

Hablemos Español en Casa

Un proyecto para mantener viva la lengua hispana en nuestra comunidad

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Language Loss among Spanish Speakers

It has been documented many times that one of the major concerns in the Hispanic community is the loss of their language (Krashen 1996, p.51). "In several places fears are expressed that Mexican American children are losing their language, and thus, by implication, denying their proper cultural heritage. (Gumperz 1971, p.117) Even bilingual children often prefer to use English in social situations. Yet, many parents feel powerless to combat this loss, fearing either that the use of Spanish in the home will interfere with a child's English language development, or that their own Spanish is inadequate. These beliefs usually result from their own childhood and school experiences, and were imposed upon them and their own parents before them by a dominant English speaking educational bureaucracy that attempted to eradicate the local culture through its most powerful and apparent component, its language.

The results of this policy can be seen at its extreme in the obliteration of most Native American languages and cultures, the resulting loss of identity and the social problems that seem almost generic in the remnants of tribal cultures. As stated by Gloria Anzaldúa, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language. (Anzaldúa 1987, p.59).

A common practice wherever two languages are commonly used is to interchange or mix them in conversation, even within the same sentence. This is not a phenomenon peculiar to the American southwest, nor to English and Spanish. This code-switching, as it is called, often leads to less and less use of Spanish due to the dominance of English. Even among many who speak primarily Spanish, English intonation patterns are adopted "...as is particularly evident in the Spanish of bilingual Chicano students who have had all their academic instruction in English. (Sánchez 1982, pps.35-36) These interferences are even more pronounced in writing due to a lack of practice in Spanish composition. Borrowing words from English to supplement Spanish vocabulary is also not unusual. Indeed, it is a normal practice, even in Spanish speaking countries. (The reverse is also true; English is a language of borrowed words.) This is not a primary concern as long as the borrowing does not exceed the community norms nor impede communication.

Strong measures must be taken to ensure the preservation of the Spanish language wherever it is challenged; in the home, in the schools and universities and in cultural and social affairs. Though the tide is slowly turning and many parents now realize that

bilingualism is a definite asset they are uncertain as to how to proceed and often lack the confidence to attempt raising their children as bilinguals.

Let's take a look at some encouraging evidence researchers have gathered in favor of learning heritage language Spanish as a child.

The positive reality of Spanish/English bilingualism

Long range studies of bilingual students indicate that those who speak two languages from early childhood, or learn the second language at an early age and pursue the study of their home language in addition to English often excel in school through their academic career. (Thomas 1997, p.14) An above-average percentage of high school students in bilingual programs are placed in honors or advanced placement classes when compared to students who are not in a bilingual program. Strong development of the home language aids students in their English language skills, and students who pursue the study of more than one language generally excel in other academic subjects as diverse as mathematics, science and the arts. Much research supports "the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive advantages. Among the benefits cited...we find advantages in: concept formation, social skills, creativity conservation tasks, visual-social abilities, logical reasoning, classification skills, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility. (Cook, 1990; Cummins, 1994; Díaz Arenas, 1988; Dolson, 1985; Lambert, 1975; Pearl & Lambert, 1962; Schinke-Llano, 1989) (Malavè 1997, p.17)

One of the principal goals of the national Goals 2000 is to assure that all Americans are literate in two languages. Spanish speaking parents have an excellent opportunity to help their children reach this goal because their communities provide access to the culture and language through family, television and radio, newspapers and cultural events. It is essential that parents help their children retain their heritage language.

Our local classrooms are filled with students who understand considerable Spanish, but are reluctant to speak it due to a lack of self confidence and pride in their language. As a result, they repress their cultural identity in favor of the "mainstream culture. Our universities also have a large number of students investing tremendous effort and time trying to relearn the language they spoke as a child, or that their parents spoke in the home. It is unproductive to allow the child's heritage language to wither on the vine and later try to revive it in the artificial environment of the classroom. Understanding how children learn languages is important to understanding the advantages of bilingualism.

Early Childhood Language Learning

The most important thing to keep in mind is that parents do not teach their children a language, but that children learn a language. They do this through imitation, making generalizations, experimentation, and trial and error, all with little conscious effort on their part. All children learn their home language, regardless of its complexity and their own intellectual capacity. (Pines 606) They are unconsciously aware of hundreds of rules that they apply constantly to their speech, even though neither they nor their parents

and teachers can state those rules. They begin with "baby talk and gradually and effortlessly replace this simple language with more mature and expressive language . As long as the words have meaning to a child, he/she will learn them at a comfortable rate, which varies greatly from child to child during the first several years. This difference in rate of language learning among young children is nothing to be concerned about. By the time a typical student graduates from high school, he/she may have a vocabulary of 80,000 words which he has learned in about 16 years, an average of 13 words per day. "No one teaches children 13 or more words a day. (Miller 1998, p.581)

Young children learning two languages have no difficulty in maintaining a distinction between them and learn both languages as quickly as if they were only learning one. The secret is, of course, in keeping the two languages distinctly separate. Many parents have adopted the strategy of "one parent, one language; however, since the mother often has much more contact with the child during the early years she will more strongly influence the child,s early language development. Other parents choose to wait until the child is about three years old before communicating with the child in the second language. Because the child already has a basic understanding of how language and communication works, the child learns the new language quickly and effortlessly. It is important that the first language learned also be used for communication so the second language does not replace the first. Once again , the important thing to keep in mind is that the child will learn both languages with no real effort as long as they are spoken at different times. The bond between the adult and the child, combined with the child,s age are the natural elements that successfully instill language learning. (Hatch 1983, pps.180,188)

However, it is important that we keep in mind that the child will be immersed in an English language environment in many of his/her classrooms, on the playground and by the media. This leads us to realize that the child will learn English, even if it is not stressed in the home.

Emphasize Spanish

Because of the dominance of English in schools, mass media, business and commercial communications, there is little danger of a child not learning English; as a matter of fact, it would be very difficult to prevent a child from learning English after the age of three due to exposure to other children, pre-school and kindergarten, family social functions and reunions in addition to radio, public television, videos, computers and popular music. It is therefore essential to place the most emphasis on learning Spanish. If not, the language will be lost in spite of a healthy bilingual home environment. "Many studies have confirmed the presence of intergenerational shift, the finding that English language use is much more common among children than among parents, and that first language use is much more common among parents than children.... A surprising number of Mexican American children appear to be English dominant for conversational language at a young age. (Krashen 1996, pps.51,55) This is primarily a result of the educational environment, as "...children are influenced more strongly by the language of their peers than by that of their parents. (Marckwardt 1998, p.283) Any parent of school-

aged children, regardless of the language spoken, or whether or not the child is bilingual, can attest to the veracity of that statement.

Even if parents do not have what they consider to be a good education, they can assist in their child's cognitive and academic development at home and provide the first language support that may be missing in the school. By doing this, they are providing the child with a documented advantage by adding to his/her bilingual abilities, in spite of the Spanish language loss in the school environment (additive bilingual environment vs. subtractive environment)(Thomas 1997, p.77) Likewise, parents should not be concerned about a "local dialect or "less than standard Spanish. All speech belongs within a community, whether that community is the workplace, the school, family gatherings or community social events. The community determines that which is correct and standard, and every speaker adjusts his speech to the dominant environment. There is no English that is "correct in all English speaking environments, and Spanish speakers should not be taken in by the mistaken conception that their language is inadequate. It is important to realize that (a) those who make derogatory statements about local varieties of Spanish are seldom linguists or experts in language and communication, and (b) one does not have to defend his/her language.

Major research projects have indicated that children entering school with Spanish as their only language often are functionally bilingual by the third grade, whether they are in classes which emphasize English language development or in bilingual programs. These same investigations revealed that bilingualism should be developed by age twelve. (Collier 1997) This is even more apparent when the children are involved in a high quality bilingual education program. Another, more recent major study concludes that "...US born bilinguals whose first language is one other than English, and bilinguals whose first language is English, as well as non-US. born bilinguals, are not negatively impacted by their early bilingualism. To the contrary (*italics by author*), all groups exhibited a high level of educational and professional attainment. (Malavè 1997, p.37)

The mother has the most input and influence on the child's early language development, but other research has shown that it is often the father who is the most influential in encouraging bilingualism. (Malavè 1997, p.34) Fathers have less contact with young children and their role is supportive, rather than being the primary language model. Therefore, it is important that both parents be directly involved with the child's exposure to languages and that they continue to be involved in later years when the school environment will threaten their bilingualism.

"It is important that Spanish classes for native speakers concentrate on making students aware of the existence of different language varieties and on allowing them to increase their language functions in Spanish to where they can discuss academic, political and technical topics in Spanish and shift from one Spanish variety to another, according to the linguistic and social context. (Sánchez 1982, p.46) An excellent tool for developing an appreciation of the local vernacular and other variations of Spanish is available to many students through dual language bilingual programs.

The role of Bilingual Education

The issue of bilingual education is a separate consideration from the purpose of this informative pamphlet. True bilingualism is academic bilingualism with all four skills, speaking, understanding, reading and writing being equally developed. Extensive long term research has shown that students in quality elementary bilingual education programs consistently outperform monolingual English speaking students once they reach total bilingualism. (Thomas 1997) Advocates of English-only and other opponents of bilingual education programs concentrate on the rapid acquisition of English rather than the quality of English. Students who are monolingual Spanish speakers and do not have exposure to English in the home may take up to seven years to become completely bilingual, but when they reach that point they excel in all areas of study, and continue to grow academically at a faster rate than non-bilingual students. (Thomas 1997, p.14) On the other hand, students who are targets of rapid English acquisition programs, with neglect of their home language, do initially learn English more quickly. It has not been shown that their level of understanding of academic English has reached grade level proficiency. However, the rate of learning slows after the first few years and by the fourth and fifth grade many of these students are falling behind. (Thomas 1997, p.78) Rapid English acquisition, neglecting the home language, in effect creates potential dropouts rather than fluent English speakers.

Some Suggestions for Parents from Research and other Studies

Do academic or school tasks, consisting of reading and telling stories, reading and writing with the children, and helping with homework in Spanish. Encourage people to speak with the children in Spanish, use Spanish on the phone and with relatives and friends. Be aware of the importance of academic practices, but also create opportunities for the children to use Spanish in social contexts. (Malavé 1997, p.37)

The following informal suggestions are from a brochure entitled "COMO HABLAR CON SUS NIÑOS", prepared by the Center for Literacy at the University of Chicago. The brochure is in Spanish and is not translated.

Comparta el orgullo por la cultura y las tradiciones de su familia. Es importante compartir con sus niños historias o cuentos que sus padres o abuelos compartieron con usted cuando era niño/a.

Aprecie las fotografías de su familia junto con sus hijos. A los niños les gusta saber acerca de personas y lugares que están relacionados con usted, ya que también son parte de ellos.

Comparta con ellos juegos, trabalenguas, adivinanzas y rimas que disfrutó cuando era niño/a.

Lea con sus niños e ideen juntos un final diferente al del libro.

Escuchelos con atención e interés. Esta es la mejor manera de premiar sus esfuerzos.

Enseñe a sus niños a enojarse sin herir a otros física o emocionalmente (sin palabras hirientes). El enojo (la cólera) es un sentimiento muy poderoso.

Visite las bibliotecas, museos y otros lugares públicos. Permita que sus niños escojan las actividades por las cuales se interesan. Haga preguntas y comparta las respuestas con ellos.

Escoja un momento, cada día, para sentarse a hablar o a jugar con ellos. Usted puede leer, o escribir, o sólo conversar. Este no es el momento para mirar televisión, o escuchar la radio o hablar por teléfono. Recuerde que los niños imitan lo que ven. Ellos se acostumbran a compartir con usted muchas cosas si los anima a hacerlo. Sus hijos se acostumbran a respetar sus opiniones si usted respeta las de ellos.

Conclusion

Maintaining Spanish as a primary language has many benefits for young children. It:

- (a) instills pride in their culture and language.
- (b) improves communication with parents and elders.
- (c) provides a strong background for English language learning.
- (d) contributes to academic success in later years.

"Correct Spanish is the same Spanish your community speaks and understands. Children will learn forms that are appropriate in other environments when they are exposed to them. Encouraging your child to use Spanish wherever possible is one of the greatest contributions you can make to his/her personal and educational development.

The following quotes from academic research remind us how children learn language and emphasize the enormous power and potential of bilingualism:

"There is no set of rules of how to talk to a child that can even approach what you unconsciously know. If you concentrate on communication, everything else will follow. (Snow 1977, p.26)

"Age is a factor to consider in many areas of learning. In fact, it is the most commonly cited determiner of success or failure in second language learning. (Hatch 1983, p.188)

"...a common estimate is that 90 percent of adult structures are learned by the time a child is seven. (Daniels 1998, p.45)

"...parental expectations in regard to students, educational attainment are extremely important. (Siegel)

"The creation of a bilingual environment which uses two languages simultaneously to foster better understanding and authentic communication will have a positive impact on

children. Monolingual children who come from non-English native homes, whose parents promote bilingualism, can develop two languages in the early grades. Finally, the schools must promote bilingualism in the parents in order to facilitate the development of two languages in their young children. (MalavÉ 1997, p.38)

"Two languages are better than one--for English language learners and for native-English speakers alike. Learning two (or more) languages is the hallmark of the educated person, and is encouraged in the academic circles of the college-bound high school student and in higher education. (Thomas 1997, p.79)

Give to your children and grandchildren the gift of the Spanish language and your culture, and be assured that they will reap many benefits and take pleasure and pride in their bilingualism for the rest of their lives.

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