

Systematic Home-based Reading Practices Strengthen Mexican-American Students' Spanish Oral Fluency in a Subtractive Bilingualism Setting

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Abstract

This partial mixed methods research report explored the impact of systematic home-based Spanish reading practices on Mexican-American elementary students' oral fluency development. Data were collected from 32 US-born primary grade English language learners and their parents. Findings indicated that (a) systematic home-based reading practices have a tremendous impact on children's Spanish oral language development, (b) Mexican-American parents are in need of fostering a new consciousness aimed at developing heritage language literacy environments at home, and (c) children with low HL word per minutes were resistant to reading in Spanish due to their parents' instrumental approach of learning English.

Keywords: Heritage language, home-based reading practices, home literacy environment, Spanish oral fluency, Spanish-English bilingual practices

1. Introduction

Reading and writing are crucial skills for success in school and society. Children who fail to read and to write will surely fail to develop their full human potential. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) reveal that of 40 millions of K-8 students enrolled in public schools in the United States, 60% find learning to read and to write challenging and 30% of this 60% experience extreme difficulty learning to read. This means that a significant number of students exhibit little or no mastery of knowledge or skills necessary to perform work at grade level.

In fact, Reading failure is not only an educational concern, but a significant public health problem (Honig, Diamond & Gutlohn, 2008) as well. Claim has been made that poor reading performance in elementary and middle schools is strongly linked to school dropout and a wide variety of anti-social and risky behaviors in high school years (Lopez, et al, 2007).

A 2006 National Report from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention indicated that the number of Hispanic youth in the juvenile justice system is expected to increase significantly over the next several years.

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Additional research by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) indicated that for every Hispanic student who is enrolled in college, there are 2.7% that are currently incarcerated. The importance of home-based reading practices aimed at preventing not only the development of risky behaviors, but also at ensuring that the acquisition of adequate vocabulary level in heritage language when children, especially those from disadvantaged homes, enter kindergarten has been recently documented (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Gruwell, 2007, Honig, Diamond & Gutlohn, 2008).

In fact, there are several factors that put students at risk for reading failure. Recent research (Honig, Diamond & Gutlohn, 2008) suggested three main sources of reading failure and risky behaviors development for non-special education children. These are related to the following factors: (1) environmental (family), (2) socioeconomic (poverty), and (3) reading instruction. Further research findings compiled by Honig, Diamond & Gutlohn (2008) suggested that poor progress in bridging the reading gap among minority and low-income students can be attributed to the fact that several reading interventions are not ingrained in scientifically-based evidences.

Traditional reading intervention programs are essentially school-based. Therefore, they mainly focus on treating student only. Naturally, these traditional academic treatments for at-risk readers do not explicitly attempt to radically change at-risk students' environmental (family) literacy and reading traditions. Indeed, modification of at-risk students' environmental factor is a strong predictor of unexpected school and behavioral achievement (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008).

Whereas numerous reading interventions programs seek to address this alarming trend among Mexican-American K-12 students, some educational studies (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004) indicated that the most effective strategies for addressing poor reading performance and high drop-out rates among begins in elementary and middle school grades. Actually, success in teaching literacy during the primary grades depends upon effective home-based reading practices during preschool (P-K) years.

For instance, home literacy environments (HLEs) or home-based reading intervention (HBRI) make a significant contribution to early language and literacy development of children; it increases phonological awareness (Burgess, 1999; Evans & Shaw, 2008; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2000; Stephenson, Parrila, & Georgiou, 2008), letter knowledge (Burgess, 2011; Evans & Shaw, 2008; Stephenson, Parrila, & Georgiou, 2008), language and literacy skills (Al Otaiba, Puranik, Rouby, Greulich, Sidler, & Lee, 2010), , interests in literacy (Burgess, 2011; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002), word recognition (Burgess, 2011), vocabulary (Evans & Shaw, 2008; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002) and oral language (Burgess, 2011; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas & Daley, 1998).

Hence, some scholars began to direct their attention to fostering positive literacy and reading experiences and opportunities at home for children. For monolingual children, recent findings (Duursma & Pan, 2011; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Park, 2008; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Roberts, 2008; Steensel, 2006) have suggested that some factors, such as frequency of maternal and paternal book reading to children, home literacy practices, parental attitudes toward reading, numbers of books at homes or socio-economic status of parents positively or negatively associated with children's educational outcomes and home literacy experiences.

For example, Duursma & Pan (2011) used trained local data collectors to interview mothers and fathers about their HLEs when their children were 14, 24, 36 months of age and at prekindergarten. Parents were asked how often they read to their children. Findings demonstrated that in more than a third of the families, both parents reported that they read to their young children on a regular basis (daily or weekly); while "in another substantial proportion (nearly a fourth), children were read to by mothers daily and by fathers less frequently" (Duursma & Pan, 2011, p.1175). Duursma & Pan (2011)' s conclusions encompasses with our own lessons learned from the field regarding the lack of reading traditions among many low-income and low-educated Mexican-American families, especially those who are new immigrants, in South Texas.

In the same vein, Park (2008) investigated the predictors of home literacy factors for 4th grade children who participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in 25 countries. Results showed that children in countries with more favorable literacy environments had better reading performance. In addition, even though there is a reading gap related to parental education, “low-educated parents are engaged often with the child in literacy activities, have positive attitudes toward reading, and have a large number of books at home” (Park, 2008, p.502). In sum, parents play a significant role in creating opportunities for children to participate in language and text as well as boost literacy development in home environment (Carter, Chard, & Pool, 2009; Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998).

Despite the significant contribution of previous research to acknowledging how HLEs impact children’s language and literacy development, there still remains an important gap in the literature. Most attention is paid to home literacy environments of children at very early ages, such as preschool-aged children (Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998; Hindman & Morrison, 2012; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006).

As suggested by Burgess (2011), “In order to understand HLE development and maintenance, it is important to examine the HLE provided to younger children” (p.445) because parents might provide various literacy experiences, activities and resources to their children at different ages. “The HLE provided to young children likely plays an important role in their subsequent oral language and literacy skills” (Burgess, 2011, p.447).

So far, the majority of home literacy research has been exclusively conducted in monolingual population. Therefore, the impact of home literacy practices among bilingual or multilingual population, in a predominantly subtractive bilingualism setting like the United States of America, has not been extensively explored. Therefore, the purpose of this study consisted of exploring the impact of systematic home-based Spanish reading practices on Hispanic elementary students’ oral fluency development in their heritage language. One research question was used to guide this study: In a predominantly subtractive bilingualism setting where Hispanics elementary students are implicitly forced to become monolingual in English quickly, how would systematic and intensive home-based Spanish reading practices impact participants’ oral fluency development in Spanish?

Certainly, the answer to the aforementioned research question, reported in this article, will extend previous researchers’ work regarding HL oral fluency development in predominantly monolingual societies. Surely, it will disseminate knowledge needed regarding how to systematically and intensively train low- income Hispanic parents to read with and read to their children in their heritage language in the United States of America. To help our readers better understand the structure of this article, the next segment we will provide an overview of previous research in relation to the topic of inquiry before describing the research method including data procedures, background of participants, measures, and data analysis. Afterwards, findings and implications will be discussed.

2. Home Literacy and Home Reading Practices

Research (Duursma & Pan, 2011; Honig, Diamond & Gutlohn, 2008; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Park, 2008; Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Roberts, 2008; Steensel, 2006) has long studied types of literacy and reading practices that children experience within home environments. Zeece & Wallace (2009) investigated the use of literacy bags, namely Books and Good Stuff (BAGS) of participants at an early childhood education program. They found that the execution of the BAGS encouraged parents to participate in their children’s home education. In addition, parents played a support role in the development of emergent literacy. Emergent literacy refers to “the skills and reading-like behaviors that are developmental precursors to their conventional and more advanced counterparts” (Evans & Shaw, 2008, p.89). Similarly, Grande & Downing (2004) investigated the effectiveness of literacy bags on first through third graders. Parents were provided with literacy bags to engage their children’s literacy practices. Literacy activities included in the bags were sight word bingo, Lucy the ladybug’s log, file folder games, children’s picture books, and shaving cream.

Weigel, Martin, & Bennett (2006) found that parent-child literacy and language practices corresponded to children's print knowledge and reading interests. Literacy activities at homes included reciting rhymes, telling stories, drawing pictures and playing games, reading together, and watching educational television programs. Later, Evans & Shaw (2008) emphasize the use of shared book reading for vocabulary development and word recognition. It also stands to reason that learning fortified by this literacy activity might reinforce skills taught by parents and enhance children's interests and motivation to sustain their learning as well as in turn make learning at homes enjoyable.

Stainthorp & Hughes (2000) broadly investigated the home literacy environment as library or bookshop visits, newspaper or magazine subscriptions, fiction or non-fiction reading, computer use, writing activities, games with a literacy theme, and parental reading, and found that it was positively related to children's reading performance. In addition, literacy activities were used for pleasure, educational, and work purposes with parents.

Senechal et al. (1998) research findings suggest that children had two types of literacy experiences at home: formal literacy or informal literacy experiences. When parents exposed children to formal, explicit home literacy experiences, they received formal reading and writing instruction by parents and had greater experiences of exploring print *per se*. On the other hand, children are exposed to informal and implicit home literacy experiences when parents read storybooks to their children and had greater experiences of engaging with reading comprehension instead of print. Empirical observational data collected by the authors during field visits suggested that the majority of low-income Hispanic parents, participating in this project, did not engaged their children neither formal and informal home literacy experiences both Spanish and English. The lack of formal and informal home literacy experiences in both languages justified why most of Hispanic children had low vocabulary at the beginning of their formal schooling years. The following section will review the relationship between home literacy exposure and children's language development.

2.1. Home-based literacy exposure and language development

Some recent studies (Kupzyk, McCurdy, Hofstadter, & Berger, 2011; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005) have suggested that home-based literacy exposure has a tremendous impact in children's reading, literacy and language development. For example, Midraj & Midraj's (2011) examined different forms of parental involvement (parent involvement in home-based literacy activities, parent involvement at home-providing resources, and parent involvement at school) on English reading achievement of 186 fourth-graders in the United Arab Emirates and suggested that parent involvement in home-providing resources are associated with reading comprehension and fluency while parent involvement in home-based literacy activities are associated with reading fluency.

The above research findings confirmed the importance of home literacy as predictor of children oral language development, academic reading motivation, phonological sensitivity and word decoding ability in 4- and 6- year-olds claimed by several scholars (Beals & De Temple, 1992; Burgess, Chow, McBride-Chang, & Cheung, 2010; Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Giordano, 1997; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

Research literature exploring our topic of inquiry in monolingual children (Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998; Hindman & Morrison, 2012; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006) or in bilingual students in EFL context (Chow, McBride-Chang, & Cheung, 2010) is really rich. However, researchers know little about Hispanic new immigrant parents' heritage language home-based practices in a predominantly subtractive bilingualism setting. This paper suggests some insights aimed at fostering further research in this field.

3. Methods

As suggested in the introduction, the purpose of this study consisted of exploring the impact of systematic home-based Spanish reading practices on Hispanic elementary students' oral fluency development in their heritage language after participating in a family bilingual (Spanish-English) reading program, designed and implemented by project leaders. Contrary to traditional school-based family reading plans, in predominantly subtractive bilingualism settings, which mainly pretend to develop only at-risk students' reading competencies in English, the proposed intensive family bilingual reading plan included systematic training of parents and children in heritage language home-based literacy practices. It was grounded on a research framework summarized below:

“Environmental stimulation actually changes brain structures and affects the way people think. Hence, brain reorganization depends upon received inputs. Enriched environments stimulate brain changes compare to impoverished ones after as little two weeks (...). Brain reorganization is not a casual process. It occurs when the subject pays attention to the sensory input and to the task. From the aforementioned brain malleability frame, Scientific Learning Corporation recommends students to spend 100 minutes per day, 5 days per week for a considerable period of time to create desired changes” (Scientific Learning Corporation, 2000 Cited in Prensky, M., 2001).

Participants

Given the nature of this project, a partial concurrent mixed methods design was utilized. Quantitative (QUANT) data were collected using quasi-experimental approach, while qualitative data (QUAL) were collected using observation, self-narrative reports, interviews and field memos. Thirty-two US-born primary grade (kindergarten to second grade) English language learners (ELLs) with reading problems were selected, and their parents (at least one) also participated in an intensive bilingual family-reading program. A group of four primary grade students who were fluent and proficient in Spanish, newly arrived in the United States were selected by the Principal Investigator (PI) as “controls” for further comparison. The four control students did not receive additional home reading instruction. Simultaneously, parents were involved in weekly training workshops and reading projects at, home and within the community while participating in the family bilingual reading training. Each training workshop lasted six weeks.

The intensive bilingual (Spanish-English) family-reading trainings were provided by the PI and several pre-service teachers who were trained in family-reading instruction by the project leaders. It included two differentiated treatments: one for at-risk students and another one for their parents.

a) Treatment procedure for students considered at-risk:

All participants were Hispanic and 97% were from Mexican descent (only 3 % were from Guatemala descent). All were from low-income and low-educated families and qualified for free lunch. The students actively participated in a variety of individual and small group bilingual (Spanish and English) reading activities including: reading aloud, shared reading, choral reading, paired reading, echo reading, tape recorded reading, budding reading, radio reading, mumble reading, silent reading, collaborative repeated reading, book talks, book buddies, reader theater, poetry coffeehouses and creative writing practices after school.

Most activities were home-based and led by one of the students' parents/tutors and, at least, one reading instructor. None of the reading instructors were fluent or literate in Spanish. Parents used family reading skills that they learned through active participation in family bilingual reading training workshops as opportunities to explore a variety of reading instruction strategies to help their children develop oral fluency skills in Spanish.

The students spent a minimum of five hundred minutes per week in supervised reading activities at home during this project in bilingual settings (Spanish – English). Each student was assigned two to four reading instructors who were in charge of planning the weekly home-based English reading instruction at home Monday to Thursday. The Spanish reading instruction was collectively planned by the PI and the workshops' attendees. Parents were in charge of delivering the Spanish reading instruction at home or public libraries during two academic semesters. Parents and children committed themselves to this project for at least one academic year (2008 – 2009).

Each student received one or two bilingual (Spanish – English) book(s) weekly to support his/her home-based silent reading plan designed by the reading instructors and PI and workshops' attendees (parents). Each guided bilingual (Spanish – English) home-based reading session lasted approximately sixty minutes (thirty in Spanish and thirty in English) for a total of two hundred and forty minutes of guided reading activities per week in English and Spanish.

Moreover, the target students were required to spend additional one hundred minutes (minimum) of home – based silent reading per week in Spanish, supervised by their parents. The minutes of daily silent reading were recorded by parents using a Spanish reading log. Students were expected to spend at least twenty-five minutes of silent reading daily from Monday to Thursday. Oral fluency tests (Word per Minute – WPM) were performed in Spanish and English at the beginning of each weekly session. Progress was recorded by the English reading instructor and parents/guardians using oral fluency logs. Also, assisted reading technologies were widely used to enhance participants' reading skills. Parents were trained on how to supervise their children's progress using assisted reading technologies. Books and assisted reading technologies were selected by the project leaders.

b) Treatment procedure for parents/guardians

Demographic data was collected at the beginning of each workshop and demonstrated that 85% of participants were female: five of them attended high school and the rest attended elementary and middle schools in Mexico and Guatemala. While the targeted students were participating in intensive reading treatments in Spanish and English, their parents/guardians were asked to participate in three workshops during the project. Each workshop lasted for six sessions. Each weekly session lasted ninety minutes. Parents negotiated the schedule of each workshop with the project leaders.

All sessions were delivered in Spanish by the PI and some invited instructors. The workshops included the following topics: Family reading development, Computer literacy and internet use, parenting and role modeling practices, family violence-alcoholism and drug abuse, new immigrants' home economic management, personality/motivation and human relations. The project leaders made available make-up sessions if some parents were absent. Participating parents received inspirational chapter books in Spanish to read with their children at home monthly. They were invited to read to or with their children at home from Monday to Thursday along with two to four assigned pre-service reading instructors.

Also, parents/guardians were committed to supervise their children's heritage language reading practices at home. The project created a help desk service for all participants. Target students and their parents were assigned specific bilingual reading projects based on a monthly reading list for parents of gifted students. Workshops and family bilingual reading activities were designed to stimulate parents/guardians' consciousness re-constitution regarding the environmental changes they needed to promote in order to create rich reading/literacy settings in Spanish and English at home. Some parents/guardians were encouraged to learn English and were involved in ongoing learning through a local community college.

Assessment included a variety of data collection and testing procedures. The project gathered both qualitative and quantitative data as part of a rich tradition of mixed methods research (Creswell, 2009).

Quantitative measures collected included oral fluency and comprehensive tests completed weekly by the reading instructor. Progress-monitoring reading and oral fluency logs were used to assess students' reading performance. Additionally, parents and students' attitudes and behaviors were measured using standardized tests, such as motivational and cultural competence tests.

Qualitative measures included observations, reports and field visits throughout the program. Interviews were scheduled with target students' parents at the beginning and by the end of each semester to monitor the state of their consciousness re-constitution processes regarding the environmental changes they needed to promote in order to create rich reading/literacy settings in Spanish and English at home. Validity of outcomes was assured by the extensive time spent on the field and by sharing the emerging findings with participants at the beginning of the data analysis and interpretation process.

4. Findings

Data analysis suggested that among participants, only a small number (five families from Mexican descent) were conscious of the importance of fostering their children's heritage language oral fluency development in a predominantly subtractive bilingualism setting. It looked like that many adult participants have been taught (including some ethnic media) that learning English is the gateway for economic success in the United States of America. This misconception led many parents to motivate their children to prioritize the acquisition of the English language over their heritage one: Spanish. As a result, all children (100%), participating in this project, had poor Spanish linguistic competences. They displayed speaking and listening skills but not at their age-level and did not possess reading and writing competences at all.

Moreover, based on their own hardship as involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1998) in the United States, some parents believed that teaching their children to maintain their heritage language will result in a great disadvantage for them in school. These two misconceptions were cleared through active participation in family reading workshops (FRW) where they learned the basic tenets of second language acquisition and literacy development for bilingual children in a predominantly subtractive setting. Parents learned the importance of developing first language competences during preschool years to ensure their children's English language learning processes. Self-analysis of participating parents' childbearing practices during FRW made them conclude that their children did not have the needed vocabulary level in Spanish and English when they started kindergarten. This is due to lack of home heritage language environments and traditions in their families and the lack of reliable heritage language networks as new immigrants. In addition, despite their willingness to support their children home heritage language development process, family poverty situations mandated them to work two or three low-paid jobs which impeded them to be fully active in scaffolding their children heritage systematic heritage language development as suggested by the Principal investigator (PI).

Data described in the following section are only from five students from Mexican descent, whose parents made a clear and explicit commitment to fully support their children heritage language oral fluency development as suggested by the PI. Data analysis from the above five participants illustrated that one of the research findings, applicable for all bilingual families in the same situation, was the importance of creating the heritage language immersion structure and network at home and within the community to ensure Heritage language development. Besides, the home-based bilingual reading practices, the five parents enrolled their children in a variety of after-school activities taught in Spanish such as: soccer, karate, dance, music, church choir, Spanish reading and writing clubs, etc.

By setting up this basic structure, parents made sure that their children learned to speak fluent Spanish like natives without code-switching. Data from heritage language oral fluency logs demonstrated the importance of repeated readings in oral fluency development in both languages.

In fact, by the end of the academic year 2008 – 2009, students who were not able to read and write any single word in Spanish, their heritage language (HL), at the beginning of this project were making huge progress in reading and oral fluency in Spanish. To protect participants’ privacy, we use pseudonyms to present findings. The chart below illustrates the five children’s oral fluency progress in both languages.

Figure # 1: HL and L2 word per minute chart per participant

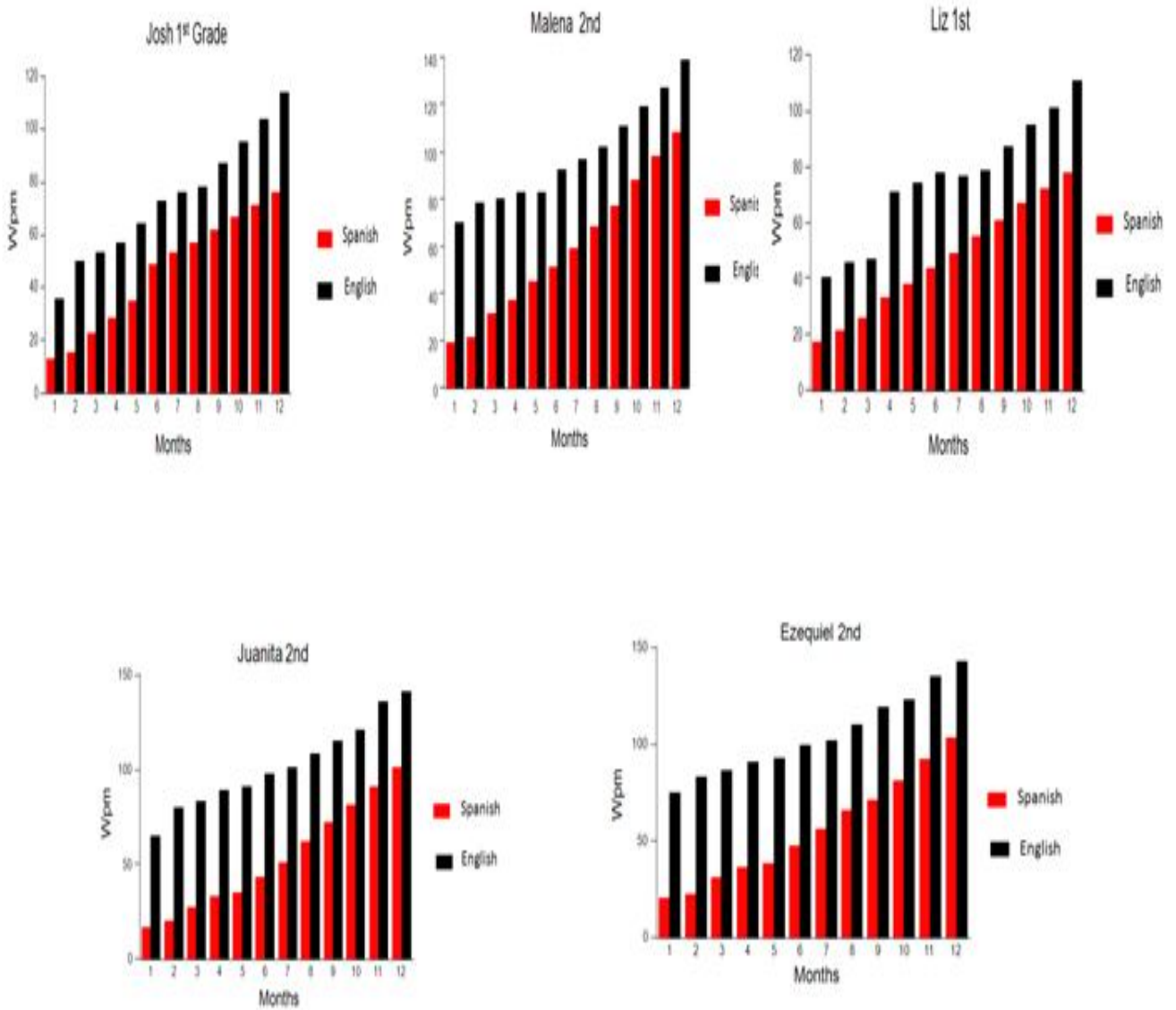
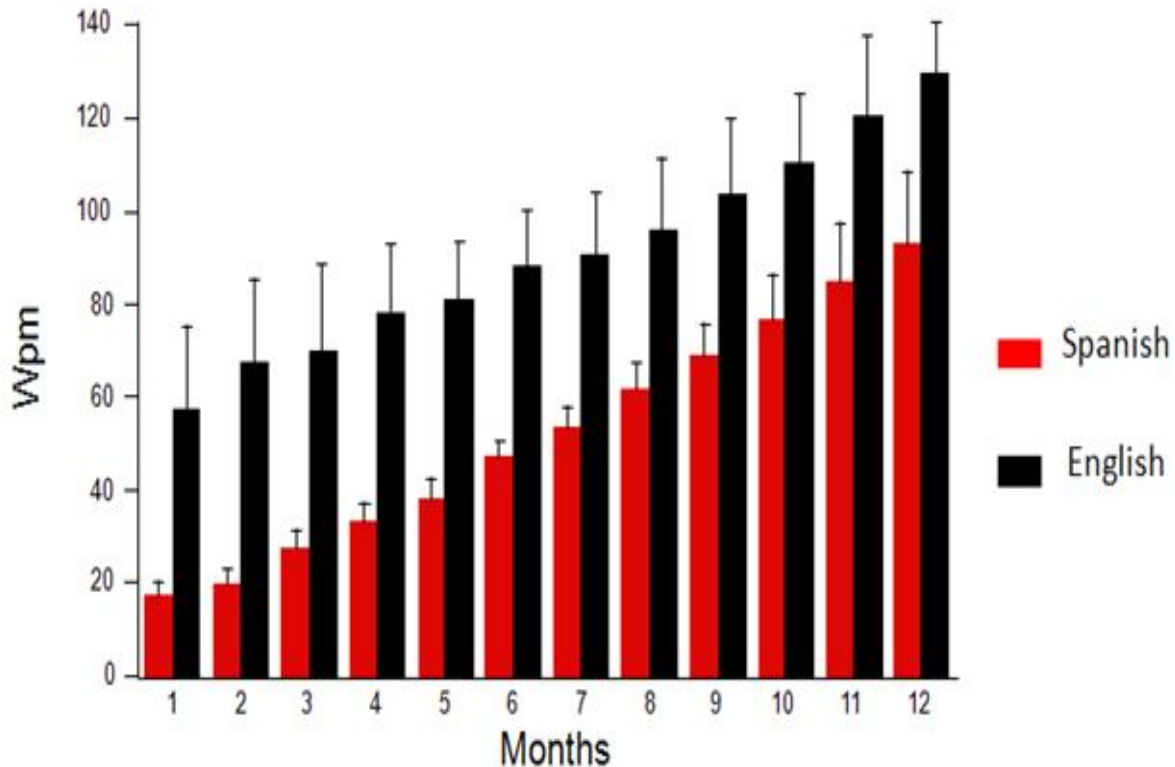


Figure #2: Overall wpm average

The above charts summarized the five children's oral fluency evolution for the first twelve months of the project. It showed that the five children achieved the L2 grade – level oral fluency after seven and eight months of being immersed in intensive bilingual reading practices. However, their heritage language (HL) oral fluency competences started to improve only when they have reached their age-related oral fluency and proficiency in English. Data analysis of oral fluency logs suggested an oral fluency developmental pattern in their HL emerged when they reach their age-related L2 proficiency. First graders were making progress of 4 – 6 WPM monthly in HL and 2nd graders were progressing at 9 – 11 WPM pace monthly in HL.

The above pattern emerged only after three months of intensive home-based bilingual reading practices aimed at infusing the love of HL reading to the children. Kids started to be interested in reading in both languages when they perceived that their parents started to act as their true role models. Also, they were one grade level behind in their oral fluency pace in HL in comparison to their oral fluency in L2 according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress –NAEP- (2005)' standards (See next chart). So, they needed more extra-curricular, linguistic and cultural immersion activities to catch up.

Figure # 2: NAEP Oral Reading Rate

Grade Level	Words Per Minute
1	75
2	100
3	124
4	140
5	150
Higher Text	170

Children's oral fluency rates improved drastically after their first visits at their parents' home countries. From data analysis, it looked like that heritage language oral fluency developmental process of US-born Mexican-American kids can be a backward process from L2 knowledge only when deeply and systematically immersed in HL reading practices and creating the have the required heritage language network for abundant practices oral practices.

Brown (2006) has suggested the importance of strong heritage language (HL) when learning L2. Data Analysis suggested, hypothetically, a different way to foster bilingualism – biliteracy competences among bilingual children with poor heritage language and culture support at home and within a subtractive bilingualism community. Data suggested positive interrelationship between L2 oral fluency and heritage language oral fluency development for children involved in intensive bilingual reading practices. In this case, achievement of L2 age-related oral fluency competences helped them to improve their oral fluency competences faster by transferring L2 literacy skills to learn HL.

From the above word per minute chart, we could postulate that for bilingual children living in predominantly subtractive bilingualism settings, achieving L2 proficiency at or above age – grade level might help strength their heritage language learning process only when they are simultaneously immersed in systematic HL and/or biliteracy processes.

Lessons of history demonstrated that, in an ESL context, not all bilingual children are dominant in their heritage language. Data from this study suggested that the five Mexican American students whose parents to themselves to support their children bilingualism-biliteracy process might potentially become dominant in both languages when reaching their age-related oral fluency and proficiency in both languages. This can be achieved through abundant and ongoing personal and professional use of HL & L2 in both ESL and EFL settings. Furthermore, home-based bilingual reading practices altogether with parents as role – models are powerful instruments to face the subtractive bilingualism trend, deeply embedded in many monolingual-monocultural societies.

Qualitative data analysis suggested that the intensive home-based bilingual reading practices had positive impacts on parents' view of heritage language development in a subtractive bilingualism setting. Family reading workshops deeply changed the five families' lives. They adjusted their lifestyles by creating a bilingual reading (Spanish-English) tradition at home. Certainly, to support bilingual children emerging bilingualism and biliteracy competences in predominantly English speaking society, it was important to create an authentic heritage language immersion. The bilingual family reading practices helped parents to set up this environment. Furthermore, exposure to quality-recorded media (VHS, CD & DVD) was considered as a powerful tool to involuntary minority parents committed to enhance their children bilingualism-biliteracy competences.

Moreover, another important finding, applicable to all low-income new immigrant parents in the same situation, was the impact of parent involvement not only in their children education, but also in their own ongoing learning. Mexican-American children were really motivated to see their parents attending evening English, High school diploma (GED), Information Technology and nursing programs at a local Community College. Being involved in ongoing adult education helped their children value school and its impact in people's lives. Thus, parents started to preach as role models. Through ongoing education, some of them learned a variety of professional opportunities in order to succeed in the United States of America.

Without any doubt, involvement in ongoing learning implied deep schemata and family lifestyle's changes. Parents learned to detect "appropriated teachable moments" to strengthen their children heritage language fluency and proficiency. These five Latino parents were engaged in scaffolding their children process of moving toward the center of both cultures as old-timers. Therefore, children displayed a reduction of L2 oral interference when speaking Spanish because of heritage language vocabulary's increase.

5. Conclusions

Observational and field data collected throughout the life of the project demonstrated that at the beginning of this venture, Children participating in this project struggled to speak Spanish. Even more, they did not want to read with or read to their parents in their heritage language. Through workshops, parents learned that their children were not empowered to direct their lives yet. Adult participants were challenged to develop their sound visions and missions for their families while living in a pluralistic society. Therefore, they were conveyed to do whatever they need to do to ensure a bright future for their children. They learned that their children couldn't succeed in life if they are not fully rooted in both cultures. Only those bilingual children, as argued by Cummins (1986 & 1996), who are positively oriented toward both cultures succeed in life, since they do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group and are not alienated from their own cultural values.

In sum, the following conclusions were drawn after mixed data analysis:

- a) Importance of heritage language (HL) systematic and intensive reading plan, under HL parents' supervisory since children spend 70% of their waking time, including weekends and holidays, out of classrooms and school (Michigan Department of Education, 2001) to achieve effective HL oral fluency development in a predominantly subtractive bilingualism setting.
- b) Mexican-American parents, especially those who are new immigrants, need to develop a new consciousness regarding the basic HL environment that they should promote at home. This was achieved after active participation in family reading training delivered in their heritage language.
- c) Observational data suggested that children with low HL word per minutes were resistant to reading with or reading to their parents in Spanish. This was also due to parents' instrumental approach of learning English.
- d) In a predominantly bilingual setting, data demonstrated that an oral fluency developmental pattern emerged in their HL when they reach their age-related L2 proficiency. First graders were making progress of 4 – 6 WPM monthly in HL and 2nd graders were progressing at 9 – 11 WPM pace monthly in HL. Overall, the five children were one grade level behind in HL oral fluency development after 12 months according to NAEP standards in comparison not only their L2 WPM scores, but also to the comparison group.
- e) More investments in HL linguistic and cultural extra-curricular activities were needed to help them catch up.
- f) Data from parents' self-report narratives and further conversation with the project leaders at the beginning, middle and end of the project suggested the reduction of L2 oral interference in HL when speaking Spanish because of the increase of HL vocabulary repertoire.
- g) Overall, participation in this project highlighted the importance of strengthening bonds and communications between not only Hispanic parents and the majority of pre-service teachers (reading tutors – students), but also between parents and their own children.
- h) So far, in second language acquisition field, claims have been made on effectiveness of HL transfer to L2. Data from this study suggested that in subtractive bilingualism, US-born readers, involved in the process of strengthen their HL, might transfer L2 knowledge to enhance their HL learning processes.

At last, this project demonstrated clearly that low income parents from involuntary minority groups can indeed raise perfectly fluent and proficient bilingual-biliterate children. In this case, parents' mission consisted not only in maximizing exposure to their heritage language and culture, but also to involve themselves in a cross-cultural adaptation process to serve as role-models for their children.

Definitely, participating in this project opened parents' eyes. Five parents gladly took this opportunity to improve their lifestyles. They found out that nothing were impossible. However, they could not teach what didn't know (Howard, 2006).

Therefore, those who were raised in monolingual – monocultural countries needed schools and community support to raise bilingual-biliterate children in a predominantly English speaking society.

To ease Mexican-American parents' anxiety when raising their children in a predominantly subtractive setting, teachers, staff and policymakers are invited to learn and understand the importance of HL in the process of educating bilingual-biliterate children in order to offer quality education for English language learners. Because, US-born bilingual children, from low income and low-educated families, do not possess the required vocabulary competences in either language at the beginning of their formal schooling processes. Therefore, additional resources are needed to help them catch up linguistically and culturally. Conceding high value in mastering the English Language without understanding the wide meaning of life with two languages and cultures might have negative impact on Mexican-American children's HL oral fluency development.

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