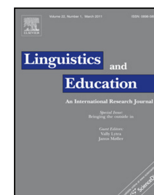
Linguistics and Education 25 (2014) 24–39

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/linged



"¿Cómo se dice?" Children's multilingual discourses (or interacting, representing, and being) in a first-grade Spanish immersion classroom

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 28 December 2013

Keywords:
Language immersion
Speech community
Scaffolding
Multilingualism
Discourse
Dialogic speech
Appropriation

ABSTRACT

At the Spanish Immersion Elementary School (SIES), most students speak only English at home, but they soon speak Spanish—and other new discourses—at school. Taking a socio-cultural approach, this qualitative study used critically oriented discourse analysis to examine: how did first-grade students at SIES appropriate multiple languages and discourses during classroom activities? In turn, how did they support each other and their teachers in creating new discourses? Data included weekly field notes and six hours of video from four months of participant observation. Analyses demonstrated that teachers' structured, whole-group activities fostered children's Spanish while small groups fostered diverse language use. In whole groups, students appropriated ways of interacting, representing, and being that resembled teachers and translators. In contrast, students wrestled with multilingual, identity discourses in small groups. This pushes the field of language immersion education forward by moving beyond the quantification of language use, production and achievement. Highlighting how youth scaffold language development, appropriate new discourses, and create speech communities in multilingual contexts has implications for the design of language education.

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1. Introduction

It was Friday morning in a small U.S. city in the Midwest. In Profesora Ana's[1] first-grade class at the Spanish Immersion Elementary School (SIES, a pseudonym), children were sitting in a circle taking turns asking questions to "la estrella de la semana" (the star of the week). On this day, Delmar was the star of the week. Profesora Ana called on Donny to question Delmar:

Donny:	¿Cuál es tu (*turning from Delmar to Profesora Ana*) ¿Cómo se dice cartoon? [Which is your . . . how do you say cartoon?]
Profesora A:	¿Qué? [What?]
Donny:	¿Cómo se dice cartoon? [How do you say cartoon?]
Profesora A:	Dibujos animados.[Cartoons]
Donny:	(*Looking at Delmar*) ¿Dibujos animados *favorito*?[2] [Favorite cartoons?]

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[1] All place and person names in this report are pseudonyms.
[2] Words are transcribed exactly as children spoke; the grammatical errors, which we note by underlining and italics, are not corrected.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2013.12.001

In this immersion classroom, a diverse set of U.S.-born, mostly English-dominant students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds regularly asked their teachers "¿Cómo se dice?" (How do you say?). After employing this common practice—or scaffold, designed by their teacher—they almost always put their new words to use. With limited exposure to anything but English outside of school, this was one way they actively participated in conversations and academic activities in Spanish. Observers to their school were often impressed at their linguistic abilities, noting that for most of these young children, their home language or L1 was English.[3] Even more impressive, perhaps, was that this group of children and teachers came from various countries and socio-economic classes. Thus, as a group, they were using multiple varieties of English and Spanish and bringing a range of discursive practices to school, which likely shaped the learning environment.

Language immersion classrooms like these are dynamic and complex settings in which children simultaneously learn academic content while acquiring a new language. The most common immersion schools are "one-way" and "two-way." The elementary classroom described above was considered an early one-way (or foreign language)[4] Spanish program because it provided 80–100% of instruction in a new language to students who were dominant in the area's majority language of English (Tedick, Christian, & Fortune, 2011); at SIES, most students came to school as monolingual English speakers. In contrast, two-way (or dual language) programs enroll children from two different language backgrounds and teach content material in both languages. With goals to develop students' bilingualism, inter-cultural competence, and academic success (Tedick et al., 2011), we argue that both kinds of programs may provide new ways not only *of speaking*, but also *of being*.

Studies on language immersion education have focused largely on measuring academic achievement, literacy outcomes, and language proficiency, as well as the cognitive benefits of early second language learning (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Barik & Swain, 1976; Bialystok, 2005; de Courcy, Warren, & Burston, 2002; Landry, 1973; Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). In addition, a small but growing number of studies have examined the socio-cultural contexts of both one-way and two-way programs (Broner, 2001; Gort, 2008; Medina, 2010; Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001; Olmedo, 2003; Potowski, 2004). However, most language immersion research has neglected the diverse linguistic and discursive practices that emergent bilinguals[5] (García, 2009) bring to and create in such environments. We know little about how immersion students develop cultural understandings and identities (Wesely, 2012)—or new ways of *interacting* and *being*—through their new languages. Because sociocultural, dialogic, and discourse theories of language suggest strong interactive connections between languages and identities (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005; Hicks, 1996b), we used Bakhtinian ideas of dialogue and critically-oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Rogers, 2011) to examine a diverse, one-way, Spanish language immersion classroom. This project interrogated "language-in-use" (Gee, 2011), with these research questions: How did first-grade students at SIES appropriate multiple languages (varieties of English, Spanish) and discourses (ways of being, representing, and interacting) during classroom activities? In turn, how did they support each other and their teachers in creating new discourses?

To summarize this introduction, language immersion schools, which are growing exponentially across the U.S. (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2013), aim to provide students access to new ways of speaking and being, but few studies closely examine the processes involved (García & Sylvan, 2011; Lee, Hill-Bonnet, & Raley, 2011; Olmedo, 2003). To provide teachers with a deeper understanding of the complex social and linguistic contexts of language immersion classrooms, this study examined weekly field notes and six hours of video collected through four months of participant observation. After describing our conceptual frameworks and methods, we analyze how students used their multiple languages and shaped others' discursive practices in whole-group activities, as well as spontaneous dialogues that occurred in smaller, peer-led interactions. The conclusion considers implications for teachers and future research.

2. Conceptual frameworks

Broadly, this project employed a socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978), which highlights how teaching and learning occur within social interactions, where experts help novices "internalize" new ideas. However, language and learning does not only flow from expert to novice, from the outside to the inside. Instead, as Bakhtinian theories of dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981,

[3] In some areas of this manuscript, we follow the linguistic convention of noting students' first, dominant, or home language as "L1" and the language at school or second language as "L2." This works for almost all children in one-way immersion contexts, where their L1/home language is English and L2/school language is a foreign language for them, such as Spanish. However, there were a few children in our study that spoke Spanish at home; thus, Spanish was their L1 *and* the school's target language, while their L2 was English. Some immersion schools also have children growing up in fluently bilingual homes, where two languages constitute their L1. Therefore, we also define students' languages as their *home language(s)*, versus the *school* or *immersion language*.

[4] Because most one-way immersion students come from homes that speak the area's majority language (in the U.S., English), one-way students are essentially studying a foreign language at school (at our study site, Spanish). Therefore, such programs are sometimes called "one-way immersion programs" and sometimes, "foreign language immersion programs." Because two-way immersion programs use two languages to teach content material and mix students from two language groups, they are sometimes called "dual language" programs and are often considered one type of "bilingual education" designed for children from U.S. immigrant families.

[5] Here we borrow Ofelia García's term, "emergent bilinguals," to describe *all* students in one-way and two-way language immersion programs, even though this term was coined originally for children from U.S. immigrant homes who speak additional languages other than English. In the case of language immersion schools, however, bilingualism *emerges* for English-dominant children as well, so we believe this term is useful for any individuals who are using/learning more than one language in their daily lives. We recognize the special political importance of using the term "emergent bilingual" rather than the deficit-laden "English Learner" or "Limited-English Proficient" for youth from minority/immigrant homes, so we hope that using "emergent bilinguals" more broadly also meets the political purpose of recognizing that monolingualism should not be the "sole standard" (Garcia, 2009, p. 323).

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