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Language Choice and Use by Bilingual Preschoolers: Evidence from a Spanish Immersion Preschool Context in Chicago

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Bilingual Language Development Lab

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BiLD Lab
bilingual language development lab

Bilingualism in the US

- Students who come to school with a LOTE are quickly transitioned to English, few opportunities to maintain HL
- Developing bilingualism is generally not supported by the mainstream educational system (Garcia, 2013)
- Dual immersion programs in the US are among the most successful at developing language proficiency for both HS as well as L2 learners
- However, despite the benefits, these programs are quite rare:
 - 824 two-way immersion schools in U.S.
 - 20+ in Chicago (174K Latinos in CPS, 47%), 4 are early childhood

Language Choice

- Factors that contribute to language choice (Ghimenton, 2015; Lee, 2003; Montanari, 2009):
 - Proficiency in a language
 - the interlocutor's language
 - the social context/power dynamics
- Young children (both L2 and HS) negotiate language ideologies, especially in minority language environment (e.g., Spanish classroom) (Volk & Angelova, 2007)
- Children pick up on language preferences as soon as they are able to communicate (Montanari, 2009)

Goals

- Investigate data from Spanish immersion preschool in the Chicago area
- Examine two groups of students:
 - Heritage speakers (HS) of Spanish
 - Second language (L2) learners of Spanish who speak English as their first language (L1)
- Language choice and use

The Present Study: Context

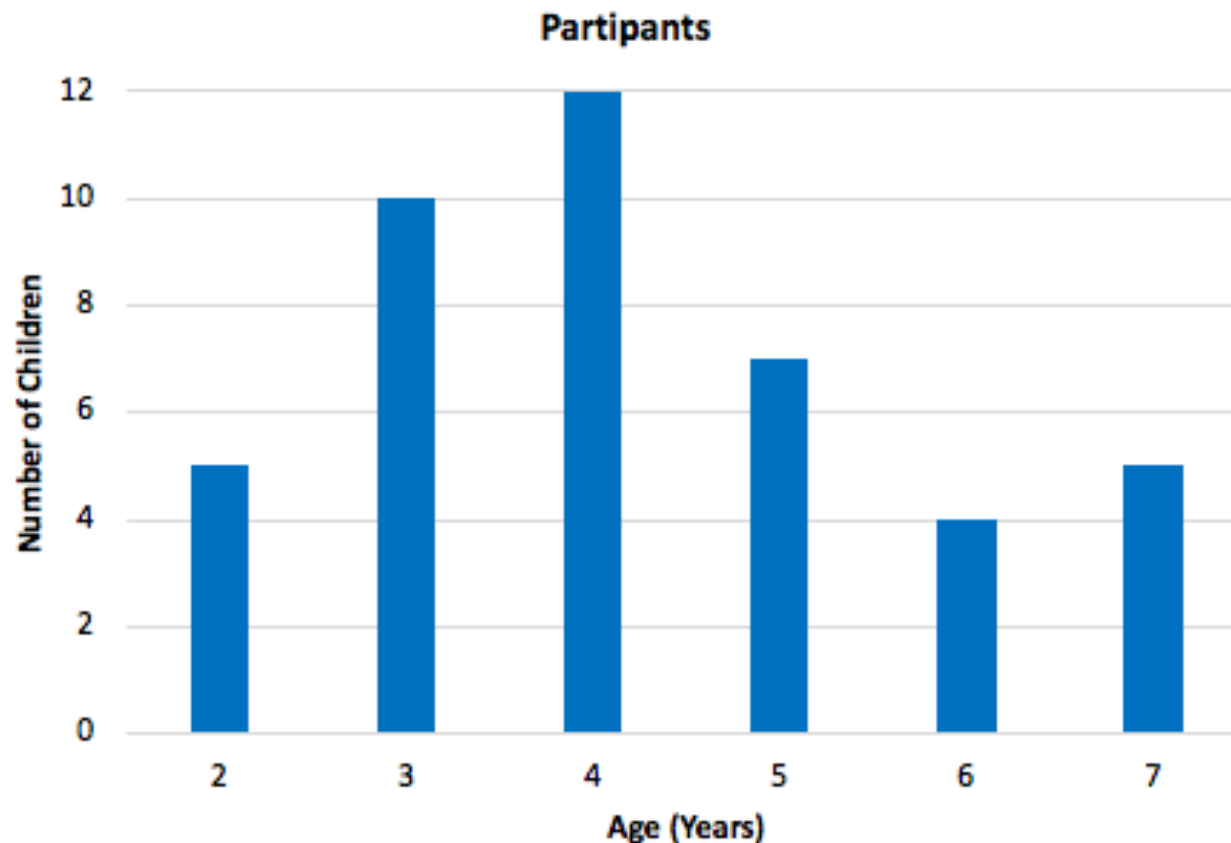
- Puerta Abierta Preschool
 - Community-run early childhood education center
 - Ages 2-6
 - Spanish-immersion
 - Students' backgrounds: 2 groups
 - L2: Exposed to English from birth, no exposure to Spanish prior to attendance
 - HS: Exposed to Spanish from birth, exposure to English varies

Research Questions

1. What language choices do children make when the language of the school and dominant language differ?
2. What factors contribute to language choice and use?

Participants

43 students (23 female, 20 male)



Participants

- Language dominance at onset of study (by parent report):
 - 7 children: dominant in both
 - 21 children: dominant in English
 - 15 children: dominant in Spanish
- All students have receptive skills in both languages

Procedures

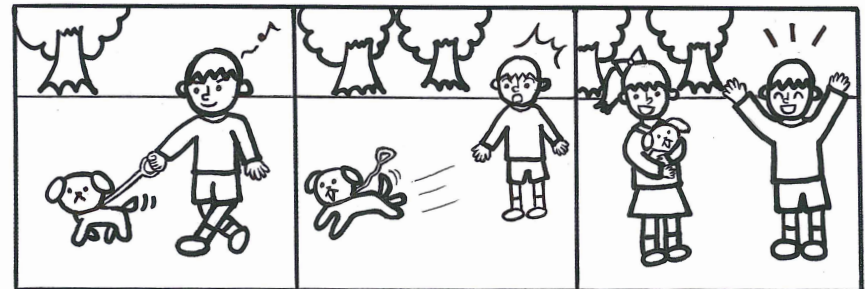


Naturalistic Observation

- Observe during regular classroom time (usually free play periods)
- Children interacting with each other and with teachers in centers around the classroom
- 23 hours of observation

Story Elicitation

- One-on-one task
- Sequence of 3 pictures that tell a simple story
- Child was prompted to describe the pictures in Spanish to tell the story



Results

Research Question 1

What **language choices** do children make when the language of the school and dominant language differ?

Findings from Observations

- Children overwhelmingly use English with each other, regardless of language background or dominance **(97% of the time)**
- Children use far less English and tend to attempt to use more Spanish with the teachers and adults in the school **(50% of the time)**

Examples from observations

M12: Do you want this one? <offers book>

M10: Yeah I want that one

M12: I want- I want that one

M10: Want that one?

<RAs join students reading on the rug>

M12: <to one of them>: ¿Te enseño?

“Should I show you?”

Findings from Elicitation

- Children who produce 90% or more Spanish
 - N = 20
 - Ages 2;7 to 6;10
 - Tend to produce about 106 words, MLUw = 3.03
- Children who produce 20% or less Spanish
 - N = 12
 - Ages 3;4 – 7;2
 - Tend to produce about 140 words, MLUw = 5.72

Findings from Elicitation

F26 (age 4,5): used **Spanish 99%** of the time, **English 1%** of the time

- HS, total words 144, MLUw=3.78
 - en la piso** (on the floor)
 - con la nena** (with the baby girl)

F6 (age 4,3): used **Spanish 1%** of the time, **English 99%** of the time

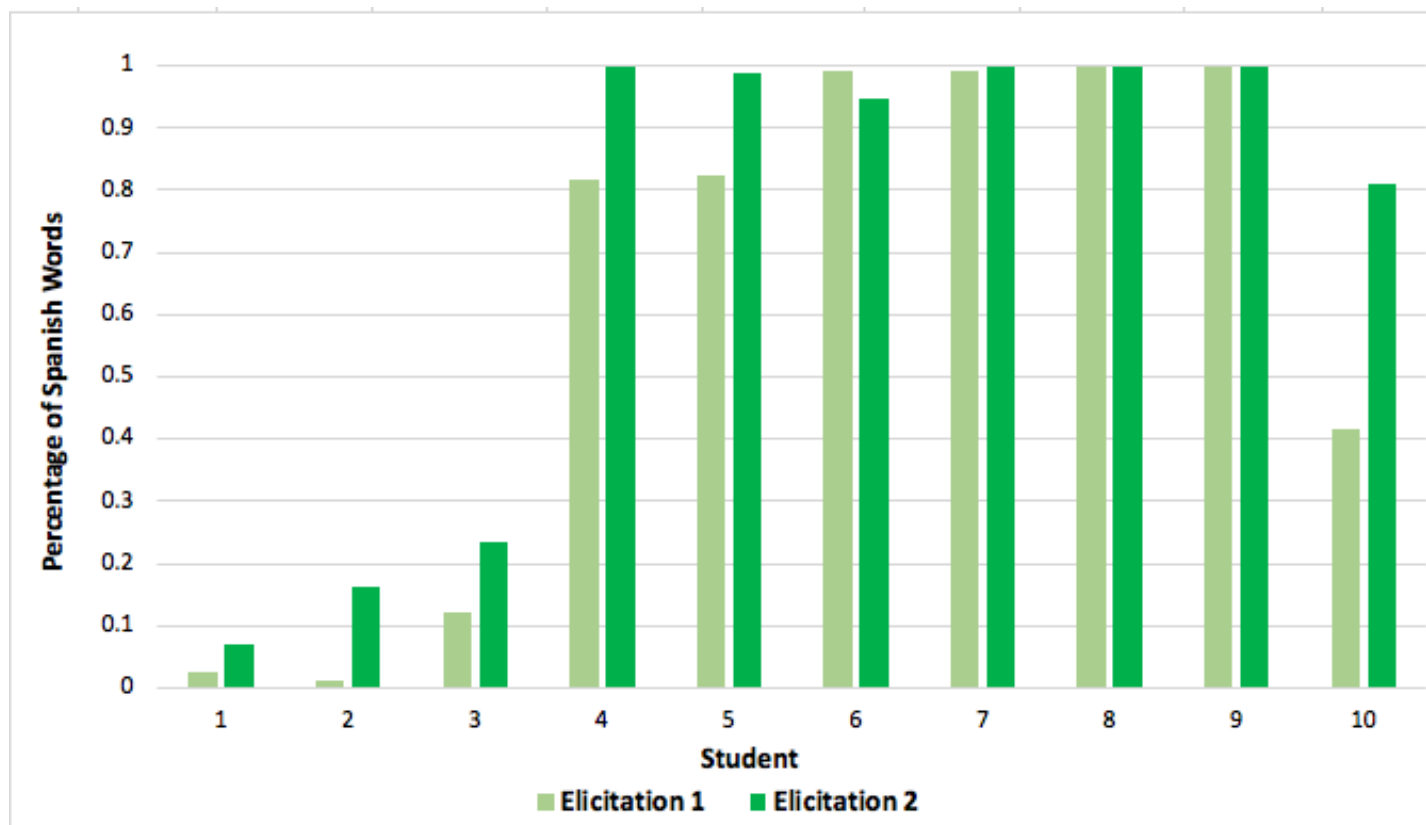
- HS, total words 159, MLUw=14.5
 - first she was playing with a ball, then she was cold because it was raining
 - then a little girl um-helped her get feel better because she was so cold she wanted a umbrella.

Results

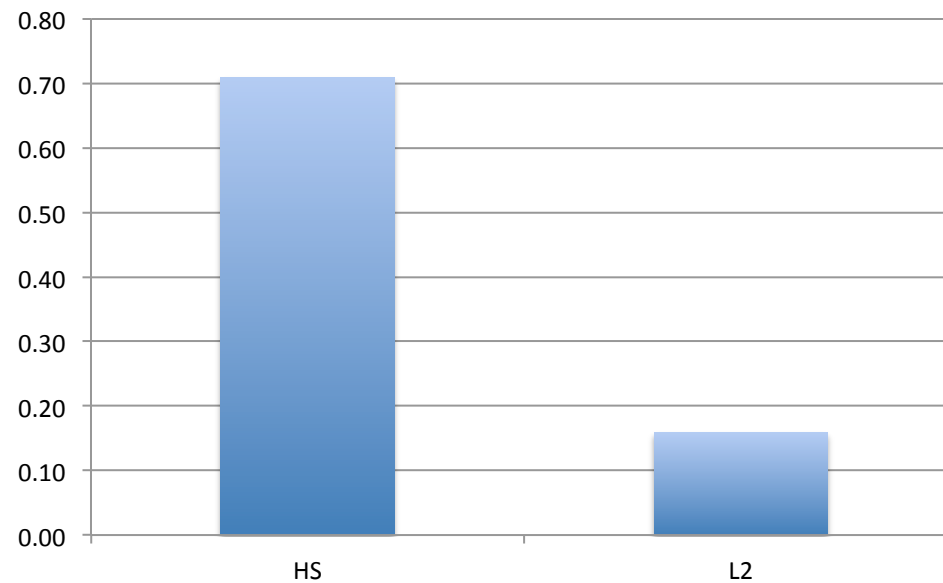
Research Question 2

What **factors** contribute to language choice and use?

Percent Spanish Word Production from E1 to E2



Elicitation 1 results: overall Spanish production



- The HS used more Spanish during the elicitation task ($N = 37$, $M = .71$, $SD = 0.33$) than L2 speakers ($N = 6$, $M = .16$, $SD = 0.12$).
- Independent samples t-test showed significant difference between groups, $t(14.480) = 5.849$, $p < .001$.

Prediction of Spanish Production in Elicitation Task

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>β</i>
Intercept	-.366	.248	
Age	.009	.002	.362*
Language Background	-.026	.123	-.022
<u>MLUw</u>	-.067	.017	-.394*
Dominant Language	.136	.059	.248*
Spanish Exposure	.206	.041	.576*

Note. * $p < .05$; B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE_B = Standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient

Other factors more important than Language Background?

Case Studies



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Sebastián



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Case Studies



Erika

Age	% Spanish Words	MLUw	Total # Words	School Language	Spanish Exposure	Gen	# Spanish Speaking Parents
7;4	79%	1.91	44	English Only	0-25%	3	1

Age	% Spanish Words	MLUw	Total # Words	School Language	Spanish Exposure	Gen	# Spanish Speaking Parents
7;2	86%	6.31	183	English Only	75-100%	2	2



Nancy



Melissa

Age	% Spanish Words	MLUw	Total # Words	School Language	Spanish Exposure	Gen	# Spanish Speaking Parents
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L2!

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Elizabeth

- Implications: HS vs. L2 learners
 - In early childhood, factors other than language background (purely HS or L2) matter more
 - Language dominance
 - Amount of language exposure
 - Generation
 - Language of the school
 - # of Spanish speaking parents
 - Strict or blurred line?
 - Evidence that in early immersion contexts L2ers pattern like HS

- Implications: Linguistic hegemony
 - Preschool children at Puerta Abierta are not immune to the hegemonic forces of English, despite institutionalized support for Spanish
 - Early perception of language preference (Montanari, 2009) and power dynamics (Ghimenton, 2015)
 - However, at an early age they learn to navigate language switches to accommodate interlocutor preference (namely, Spanish with teachers/adults) despite proficiency

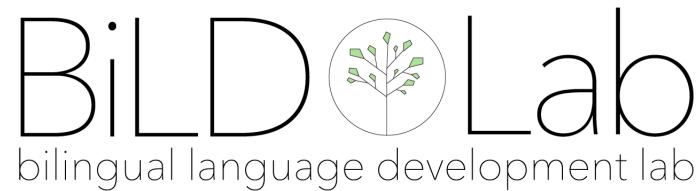
Summary

- Children differentiate **language choice** by interlocutor
- They **use** Spanish at the cost of longer, more descriptive utterances and complex syntax
- Despite the immersion environment of the school, they **use** English frequently
- Significant difference in Spanish production between HS and L2 speakers ($p < .001$)
- However, when other factors aside from language background were entered into model, found that dominance ($p = .026$) and exposure (and $p < .0001$) were more important

Implications for Education and Future Directions

- Language immersion programs in early childhood may mimic minority language exposure at home
- Blur the lines between HS and L2 speakers
- Simply using Spanish as the language of instruction may not be enough to counteract English hegemony
- Lee (2003) asserted that attention needs to be given to children's social interactions and the power dynamics they imitate and enact within classrooms that disregard the outlined educational policies

Thank you!



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