



The role of positive peer interactions and English exposure in Spanish-speaking preschoolers' English vocabulary and letter-word skills[☆]



Francisco Palermo^{a,*}, Ariana M. Mikulski^b

^a University of Missouri, United States

^b The Pennsylvania State University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 April 2013

Received in revised form 22 July 2014

Accepted 26 July 2014

Available online 8 August 2014

Keywords:

Preschool

English vocabulary

English literacy

ABSTRACT

We examined the extent to which positive interactions with peers and the amount of English exposure received from them during social interactions in the fall of preschool contributed to low-income Spanish-speaking children's ($N = 107$; $M_{\text{age}} = 53$ months; $SD = 4.30$ months; 56% boys) English vocabulary and letter-word skills in the spring (controlling for parents' language use, family income, number of English books at home, and children's nonverbal cognitive abilities). We also examined the mediating roles of children's learning behaviors (e.g., attentiveness, independence, initiative, persistence, and participation) and English oral proficiency in the classroom. The association between positive peer interactions and English vocabulary skills was mediated by children's English oral proficiency, whereas the association between positive peer interactions and English letter-word skills was mediated by children's learning behaviors and English oral proficiency. The associations among peer English exposure and children's English vocabulary and letter-word skills were mediated by children's English oral proficiency. There was also evidence of a transactional association between positive peer interactions and children's learning behaviors and between peers' and children's English oral proficiency. The findings highlight the importance of peer experiences in fostering Spanish-speaking preschoolers' English vocabulary and letter-word skills.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Many families in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home. This is also evident in school settings, where 21% of the students are dual language learners (DLLs) and 71% of them speak Spanish (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). In Head Start preschool programs, 27% of students are DLLs, 84% of whom are Spanish-speakers (Schmidt, 2012). Given that most U.S. schools instruct in English only, many DLL children face unique challenges upon entering school because they need to know enough English to comprehend teachers' instructions, engage in classroom content, and participate in classroom discussions *before* they can begin learning fundamental academic skills, including vocabulary and literacy. Additionally, many of these children are from low-income

households, and their parents have relatively low educational backgrounds and are unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, thus elevating their children's risk of underperforming academically (August & Hakuta, 1997; Kieffer, 2008). The difficulty of overcoming these challenges is evident in that many Spanish-speaking students persistently lag behind English monolinguals in English vocabulary and word reading skills, with the performance gap generally widening over time (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011). Limited English proficiency is a critical underlying factor that hinders Spanish-speaking children's ability to keep pace with English monolinguals in school (Halle, Hair, Wandner, McNamara, & Chien, 2012). Thus, it is important to identify the factors that foster Spanish-speaking children's English abilities prior to entering formal schooling.

Preschool classrooms provide an excellent setting for enhancing Spanish-speaking children's English abilities because preschool may be the first time many of them are exposed to an English-language learning environment. Also, much learning occurs in the context of social interactions, particularly with peers, and social interactions play a fundamental role in the language acquisition process. Children learn a language (whether first or second) by

[☆] This study was supported by grant number 90YF0062 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded to Ariana M. Mikulski, Richard A. Fabes, Carol Lynn Martin, Laura D. Hanish, and Francisco Palermo.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 573 884 0932.

E-mail addresses: fpalermo1@gmail.com, palermof@missouri.edu (F. Palermo).

engaging in social interactions that provide language exposure, practice opportunities, and conversational feedback (De Houwer, 2009). During day-to-day routines, Spanish-speaking preschoolers are likely to engage in social interactions with peers more than with teachers, and these interactions with peers play a key role in fostering English acquisition (Aukrust, 2004; Chesterfield, Chesterfield, & Chavez, 1982; Palermo et al., in press).

Based on the strengths-based resiliency framework (Lamb-Parker, LeBuffe, Powell, & Halpern, 2008) and the interaction hypothesis for second language acquisition (Long, 1996), we examined the extent to which positive peer interactions and English exposure are associated with Spanish-speaking preschoolers' English vocabulary and letter-word skills, with the associations mediated by their ability to communicate in English (henceforth referred to as English oral proficiency) and learning behaviors in the classroom (e.g., independence, persistence, initiative, and attentiveness). Data were gathered using naturalistic observations, teacher and parent surveys, and standardized assessments. Positive peer interactions and peer English exposure were expected to relate positively with children's English oral proficiency (DeThorne, Petrill, Schatschneider, & Cutting, 2010; Hammer et al., 2012) and learning behaviors (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Reiser, 2008). In turn, English oral proficiency and learning behaviors were expected to relate positively with children's English vocabulary and letter-word skills (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Miller et al., 2006).

Positive peer interactions and children's English skills

The strengths-based resiliency framework suggests that naturally occurring factors in educational settings foster at-risk children's learning (Lamb-Parker et al., 2008). Positive peer interactions—characterized by behaviors such as sharing, helping, and cooperating—is one of these factors (Bulotsky-Shearer, Bell, Romero, & Carter, 2012). They provide an enjoyable setting for children to develop ideas, explore, solve problems, make decisions, and practice skills collaboratively (Damon, 1984; Piaget, 1959; Rogoff, 1998). Children also practice language and engage in literacy-rich activities, such as taking notes, identifying relevant books, and pretending to read them (Andresen, 2005; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). By working together, children coordinate ideas and build on each other's knowledge and experiences to promote learning.

Notably, positive peer interactions may benefit children who are at risk of struggling academically due to economic disadvantage. For example, Cohen and Mendez (2009) found a positive link between teacher ratings of low-income African-American preschoolers' positive peer interactions and receptive vocabulary skills. Also, in a study of Head Start preschoolers, Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2012) found a positive link between teacher ratings of fall positive peer interactions and children's spring learning outcomes, including early reading, writing, and book knowledge. The work of Hampton and Fantuzzo (2003) suggests that the benefits of positive peer interactions may extend to children's early school performance. In a sample of mostly low-income African-American children, they found a positive link between teacher ratings of positive peer interactions in kindergarten and children's average report card grades in first grade.

The above research suggests that positive peer experiences might enhance children's learning of vocabulary and literacy, including that of low-income, ethnic-minority children. However, the majority of this literature has focused on English-speaking children. As such, the extent to which the findings can be generalized to Spanish-speaking children who are learning English as a second language is unclear. The work of Galindo and Fuller (2010) highlights the potential that positive peer interactions have to facilitate these children's English academic skills. Using a representative

sample of Latino kindergarteners in the U.S. from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K), they found that teacher ratings of fall interpersonal skills (i.e., the ability to form and maintain friendships and willingness to help other children), predicted positive changes in kindergarteners' math test scores across the fall and spring semesters. These findings were not specific to Spanish-speaking children, but they are consistent with the idea that positive peer interactions may be associated with their academic abilities.

English exposure from peers and children's English skills

For successful English acquisition, English exposure is required. Research suggests that classmates can be valuable sources of English exposure for Spanish-speaking preschoolers (Chesterfield et al., 1982; Palermo et al., in press). Nevertheless, many of them attend classrooms with varying numbers of English- and Spanish-speaking students. As such, the amount of English exposure that children receive from peers is likely to vary based on the extent to which peers speak English relative to Spanish. This makes individual differences in peer English exposure an important variable to consider.

The interaction hypothesis for second language acquisition suggests that linguistic interactions among children, including those that occur between two second language learners, foster Spanish-speaking children's English oral proficiency by providing English exposure, practice, and opportunities to enhance comprehension (e.g., by peers repeating, elaborating, or simplifying their English speech; Long, 1996). Support for this idea stems from several studies (Aukrust, 2004; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996). For example, Chesterfield et al. (1982) observed the peer interactions and language use of six Spanish-speaking preschoolers in bilingual (Spanish-English) classrooms at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year and found that those who interacted mostly with English-speaking peers were likely to exhibit the greatest gains in English oral proficiency. Similarly, Palermo et al. (in press) examined the extent to which English exposure levels from family members in the home and teachers and peers in the classroom uniquely contributed to Spanish-speaking preschoolers' English vocabulary skills. Parents reported children's levels of English exposure at home. Multiple observations per week were gathered on the frequency of teachers' and peers' English use during interactions with children in the classroom. After accounting for the contributions of English exposure from family members and teachers, Palermo et al. found that English exposure from peers uniquely enhanced Spanish-speaking preschoolers' later English expressive vocabulary skills. Thus, English exposure from peers might play an important role in shaping Spanish-speaking preschoolers' English vocabulary knowledge. The present study extends this work by using the same sample of Spanish-speaking preschoolers to identify the mediating processes that account for the link between peer English exposure and children's English vocabulary skills.

The link between peer English exposure and Spanish-speaking children's English literacy skills is less clear due to a dearth of research. Filling this gap is important because peers are integral members of children's social contexts and the available evidence hints that linguistic experiences with classroom peers may enhance Spanish-speaking children's literacy skills. Informal peer play conversations in preschool, for example, have been positively associated with English monolingual children's narrative production, print awareness, and letter recognition skills (Bergen & Mauer, 2000; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Pellegrini, 1980). Similarly, the work of Nicolopoulou and colleagues (Nicolopoulou, 2002; Nicolopoulou & Cole, 2010) suggests that classroom activities in which English-speaking preschoolers create stories and act them

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/353810>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/353810>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)