

Bilingualism and Bilingual Education: The Child's Perspective

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This study explores the understandings that young Mexican-American students develop about the status of languages and language use in their bilingual school. The term *linguistic ecology* is used in this paper to describe the communicative behaviours of a group, as well as the physical and social contexts in which those exchanges occur. The data strongly suggest that children in bilingual classrooms discern the critical lack of support to maintain their first language. This case study documents and interprets the social and educational processes through which bilingual children in one US school come to appreciate the prestige and power of English versus Spanish. It is through their recognition of the greater social status afforded English — even in bilingual programs — that motivates them to transition away from their mother tongue.

I perceived that establishing 'whose language counts' for purposes of schooling reflected and reinforced the balance of power and prestige between social groups.

(Edwards, 1982: 516)

Bilingualism and bilingual education have been the object of study for nearly three decades in the United States. Contrary to public opinion, the scholarly literature reveals a high rate of language loss among minority-language speakers (cf. Crawford, 1995). While children are in a better position to become bilingual when a minority language is spoken at home (Saunders, 1988), research indicates that '*ethnolinguistic minorities in the United States lose their ethnic mother tongue fairly completely by their second or third generation of encounter with American urban life*' [emphasis in original] (Fishman, 1991: 168). For their part, Hispanics are linguistically assimilating faster than any other wave of immigrants in US history (Veltman, 1988). Seven out of 10 children of Hispanic immigrant parents have English as their mother tongue (Veltman, 1990).

The experiences of minority children in US schools makes them aware of the limited social status their home culture and language receive within the broader society. Though a fortunate few become bicultural and balanced bilinguals, studies of minority communities indicate that language maintenance is the exception and not the norm. In the foregoing quotation Edwards (1982) describes the incessant social and linguistic battles in which English language learners are engaged. Though schools may strive to create linguistically and culturally supportive environments, there exist insidious and compelling factors that contribute to language loss.

In this paper I argue that, as a result of naturalistic quantitative and qualitative assessment in their school environment, young children infer that the linguistic goal of schools is English dominance. Students perceive both overt and covert

indications regarding language use in school, which they interpret to mean they should abandon Spanish and become English-dominant as soon as possible. Such indicators include: (1) the paucity of materials in their native language; (2) the less-than-optimum fluency of their teachers in the students' home language; and (3) the overwhelming presence of the English language — even in bilingual programmes — as signs that English is valued over the native languages in the school and the wider society (represented by the school).

To explore this supposition, a study was conducted to describe and analyse the social and linguistic realities of a bilingual first grade that would contribute to or deter the development of Spanish. By doing so, it also documents the social and educational processes — large and small — through which bilingual children in one US school come to appreciate the prestige and power of English versus Spanish.

Review of the Literature

Language policy

Language shift in minority communities has been attributed to various social, historical, political and economic events. The emergence of anti-German language statutes at the beginning of World War I curtailed public use of the language for several decades (Crawford, 1995) and diminished the number of native speakers in the United States. Similarly, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, anti-Asian sentiment was so strong that several states passed laws banning the use of Japanese, greatly reducing the number of native speakers.

Recorded history notes how American Indian languages have been exterminated, along with their speakers, under duress by federal agencies. 'Under strict "English-Only" rules, students were punished and humiliated for speaking their native language as part of a general campaign to wipe out every vestige of their Indian-ness' (Crawford, 1995: 27). In their research with members of the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona, Lipka and McCarty (1994) find that before the advent of the Rough Rock Demonstration School in 1966, 'most students attended mission or federal boarding schools. Stories abound of the psychological and physical abuse inflicted on children at federal schools, as well as the alienation of parents from all aspects of school life' (Lipka & McCarty, 1994: 268).

The Bilingual Education Act (BEA) of 1964 held great promise for providing educational parity for language minority students. However, with each passing year and each presidential administration the funding for the BEA (Title VII) decreased while the programmatic demands for more English increased. The trend has been 'to intensify the goal of English proficiency, to the point of promoting English-only instructional programmes under the aegis of Title VII' (Ruiz, 1995: 73). In sum, federal policy toward minority language speakers and minority language maintenance has ranged from monstrous cruelty to benign neglect (Lipka & McCarty, 1994).

Pedagogy and school practices

Other factors that contribute to language loss occur in schools. Studies indicate that in bilingual classrooms: (1) more time is devoted to English instruction (Paulston, 1982); (2) more communication occurs in English, even during those

periods which have been reserved for minority language instruction (Edelsky & Hudelson, 1989); (3) few bilingual teachers have high levels of proficiency in two languages (Ada, 1986; Baca & Chinn, 1982; Shuy, 1981); (4) the personnel of bilingual schools, even those who possess a high degree of fluency in a minority language, utilise more English in the school environment (Edelsky & Hudelson, 1989); and (5) resource materials (e.g. textbooks, charts, videos, records) in languages other than English are fewer in number and often less appealing than their English-language counterparts (Allen, 1993).

Children and language selection

The literature on language loss in children, while convincing, has ignored a key component in the process: the child. For this study, I argue that it is not the mere existence of hindrances or deterrents in the environment that determines language shift, but rather the children's recognition, interpretation and internalisation of those negative messages from the broader school community that prompts language loss.

Werner Leopold (1939) published perhaps the most famous if not the most influential study on child bilingualism. Using his daughter Hildegard, he constructed a case study on her language development in German and English. Through this seminal work, Leopold demonstrated that young children are able to distinguish the language abilities of people in their environment and make conscious language choice accordingly. Similarly, Saunders (1988), through a case study of his offspring, showed that children develop and maintain their ability to distinguish language dominance of speakers and listeners.

This paper offers description and analysis of the understanding children have of the communicative events that occur in a bilingual (Spanish–English) classroom in a large metropolitan school district in the southwestern United States. Unlike the cited work of Leopold and Saunders, the purpose of this study is to locate factors that lead to language loss, not language maintenance. To accomplish this I created the term 'linguistic ecology' that refers to the communicative behaviours (written and spoken) of a group, as well as the physical and social contexts in which their communication occurs (Hamilton, 1983). In addition, a linguistic ecology includes the reciprocal influences of persons and environment on each other (Ogbu, 1974).

The central question guiding this study was: *How do the children interpret the roles of English and Spanish in their classroom environment?* The word 'role' incorporates the notions of *function* (how language is used) and *status* or *position* (how language is valued). In order to answer the central question, a secondary question also was considered: *What resources, human and material, are made available to support the development of both languages in this bilingual classroom?*

Given the findings of historic and current literature, this study is based on the premise that bilingual (Spanish–English) children, by age seven, are able to discern and interpret the role and status of English and Spanish in their school environment to a very sophisticated degree. It is further advanced that young students analyse the spoken and written language events in their classroom and their school surroundings, as well as the persons who create them.

Language ecology studies

When language ecology studies began in the late 1950s, they were often referred to as research of 'contact linguistics' (cf. Haugen, 1971). Such work tended to focus on questions of lexical or phonetic interference (cf. Weinreich, 1964). Later, the discipline was expanded to incorporate concerns of language planning and language politics (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990); language maintenance and language extinction (cf. Garcia, 1991). The term subsequently expanded to include the social, political and psychological realities in which a language was utilised.

A *linguistic ecology* study applies the theoretical framework of the macro-level ecology studies to a more focused, micro-analysis of a smaller discourse community. It is defined not solely through physical space (in this case the school and the classroom) but also unseen 'walls' and limitations of the written curriculum (cf. Seymour, 1993). The present study differs from other qualitative studies on school-based language dynamics (e.g. Heath, 1983; Walsh, 1991) in that I will attempt to ascertain the emic view of the *children*.

Three over-arching categories were used to describe and analyse the linguistic ecology as viewed by the children. These categories were established a priori, based on a review of existing literature, and subsequently refined and revised in light of the data collected. They were: (1) the dynamics of language use within the school, especially within one first-grade classroom; (2) the staffing for bilingual instruction; and (3) the materials available in the school to support Spanish development. The goal was to ascertain the perceptions and interpretations that children make of their linguistic ecology and the subsequent choices they make for language use.

Methodology

Data collection

The present study was part of a larger research initiative, the Educational and Community Change Project (see Heckman, 1993). A variety of interrelated data were collected: a survey on language domains, three language assessment instruments, structured interviews, student writing samples, teacher journals and field notes. Data collection began 3 January 1994 and continued through 3 January 1995. I visited the classroom every day from January through March 1994, from 9am until the lunch period at 11.10am. During that time I administered the surveys and questionnaires to the children in the first-grade classroom.

The community and the parents

The community suffered from high unemployment and underemployment. Government studies of the larger school community indicated that it had the highest incidence of poverty in its county. Thirty-eight percent of all children in the county were from families at or below the US poverty level (1990 US Census).

The homes in the area were built in the early 1950s. While many were in disrepair, several near the school were adorned with plants of all shapes and sizes growing in clay pots and bowls or along trellises. Some residents grew *calabaza* (pumpkin), *chile* (peppers), or citrus trees in their yards. Denoting the strict

Mexican Catholic background, there were pictures of La Virgen Guadalupe (Guadalupe, the Virgin of Mexico) on some door fronts and window panes.

General services were scarce. Lacking a community medical facility, many area residents went to Mexico for medical treatment as well as for dental care and medicines. Because of their ancestry and the proximity of their city to the US-Mexican border, over 90% of the families with students at the school spoke Spanish to some degree. The parents of the first-graders were actively involved in the education of their children by chaperoning field trips, through in-class projects, reading to small groups of students, or providing tours through botanical gardens in their backyards. Some parents, often working double shifts to earn sufficient income to support their families, came straight from work in their uniforms to share mariachi and other kinds of music with their children.

Students

At the time this study began, there was a combined total of 48 students divided among the three first grade-classes. To facilitate a case study approach, I created a 'purposive sample' (Merriam, 1988: 48). I asked every student to name the member of the class who, in their opinion, had the best oral, reading and written command of English and Spanish. The students selected were named most often by the bilingual first-grade class. The teachers concurred with the sample the students suggested. This study highlights the views and perceptions of the five selected as core group participants. This group included two girls and three boys — one spoke Spanish as the primary language, one was English dominant and three were relatively equilingual in English and Spanish. All had attended kindergarten at the school. For reasons of anonymity, I use pseudonyms for the students and teachers and refer to their school as 'Proyecto Uno Elementary School'.

Language Use

Daily inventory

I asked the students how much they had used the two languages in the course of the school day. On 15 random days, I asked students: (1) Did you read more in English or Spanish today?; (2) Did you write more in Spanish or English today?; and (3) Did you speak more in English or Spanish today? In general, their responses suggested that much more time had been spent using English than using Spanish. This was especially true when one considers the ancillary instructors and support staff who were English dominant, in the majority. The long list of professionals include, teacher aides, counsellors, librarians and nurses. Because such individuals are part of the 'continuity of care' that children receive while in school, peripherally, these adults are part of the student's linguistic ecology.

Notions on the Word 'Bilingual'

At this juncture, it would be appropriate to examine two assumptions that I explored in my research. The first assumption was that these children would

understand the concept of 'bilingual' or 'bilingualism'. The second was that they were aware of constructs such as 'fluency' (language proficiency).

My first assumption was the product of a review of the literature with bilingual children. Werner Leopold (1939), having established the formula of 'one person, one language' (Ronjat, 1919) in his home, soon found his daughter Hildegard able to communicate with her mother in English and her father in German. Saunders (1988) tried a similar arrangement with his wife and three children. The children in all cases were aware of the language(s) that were most appropriate for the intended listener, even when that language was not favoured by the child.

Although children were able to function in two languages, no research was available at the time of this study to indicate that such young children would even understand the concept 'bilingual'. Indeed, some students did not comment on 'bilingualism' or their teachers' abilities with language except to say that their teachers spoke both English and Spanish. Two students, however, had definite ideas. The first interview is from Manuel:

HLS: La primera pregunta. ¿Qué quiere decir 'bilingüe'? [The first question. What does bilingual mean?]

[long pause]

HLS: ¿No sabes? Ok. Pues, bilingüe quiere decir, 'hablar dos idiomas'. Dos lenguas. [You don't know? OK. Well, bilingual means speak two languages.]

Manuel: That's what I was thinking about but, I thought it wasn't, it wasn't that.

HLS: What were you going to say?

Manuel: Hunh?

HLS: Go ahead. Say it anyway.

Manuel: Um. Eso una persona que habla en dos idiomas. [That is a person who speaks two languages]

HLS: Unhuh. Y ¿has oído esa palabra antes? [Have you heard that word before?]

Manuel: [nods affirmatively]

HLS: ¿Dónde? ¿Cuándo? [Where? When?]

Manuel: En la televisión, y en con unos amigos que tengo [mumbled].
[On the television and with some of the friends I have.]

HLS: Pues, ¿en tu clase, hay muchachos bilingües? [Well, in your class, are there bilingual kids?]

Manuel: [nods affirmatively]
[moments later]

HLS: Are you bilingual?

Manuel: [nods head]

HLS: How do you know you're bilingual?

Manuel: Cause, I, I, I, speak two idiomas. [languages]

HLS: ¿Cuáles son? [Which ones are they]

Manuel: En inglés y en español. [In English and Spanish]

In his interview, Manuel waited until he heard my definition of bilingual — 'speak two languages' then offered a richer definition of his own, 'a person who

speaks two languages'. Moreover, Manuel knew why he considered himself bilingual — he spoke English and Spanish. He identified his teachers and several classmates who also had some degree of proficiency in English as well as Spanish, again demonstrating his understanding of the term.

When I interviewed Federico, he was just as able to identify his teachers as bilingual as well as students who were. However, he was willing to share his own definition of bilingual.

HLS: OK. Now here's the first question. It might be kind of hard. What does bilingual mean?

Federico: Aa speaking two languages.

HLS: Speaking two languages. Um. Are you bilingual?

Federico: Yes.

HLS: What two languages do you know?

Federico: Um English and Spanish.

As data were gathered to answer the aforementioned questions, I became aware of broader issues that affect and help to create the linguistic ecology of this, or any, bilingual first grade. Through my interviews and observations, the participants within this linguistic ecology informed me of the systemic issues that confine and configure their language experiences. This case study, then, documents and interprets, through qualitative means, the social and educational processes — large and small — through which bilingual children in one US school come to appreciate the prestige and power of English versus Spanish.

Notions on Language Proficiency: The Students

He likes to speak, um English but he doesn't. ... know English that good.

Given that young children do not have access to statistics, nor direct experiences with qualitative methodologies or linguistics, it seemed doubtful that they would have any response to my questions regarding Spanish proficiency. In general, all students, including the ones in the focus group, knew who spoke English and Spanish. I wanted to find out if the students had evaluated the proficiency of those people in their linguistic ecology. Federico gave his evaluation of one student I named from his class.

HLS: ... How many kids in your class are bilingual?

Federico: Umm. Me.

HLS: You. Anybody else?

Federico: Umm [long pause] no.

HLS: Is Xavier bilingual?

Federico: Yea.

HLS: He speaks English and Spanish?

Federico: [nods head]

HLS: Umm how about ...

Federico: ... but not, but not that much English.

HLS: He doesn't speak that much English, mostly Spanish?

HLS: ... How about Flora?

Federico: Yea. But she speak[s] Spanish better.

[A third student is named]

Federico: He only, he likes to speak, um English but he doesn't ... know English that good.

[Moments later]

HLS: ... How do you know that [these classmates] are bilingual?

Federico: Umm, cause they talk mostly English.

HLS: When do you hear them speak both languages?

Federico: Sometimes.

[Moments later]

HLS: OK. Does everybody in class speak good Spanish?

Federico: Only the ones that speak Spanish. And the ones that speak English only speak English good.

At Proyecto Uno, there existed an historic division between English dominant and Spanish dominant students (see Smith & Heckman, 1995). Once a student's language group was determined at the school, s/he was treated in accordance with the status of that language. In spite of the fact that over 90% of the students were of Mexican ancestry, the students gave themselves ethnic labels based on language dominance. Examples from the fourth and fifth grades denote the cost of being viewed as Spanish dominant:

'... and they were calling us Mexicans'.

'The English kids would call us like wetbacks, dirty Mexicans, and stuff'.

'They would say like the Mexicans they say were like rats ...'

Conklin & Lourie (1983: 114) remind us that 'Language functions not only to communicate social information but also to define and maintain social roles'. In many schools, Proyecto Uno included, those students who are not considered English dominant are often the object of derision. This suggests not only beliefs about which language had greater importance in the school but also the interrelationship of language, culture, and society:

Society decrees that certain people be more highly thought of than others — because they are economically, culturally, or politically more powerful. To the extent that social identity is tied to language, actual linguistic forms become 'good' or 'bad' language according to the social standing of the individuals and groups who use them. (Conklin & Lourie, 1983: 114–115)

The rewards earned for speaking the language or dialect of prestige have been well documented (e.g. Crawford, 1992; Heath, 1983). In the case of Proyecto Uno many of the more entertaining support services (e.g. computer instruction, 'higher order thinking skills' training) were offered by teachers who were English dominant. The staff assigned to these roles made an effort to communicate in Spanish. Some of these resource teachers had learned Spanish words and phrases to communicate with the children on some level. However, none of these instructors would consider herself a Spanish role model for students. Those students who spoke English had direct (linguistic) access to these support personnel. Those students who were not fluent in English — even when they were included in general activities — could not have had full and equal access to

the services of the linguistically limited staff member. Consequently, those students who spoke English, regarded themselves (and were considered by others) to be more advantaged than those who were Spanish dominant.

Notions on Language Proficiency: The Teachers

But she can't talk ... Spanish good.

As stated earlier, many of the staff were bilingual. However, some had achieved noticeably more fluency in two languages than others. What perceptions did they have about the performance of their teachers?

HLS: [W]hat does the teacher speak?

Manuel: English and Spanish.

HLS: How do you know?

Manuel: Cause they, they talk like that.

HLS: Umm. How do you think the teacher knows English and Spanish?

Manuel: Cause they, they, they tell us um. Inglés, English, and Spanish.
[moments later]

HLS: Y, ¿las maestras hablan mejor el inglés o hablan mejor el español?
[And do the teachers speak better English or do they speak better Spanish?]

Manuel: El inglés. [English]

HLS: ¿El inglés? Umm. [English? Umm]

Like many people who have been educated in the United States, the bilingual teaching staff considered itself English dominant. Spanish-speaking students were encouraged to act as 'resources' when teachers could not remember a word in Spanish. This strategy was an attempt to build up the students' self-esteem and to publicly demonstrate their support of minority language speakers. However, the first-grade students had distinguished between the varying levels of fluency among their instructors. Federico shared this evaluation of his teacher with me.

HLS: OK. What does Miss Catalina speak in class?

Federico: Both.

HLS: Both.

Federico: But she can't talk [mumbles] say Spanish good.

HLS: OK. Who do you think talks better Spanish, your teacher or you?

Federico: Me.

What is especially surprising is that Federico gave an assessment that was quite close to my observations. His assessment of his teacher coincided with the feelings of the two teachers who had worked with Miss Catalina, and it shed light on comments his teacher had made herself. During one conversation, she spoke of her confusion because of the new demands a bilingual classroom put upon her. She had a large collection of books and other materials in English and resented the burden and imposition of having to translate them into Spanish. While bright, colourful and print rich, her classroom had only token objects in Spanish. This fact did not go unnoticed by the students. In the following excerpt Federico responds to my questions about books in Spanish in his bilingual classroom.

- HLS:** Both. Do you think that... In your classroom, are there more books in English or more books in Spanish?
- Federico:** English only.
- HLS:** English only. Why do you think there are more books in English? Why do there, it's English only?
- Federico:** There is no Spanish?
- HLS:** Why don't you think there isn't any Spanish?
- Federico:** Cause, Mrs. Dominguez is, a English teacher.
- HLS:** Who told you that?
- Federico:** I just know it cause she has a lot of English books.

Federico recognised that he had been assigned to a classroom where English was highly valued over Spanish. Even though his teacher was bilingual, he knew that she preferred English to Spanish when she taught. Consequently, he classified her as an English teacher, based, in part, on the language she used in the classroom.

Material Resources in Spanish

'... [Teacher, there] are no books in Spanish ...'

Students often had stories read to them by the teachers, visiting adults or older students from other classes. The teachers seemed diligent in choosing stories that were in Spanish and English, as well as representative of other cultures — one of the first grade teachers had been the Spanish reading resource teacher for several years. Materials also were distributed to the students. These 'assigned readings' (e.g. worksheets, minibooks) were faithfully available in both languages. Most often, these worksheets had been made by one of the instructors.

On occasion, however, students were encouraged to select a book and read silently for pleasure. One March day in 1994, I went to the bookshelf in the reading alcove to get a better idea of the texts that were accessible should a child decide to read. I counted those texts that were on bookshelves that were within reach of the students — materials on the 'teacher's shelf' or in the 'teacher's closet' were not included. At that time there were 80 books — 13 in Spanish. The books in English were all colourful, fully illustrated and of various sizes, shapes and themes. Of the books in Spanish two were tattered with pages missing and another was a basal social studies text nearly 10 years old.

Miss Catalina (Federico's teacher) ultimately decided that she and her class would not be a part of the bilingual group. Though I never saw a book in Spanish in her classroom, she suggested that there had been. She said that when she 'had books on display in Spanish, the kids don't touch them'. As I gathered data for this study, I wondered whether children saw any differences in the materials in the two languages. I asked one student about the 'interest value' of the books. This excerpt records his comments:

- HLS:** Los libros en tu clase, ¿hay más en inglés o hay más libros en español? [Of the books in your class are more in English or more in Spanish?]
- S1:** Los dos. [Both]
- HLS:** Los dos? ¿Cuáles son más interesantes los del inglés o los del español? O sea, con, los dibujos, los cuentos y todo. ¿Cuáles son más

interesantes, los del inglés o los del español? [Both? Which are more interesting, the ones in English or the ones in Spanish? I mean, with pictures and stories and all. Which ones are more interesting, the English ones or the Spanish ones?]

S1: Inglés. [English]

During interviews with the focus group of students I asked whether there were more books in English or Spanish in their classroom. All but one student said there were more books in English than in Spanish. Answers such as these are not surprising given the low count of 'student pleasing' materials within reach in Spanish. Though the students I interviewed for this study felt that English and Spanish were the official languages of the school, they also knew which one received more 'air time'. Federico observes:

HLS: OK. You know what the official language of, do you know if Proyecto Uno has an official language? Do you know what official means?

Federico: Unnn [negative response]

HLS: Like the, the most important language. Do you know what the most important language, what the most important language is at Proyecto?

Federico: Both.
[Later]

HLS: Does Miss Catalina ever read you stories in Spanish?

Federico: No.

No Books in Spanish in the Library

Another contributor to language retention is the availability and quality of printed materials in a language. Studies have examined materials printed in Spanish for free reading time and indicate that those students who have not lost reading proficiency (in Spanish) are often quite eager to read them (Pucci, 1994). However, research also shows that children are far less likely to encounter a book of their language choice in their school media centre (Allen, 1993).

Before questioning the children I perused the school library with the following categories in mind: (1) the potential interest value to pupils (including illustrations) of materials available in Spanish when compared to those available in English, (2) the physical quality of the materials available in both languages, (3) the frequency that children obtained materials and the decisions they made regarding selection.

While I gathered the data for this study, I noted that there were less than five shelves of books in Spanish for a school of over 300 students. Each shelf — a space approximately four feet wide — held a random assortment of title in Spanish, varying in theme, genre and reading level and decade of publication.

When I asked several teachers their opinion of the situation most looked at me in disgust. Sensing great levels of frustration, I asked them why they didn't request the librarian to order more titles in Spanish. Four of the teachers said they had spoken with the librarian, to no avail, and had grown tired of making the same request. Another teacher later commented that the library was never open when she wanted to take her children there. One teacher volunteered, 'I go ask

[the school secretary] for the key and take my kids in, and sign out the books myself'.

On one of the student survey instruments, a question reads 'How do you feel when you go to the library and find new books in Spanish?' One of the first grade teachers reported with laughter, 'I went to [a particular student] and when I asked him this, he said that this would never happen because there are no books in Spanish in the library!' Another child said, 'I've read all the books in Spanish in the library'. Comments such as these indicate the students' awareness of the limited selection of materials available to support Spanish development. Given the circumstances, if these students were to become avid readers, they had little recourse other than becoming English dominant. While the quantity of materials in Spanish at a school, *per se*, does not determine the success of a particular bilingual model, it does reveal weaknesses in a programme that may contribute to the loss of Spanish, even when staff and faculty profess a philosophy of 'additive bilingualism'.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reviewed and analysed the events and materials of a bilingual classroom that could support the development of Spanish, highlighting the perspective of the children. Through my interviews and other qualitative data collection, I noted that many of the children had evaluated the performance of their teachers in Spanish as well as the materials they provided. Students found both lacking. I observed how Spanish-dominant children stifled the use of their mother-tongue in order to escape the insults and other negative behaviours that were associated with the Spanish language in this school.

Children, by virtue of the language the teachers used, understood that 'Aquí no se habla español [Spanish is not spoken here]'. I hasten to point out that the faculty and staff of Proyecto Uno were all kind and reflective professionals. When the curriculum required instruction in Spanish they provided pedagogically sound instruction using that language. The activities in which the students were involved were always academically challenging and culturally appropriate. However, when communication would take place outside the context of 'formal instruction', they usually spoke in English.

The decision to use one language or another is often unconscious and spontaneous. It would appear, however, that the children at this age are able to assess their linguistic ecology in an attempt to decipher, the role and power that individual languages enjoys. The adults' intentionality notwithstanding, the interpretation that students make of language speakers and events — i.e. their linguistic ecology — depends in great part on what they see and hear. Logically, that assessment, in turn, would influence their own language preferences.

What is the result? My field notes provide one answer. One day in February 1994 I interviewed Gloria, a bilingual student from the bilingual first grade. As I did with every student, I showed her two lists of questions and asked, 'Lo quieres en español o inglés?' [Do you want it in Spanish or English?]. At first Gloria said, 'español' [Spanish], whereupon I began the interview in Spanish. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she grabbed her head with clenched fists and said:

'I mean I want English. I don't like Spanish. I hate Spanish'.

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