

# Bilingual Language and Linguistic Identity Development in Early Childhood

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BiLD Lab  
bilingual language development lab


# Outline

- Background
- School
- Research Questions
- Methods and Results
  - Picture Elicitation
  - Receptive Language Measure
  - Parent Interview
- Discussion
- Implications


# Background

Benefits for supporting early bilingual language development

- Cognitive advantages
  - Increased brain plasticity
  - Greater executive function
- Social advantages
  - Communicate with more people
  - Increased interpersonal understanding
  - Earlier development of theory of mind
  - For heritage speakers, academic success in both the home language and English


## Benefits of Heritage Language Instruction

- Heritage language students are viewed by others and view themselves as classroom resources
- Offers heritage language students recognition of their heritage identity and their special relationship to the language
- Allows heritage language students to learn about “the customs, beliefs, contributions, and history of their country of origin” (Carreira, 2007)
- By positioning the heritage language in academic content the language and its speakers are validated and empowered, contributing to children’s sense of belonging, worth and competence



## School

- Puerta Abierta Preschool
- Community-run early childhood education center
- Ages 2-6
- Spanish-immersion
- Half of the students: heritage speakers (HS) of Spanish
- Half of the students: second language (L2) learners of Spanish



# Research Questions

1. What Spanish language gains do children make over time?
2. Do children still maintain English despite attending a Spanish-immersion school?
3. How do teachers cultivate bilingualism in their classrooms?

Story elicitation

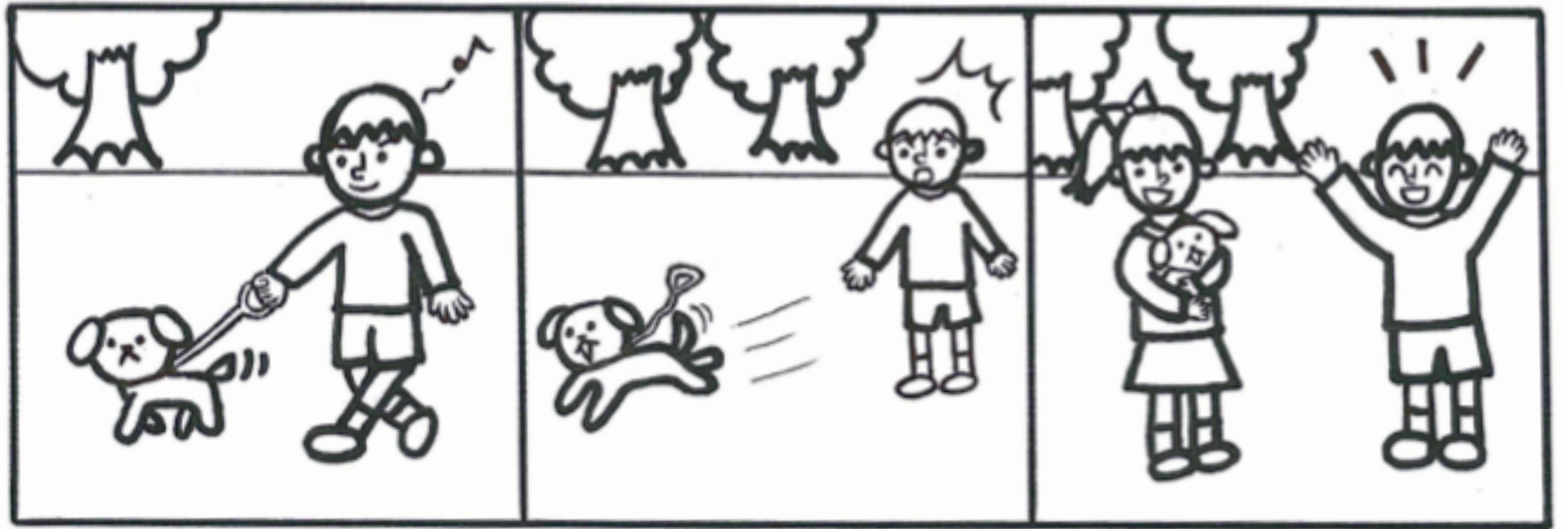
Receptive measure

Teacher interview and classroom observations

## Methods - Story Elicitation



- One-on-one task
- Sequence of 3 pictures that tell a simple story
- Child was prompted to describe the pictures in each frame to tell the story
- Examiner was NS of Spanish, used only Spanish
- Each child completed 3 stories



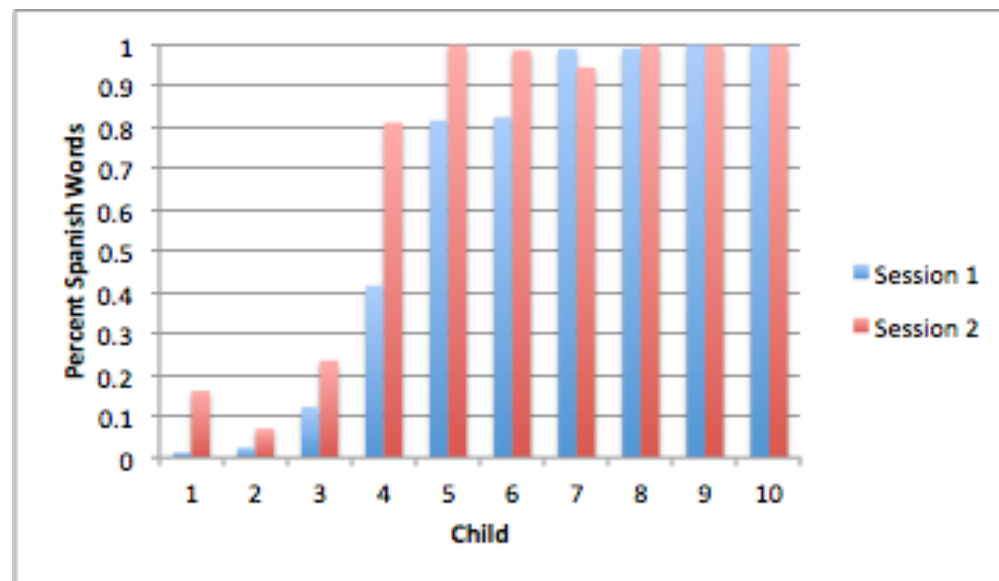



## Results - Story Elicitation

- N = 10 (5 girls, 5 boys), ages 2;4 to 4;9 at first session
- Two elicitation sessions one year apart
- Paired-samples t-test - determine whether the mean difference is significantly different between first and second elicitation sessions (one year apart)
- Percent of Spanish used (words)

The one-year enrollment in the immersion school resulted in a **statistically significant increase** in the percentage of Spanish used during the picture elicitation task,  $t(9) = 2.452, p < .05$ .



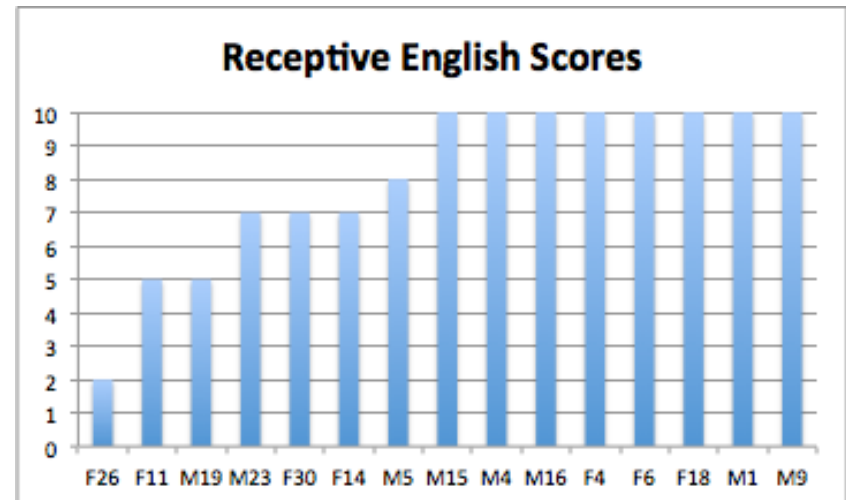


## Methods - Receptive Language

- Simon says/Simón dice - both languages
- Receptive language - listening comprehension
- Subsection of preLAS2000 Oral Language
- 10 items
  - Examples: Simon says put the pencil under the paper
- Administered by NS of each language
- 4-5 year olds

## Results - Receptive Language

- N = 18 (8 girls, 10 boys)
- Receptive English scores:  $M = 8.06$ ,  $SD = 2.52$
- Receptive Spanish scores:  $M = 7.73$ ,  $SD = 2.34$
- Paired t-test revealed **no significant difference** between English and Spanish scores,  $t(14) = .500$ ,  $p = .625$ .
- Despite the two different language backgrounds of students, no overall difference between English and Spanish proficiency
  - Kids with Spanish at home: receptive English is just as good as English-speakers
  - Kids with English at home: receptive Spanish is just as good as Spanish-speakers




## Methods - Teacher Interviews and Class Observations

- Class Observations
  - Over 31 hours of longitudinal classroom observation data across two years
- Teacher interviews
  - Teachers and administrators were given a structured interview with open ended questions about bilingualism, the linguistic environment in the classroom and their experiences in their classrooms.
  - Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and were given in Spanish (the teachers' dominant language)


## Results - Teacher Interviews and Class Observations

- Teachers use a variety of strategies to cultivate bilingualism in their classroom including: repetition, signing, recasting, code-switching, accommodation.
- The children model these behaviors themselves and use them with their interlocutors.
- Children are highly receptive to their interlocutors; they tend to speak Spanish with teachers and with children they perceive to not know English, and they speak English among themselves
- Students are not socially concerned about code-switching; they use it as part of the bilingual repertoire of communicative strategies
- The children use both languages to project their bilingual identities. They feel proud to be able to communicate with the teachers, sing the school songs, be understood by all interlocutors at the school.
- Students invest in and prioritize Spanish. When speaking with certain interlocutors they prioritize language choice over content and development (length).



# Discussion

Research questions revisited:

- 1. What Spanish language gains do children make over time?**
  - Significant gains in amount of Spanish produced in identical task
  - Suggests powerful impact of immersion-type schooling for minority language development
- 2. Do children still maintain English despite attending a Spanish-immersion school?**
  - Yes, English scores are just as good (if not better) than Spanish scores
  - Suggests that English development is **not** at risk as a result of Spanish-immersion education
- 3. How do teachers cultivate bilingualism in their classrooms?**
  - Teachers' heteroglossic practices encourage bilingual development and children's heteroglossic world views
  - The children's language learning is a complex social practice that reveals their investment in their bilingual identities



## Implications

- Findings reveal that regardless of language spoken at home, the immersion context of the school allows for both groups of students to excel not only in Spanish, but also in English
- Additionally, the linguistic and cultural environment created by the teachers contributes extensively to children's bilingual identity and heteroglossic world perception
- Suggests importance of early heritage language development: provides opportunity to **“affirm the values of their own cultural heritage while acquiring an understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of other cultures”**




## Future Directions

- Going forward
  - Explore longitudinal language gains both in Spanish and English
  - Investigate what happens to language and identity beyond preschool



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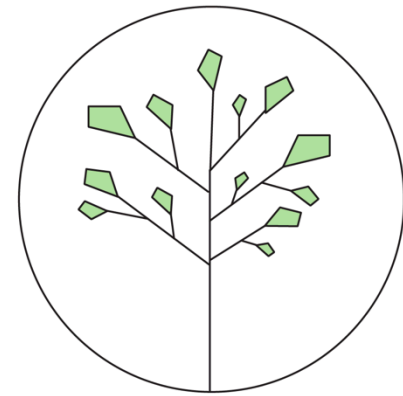


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