingualism affords cognitive, societal, and economic benefits that positively impact our society. Ruiz (1984) proposed that our society would benefit from preserving and developing important language capabilities and that seeing language as

a resource would help change attitudes towards language and language groups. Adoption of a language-as-resource orientation could lead to an overall increase in bilingualism, which some scholars argue can help decrease intergroup conflict, increase cross-cultural understanding, and enhance the ability of different ethnic groups to thrive in our society (Keller & Roel, 1979).

### **Related Literature**

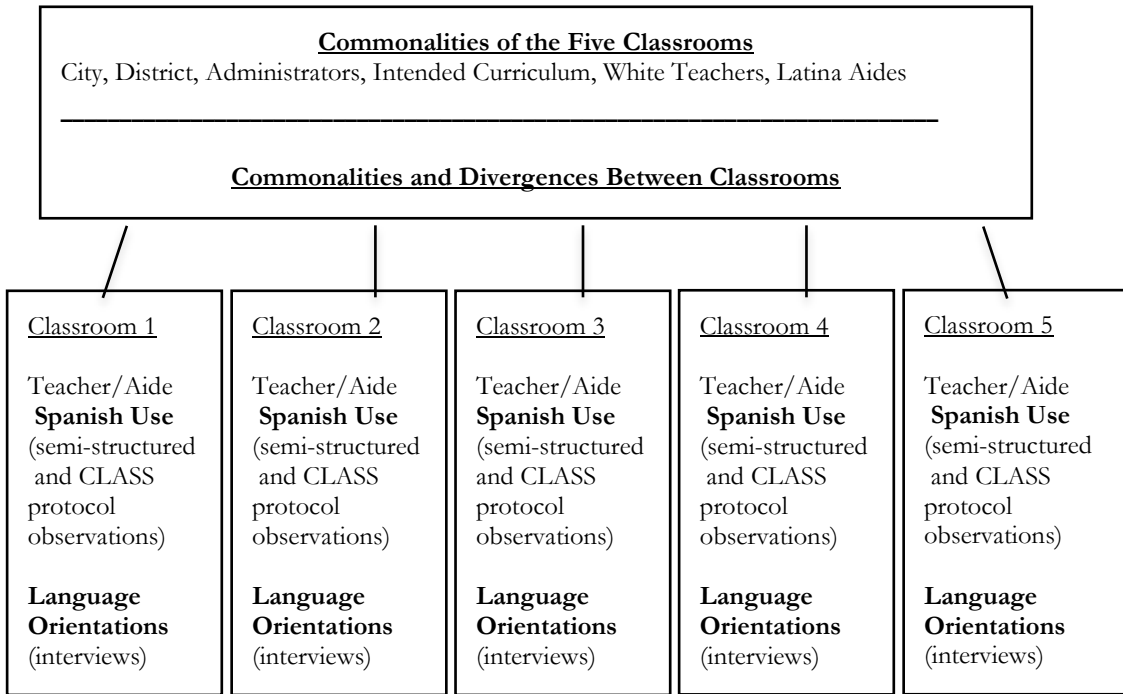
The work of Tabors (2008) describes how social and affective factors influence language learning and highlight that teachers play a key role in classroom language use. Chang et al. (2007) found that teacher's use of Spanish in the classroom was associated with children having better social skills and relationships and stronger child-adult relationships, and an increase in children participation. Yet, Rolstad, Swadener, and Nakagawa (2004) found that promoting Spanish use in the classroom is challenging.

In spite of the many positive results of proactive techniques to promote Spanish, English clearly intruded over time even though teachers' modeling appreciation for the Spanish language helped to elevate the status of Spanish. Lee and Oxelson (2006) concluded that teachers who do not believe in the benefits of bilingualism and do not understand the potential detrimental effects of HL loss are not likely to consider the needs of HL speakers. Teachers' fluency in another language also influenced teachers' beliefs and classroom language practices in favor of HL maintenance. The studies reviewed here suggest that affective factors influence language learning and that use of the child's home language in the classroom can be beneficial for various reasons. These studies also highlight how the elevated status of English can impede the promotion of Spanish use. With this in mind, the present study explored preschool teachers' and aides' stated language orientations and beliefs regarding the importance of Spanish maintenance and how teachers and aides used Spanish in the classroom.

### **Methodology**

A multiple case study approach shed light on how language orientations and the use of Spanish varied from classroom to classroom by combining the qualitative data on the intended curriculum and teachers' stated language orientations with quantitative data (from the CLASS protocol) of how Spanish was used in the classroom for each of the three CLASS domains. The CLASS observation protocol captures the nature of adult-child interactions as indicators of high-quality education preschool to third grade (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; LeParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta, LeParo, & Hamre, 2008). The three domains of the CLASS are Classroom Organization, Instructional Support, and Emotional Support, as shown in the figure below.

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### Setting

The case studies were conducted in five classrooms in a medium-sized mountain town of the United States. In addition to using Creative Curriculum, an add-on Maintenance Transitional Bilingual Education curriculum was in use to promote teaching the curriculum through English and Spanish, provide intensive instruction in English using second language methodology, strengthen Spanish through strong language arts instruction, and foster additive bilingualism with the ultimate goal of bilingualism. Teachers were instructed to use both languages in all areas all day and include the child’s home language in everyday curriculum.

### Participants

Four teachers and five teacher’s aides participated in the study. All lead teachers were white, native English speakers. Only one lead teacher spoke Spanish. All of the aides were Latinas. Three were U.S. born and two were born in Mexico.

Classrooms consisted of Latino and white children at or below the federal poverty level. Table 1 outlines the demographics of all of the children.

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Table 1 *Child demographics*

Classroom	Children's Ethnicity		Classroom Language Preference (teacher report)		
	Latino	Anglo	Spanish	English	Both
1 n = 15	80%	20%	53%	20%	27%
2 n = 16	75%	25%	31%	44%	25%
3 n = 17	65%	35%	47%	53%	0%
4 n = 15	80%	20%	40%	47%	13%
5 n = 17	87%	13%	44%	26%	30%

### Data Collection

Data was collected in one year. Stage 1 of the classroom observations focused on the basic sequence of activities of each classroom and instructional formats. Stage 2 consisted of eight 30-minute observation cycles for each classroom using the CLASS observation protocol-four cycles of whole group circle time and four cycles of small group time.

Face-to-face interviews with teachers explored amount of Spanish and English used in the classroom, teacher/aide attitudes towards L1 maintenance/attrition, teachers' and aides' language abilities and instructional priorities.

### Data Analysis

Teacher and aide interview data was analyzed via a researcher-developed language orientation coding system. Teachers' and aides' comments were coded as language as problem, right, resource, or ambivalence. Their self-ratings of Spanish and English abilities were also elicited. Stage 1 and 2 classroom observation data was used to analyze the classrooms individually and the subsequent level of analysis compared and contrasted the patterns in the five classrooms. Frequency of type of Spanish use according to the corresponding CLASS Domains was calculated. Teachers' and aides' language orientations provided an additional layer for understanding the classroom language use.

## Findings

### Teacher and Aide Language Orientations

No teacher or aide expressed language-as-problem orientations, although one teacher did express an ambivalent orientation. Results suggested that more than stated language orientations, teacher leadership style and Spanish ability were key factors

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influencing Spanish use and status in the classrooms. Considerable incongruence existed between stated language orientation and Spanish use in the classroom. The figure below provides a synthesis of the relationship between the teachers' and aides' stated language orientations and classroom Spanish use, as well as factors that do and do not contribute to the support of Spanish use in the classroom. Discrepancies between teachers' language orientations and Spanish use in the classroom were largely due to teachers' lack of Spanish skills and their minimal intentionality around classroom Spanish use. When aides' language orientation and Spanish use were minimally/somewhat congruent, it was primarily due to their lack of voice in the classroom. Congruence between stated orientation and Spanish use in the classroom was seen with the teacher of classroom 4 and 5, whose stated orientation was ambivalent and use of Spanish was minimal.

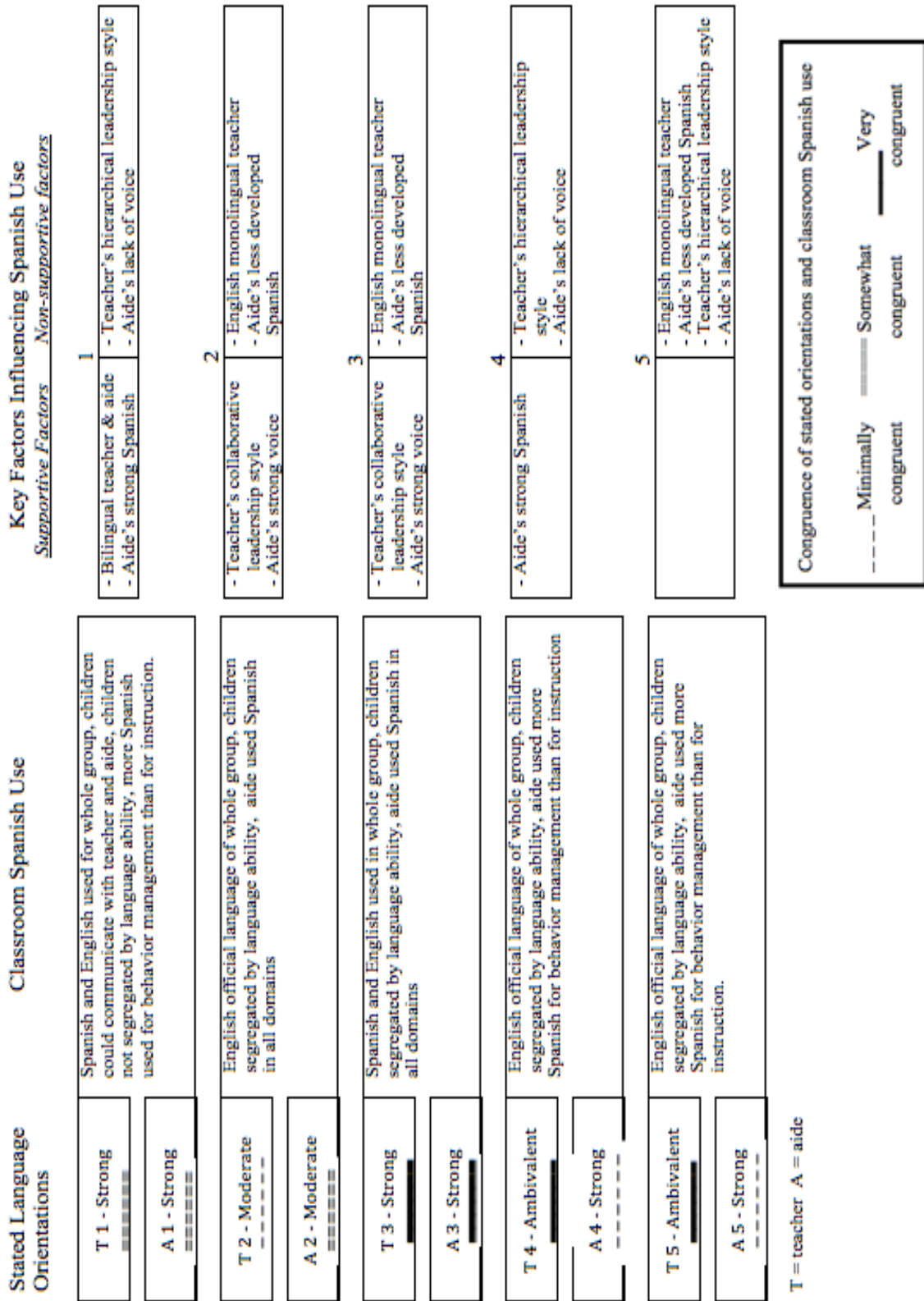


Figure 6. Synthesis of classroom findings.

**Factors Influencing Classroom Language Use and Status of Spanish.**

**Teacher language ability.** The teacher in Classroom 1 expressed a strong language-as-resource orientation, used Spanish in all contexts, and was responsive to students' needs and elevated the status of Spanish. The other four teachers could not interact with children in Spanish. The teacher in Classroom 2 viewed Spanish development as the parents' responsibility and using Spanish in the classroom as a means to facilitate English learning. In Classroom 3, the teacher understood some Spanish but was uncomfortable speaking Spanish. In Classrooms 4 and 5, the teacher did not speak Spanish, did not encourage parents' use of Spanish in the home, and English was the official language of whole group instruction.

**Teacher leadership/teaching style.** Power dynamics and teachers' leadership styles greatly influenced the use of Spanish. In three out of the five classrooms, teachers' hierarchical leadership style led to aides been given menial rather than instructional tasks. Three aides expressed frustration because teachers neither solicited their ideas nor invited them to collaborate. Teachers held the floor and controlled language use in a whole group setting. In two of these three classrooms, English was given status as the official language of whole group and the aides' role was limited to behavior management.

The two teachers with collaborative leadership styles asked aides to contribute ideas and teach lessons, and encouraged both English and Spanish in whole group instruction. These two aides were U.S. born Latinas who lacked confidence in their Spanish abilities and had limited breadth and depth of vocabulary and grammar knowledge. This reflects a systemic issue, as they grew up in the U.S. in subtractive educational contexts (Baker, 2011; Friedenber, 2002; Guerrero, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999).

Possessing a strong language-as-resource orientation and adopting an intended curriculum that values Spanish were insufficient to actively promote extensive Spanish use in the classroom. Spanish use in the classroom was limited if lead teachers did not speak Spanish and if aides who do speak Spanish are not granted a voice and pedagogical responsibilities.

Spanish was used mostly for classroom organization (primarily behavior management), somewhat for emotional support, and minimally for instructional support. Thus, children were exposed to minimal advanced vocabulary in Spanish and were seldom being prompted to analyze, problem solve, and predict in Spanish. Feedback loops encouraging students' reasoning and analysis seldom occurred in Spanish. Gebhard (2004) has documented how instruction for emergent bilinguals can lack conceptual and analytical sophistication. Teachers and aides ended up using Spanish primarily as a transitioning tool into English.

**Intended versus enacted curriculum.** Spanish use was also influenced in by the way the curriculum was enacted. The name of the curriculum, Transitional Maintenance, is



itself contradictory, and teachers and aides unanimously expressed uncertainty about how to enact the curriculum. Aides did not receive equivalent training to the teachers and trainings were conducted in English. This is a systemic problem of leaders failing to recognize the key roles Latina aides play in providing quality and quantity of language input for emerging bilinguals (Pickett, 1989; Rueda & Monzo, 2000), especially if aides are the principal source of Spanish for the children.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

To implement bilingual curriculum with fidelity, avoid segregating children by language abilities, form relationships with children, and meet their needs, teachers need to be bilingual. Dual language programs with teachers who possess extensive knowledge of the second language learning process and an understanding of sociocultural issues unique to emergent bilinguals are extremely successful (Commins & Miramontes, 2006; Howard & Loeb, 1998; Howard & Sugarman, 2007; Takahashi-Breines, 2002).

Latina aides possess essential cultural and linguistic resources and their contributions should be valued. The aides in this study were the primary source of Spanish for the children, but three of the five aides expressed frustration and resentment because they had little or no say in what was taught or how. The main teachers' hierarchical leadership style limited the extent to which, and the ways in which, Spanish was used in the classroom. Aides must be considered integral to the quality of children's education and be granted more of a voice in what transpires in the classroom, particularly if they are the sole source of Spanish. Administrators must prioritize professional development for aides and recognize their importance, especially when qualified bilingual lead teachers are scarce.

Lack of support for bilingual education leads to limited access to bilingual programs, which leads to teachers pressured to transition children to English as soon as possible. Lack of bilingual programs beyond preschool weakens the status of Spanish at various levels. The lack of bilingual programs also leads to limited opportunities for individuals to develop their Spanish, which often leads to Spanish attrition within the U. S. Latino population. This contributes to the dearth of bilingual individuals entering the work force and higher education, which then results in a reduced pool of potential educators with the cultural and linguistic skills necessary to meet the needs of emergent bilingual children.

Providing Latino children with bilingual Latino/a lead teachers trained in bilingual instruction is an essential component of equitable, quality education. Higher education should create pathways for Latinos to access the requisite training to become main teachers (Bernal & Aragon, 2004; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Genzuck & Baca, 1998; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

There is a need for more high quality heritage language programs that help Latinos continue to develop biliteracy and academic Spanish skills (Guerrero, 1997) so that bilingual aides can provide richer Spanish input to the children (Bernal & Aragon,

2004; Valenzuela, 1999). Researchers have problematized the fact that individuals with less developed Spanish are responsible for evaluating children's skills (Pickett, 1989; 1990; Rueda & Monzo, 2000).

Most emergent bilingual children are granted fewer and fewer opportunities to develop their Spanish in additive contexts as they progress through the public school system (Menken & Kley, 2010). The U.S. needs more high-quality bilingual programs in the elementary and secondary levels.

### Limitations

This study could be improved by including a greater number of classroom observations and providing a more detailed analysis of Spanish language use. This would also address the main limitation of the study that Spanish and English use was operationalized in an overly dichotomized manner that did not account for code switching/code mixing.

### Future Research

The field could benefit from more longitudinal studies of classroom Spanish use focused on maintenance and attrition. There is also a need for studies examining the economic, linguistic and educational barriers to higher education that aspiring Latina/o educators face. Future research that focused on teacher training practices that fostered language-as-resource and educational equity would also positively contribute to the field.

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