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Se Habla Espanol: Incorporating Spanish in the Early Childhood Classroom

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SE HABLA ESPAÑOL:
INCORPORATING SPANISH IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

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Honors in Education Research Project

Elizabethtown College

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Abstract

“¡Se habla español!” One cannot help but notice this phrase is becoming more and more prevalent in store windows, commercial advertisements, and phone recordings. According to the United States Census Bureau (2013), there are approximately fifty four million Hispanics living in the United States. Furthermore, the number of Latinos living in the United States is projected to grow. The Pew Research Center for Social and Demographic trends estimates that by 2050, Hispanics will make up over 29% of the United States population, whereas Caucasians will become a minority (Pew Social Trends, 2008). Since the population of Spanish-speaking Americans continues to rise, the need to understand both the Spanish and English language will only increase. As children grow up in a culture that is becoming progressively multilingual, it becomes apparent that the public education system must adapt. In preparing students for increasing national diversity, teachers are searching for ways to incorporate elements of foreign language into their daily lessons. Both developmental and neurological research overwhelmingly supports starting language instruction in early childhood. This paper reviews the existing literature, as well as discusses the implementation of a qualitative action research study that investigated the question: What are the most effective planning and implementation processes for incorporating the Spanish language into a predominantly heterogeneous, native-English speaking kindergarten classroom in the United States?

Introduction

“¡Se habla español!” One cannot help but notice that this phrase is becoming more and more prevalent in store windows, commercial advertisements, and phone recordings. According to the United States Census Bureau (2013), there are approximately fifty four million Hispanics living in the United States. Today, native Spanish speakers represent approximately seventeen percent of the total United States population. This makes people of Hispanic origin the largest ethnic minority in our country (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Furthermore, the number of Latinos living in the United States is only projected to grow. The Pew Research Center for Social and Demographic trends estimates that by 2050, Hispanics will make up over 29% of the United States population, while Caucasians will become a minority (Pew Social Trends, 2008).

As the population of Spanish-speaking Americans continues to rise, the need to understand both the Spanish and English language will only increase. Many current teachers are beginning to incorporate pieces of Spanish language and culture in their daily lesson plans. However, Spanish instruction in the general classroom is not a new phenomenon. For nearly 100 years, parents and educators have seen the need to bring the Spanish language into American schools. Cioffari (1954) found evidence of elementary based language programs as early as 1899. In an article published in *Hispania* in the early twentieth century, Kelley (1918), a young schoolteacher, explains how she created a Spanish-appreciating classroom environment for her students in New York. Of course, the need for Spanish instruction has grown dramatically since then, and continues to increase today. As children grow up in a culture that is becoming progressively multilingual, it becomes apparent that the public education system must adapt.

Duncan (1991) claims that American educators identified the need to expose *all* students to foreign languages during the Space Race of the 1950's. Nevertheless, even sixty years after this initiative, many students *still* do not have the opportunity to learn a second language at school. If the need to be bilingual existed in the past, it has only grown exponentially with the increased capabilities for travel and global communication that are present today. Beginning from an early age, children should be provided with the language skills they will need to be successful in our expanding multicultural world. Bisson, van Heuven, Conklin, and Tunney (2013) note that understanding a foreign language leads to a greater appreciation of other cultures, as well as an increased chance of gaining employment in an increasingly multilingual job market. While teaching Spanish to prepare our children for the changing American demographic is reason enough, introducing Spanish to the elementary classroom has additional benefits that are less obvious. Nevertheless, few studies have confirmed the best methods for introducing children to a foreign language during early childhood, while integrating it into the curriculum.

Review of the Literature

With the emphasis on achieving high performance marks on state exams, it is important for school administrators to recognize that foreign language instruction can increase students' results on standardized tests. Stewart (2005) found that the study of a foreign language leads to enhanced cognitive abilities, encourages greater student achievement in other academic areas, and correlates with higher results on standardized tests. McLaughlin (1977) indicates that students who speak more than one language have a unique awareness that is lacking in monolinguals. From an early age, bilingual children have an easier time understanding that names are arbitrarily assigned to objects. This allows them to interpret meanings semantically,

rather than phonetically, and enables them to grasp more complex terms, including synonyms and antonyms for common items, at a young age (McLaughlin, 1977). Further research has also shown that the study of a foreign language improves cognitive abilities, and has a positive influence on other disciplines, as students grow older. Stewart (2005) remarks that this is especially true when the study of a second language begins during the elementary school years. Landry (1974), as cited in Met (1991), found that sixth grade students who had taken a foreign language since first grade scored higher on a measure of divergent thinking, which includes components of fluency, flexibility, and originality of thought. In a study by Johnson, Flores, and Ellison (1963), fourth grade students who received twenty minutes of Spanish instruction each day showed greater achievement in reading vocabulary and comprehension skills. Furthermore, the pupils' scores in other content areas were comparable to those of their peers who did not have Spanish lessons, showing that allocating short periods of the school day to teach a foreign language does not negate performance in other subject areas. Therefore, using instructional time to expose children to a foreign language raises test scores, and does not risk compromising other academic skills.

In addition to its academic benefits, introducing students to a foreign language exposes them to a language and a culture that many would not experience otherwise. As our country continues to become more diverse, it is important to create an awareness and appreciation for different cultures. Levine (1992) notes that emphasizing the importance of foreign cultures and languages can help promote global understanding in a civically changing world. Children must learn to effectively communicate and work with people who can speak a language that is different from their own. Schwarzer, Haywood, and Lorenzen (2003) found that this level of consciousness begins with the teacher. With minimal additional effort, teachers can create

classrooms and schools that genuinely value the cultural and linguistic diversity of our children. Cioffari (1954) notes that the greatest success achieved by a foreign language program is when students display a deeper awareness of cultural similarities and differences among nations.

Furthermore, exposing children to a foreign language in early childhood promotes more native-like pronunciation. While many adults struggle to sound authentic, even after years of speaking the language, starting language instruction early can help speakers to avoid this problem (Bisson, van Heuven, Conklin & Tunney, 2013). Younger children are more receptive to language learning and develop a more native pronunciation than students who begin studying a second language before the onset of adolescence (Stewart, 2005). An experienced primary teacher (Bernard, 2014) adds, “Not only are 5-to-10-year-olds very receptive to language, but they are also excited about learning it and most of them listen without questioning the fact that I am speaking to them in a language they don’t speak – yet”(p. 34). At a young age, children’s minds are receptive and open to the absorption of a second language. Early instruction has the best chance of developing a high level of fluency and improved pronunciation.

The Critical Period Hypothesis can explain the neurology behind this crucial window for second language acquisition. Brown (2007) defines this theory as the notion that there is a biological timetable before which and after which language acquisition, both first and second, is more successfully accomplished. Science has proven that there is a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily. As time beyond this period increases, language becomes progressively more difficult to acquire. In his landmark work, Lenneberg (1967) argued that by the time children reach puberty, they experience a loss of adaptability and an inability for reorganization in the brain. This predominately refers to brain topography in relation to neurophysiological processes. Lenneberg (1967) believed that the limitations that

come with maturation are connected with the phenomenon of cerebral lateralization of function, which is irreversible after cerebral growth-phenomena have ended. He contended that this occurred around the time a child entered puberty. More recently, DeKeyser (2000), among others, claimed that in between the ages of six to seven and sixteen to seventeen, all people lose the mental equipment required for the implicit induction of the abstract patterns underlying a human language. At birth, all human brains are wired to learn language. However, as we age, the brain prunes itself of innate synapses that it does not use (Wattendorf, Festman, Westermann, Keil, Zappatore, Franceschini, Luedi, Radue, Munte, Rager & Nitsch, 2014). Similar theories, such as the maturational state hypothesis and the exercise hypothesis also support this belief (Harley, 2008). Therefore, the neuroscience of brain development overwhelmingly supports beginning language instruction as early as possible, particularly prior to puberty, when it becomes much more strenuous to acquire and store in the brain.

While most students begin learning a foreign language in high school, this is too late an age for students to develop a native-like pronunciation, as it contradicts the natural development and pruning of the brain. Current Spanish teachers complain that they have trouble getting their students to sound like native speakers. Castaño (1999) explains that the best foreign language programs are introduced early. She rationalizes, "... the basis of teaching pronunciation is imperative and must start from the early stages of learning" (p. 655). Starting language instruction early puts students at a great advantage in not only acquiring the language, but also using it.

Castaño (1999) continues to argue that another benefit to beginning foreign language instruction with young children, rather than adolescents, is the authentic applicability of children's literature. Experts agree that one of the best ways to learn a foreign language is

through reading juvenile texts, which are age appropriate for students in early childhood.

Castaño (1999) feels that teachers should offer good models of language usage, and provide pupils with multiple ways to practice reading and speaking in a fun atmosphere. She adds that that the rhythms and rhymes of books, poems, songs and tongue twisters are excellent, engaging ways for children to repeat the correct sounds. These linguistic tools allow repetition while invoking both humor and fun. Furthermore, children's stories, fables, and folk songs are easy methods for incorporating the cultural aspects of language into the classroom.

While research undoubtedly supports the benefits of incorporating Spanish instruction in the early childhood classroom, questions of logistics remain. What are the most effective planning and implementation processes for incorporating the Spanish language into a predominantly heterogeneous, native-English speaking kindergarten classroom in the United States? There are several researched programs that teachers can use to integrate Spanish in the early childhood curriculum.

Over the years, linguistic experts have developed three main models for elementary foreign language programs. These include immersion or dual-language programs, FLES and FLEX. Stewart (2005) and Met (1991) concisely summarize the similarities and differences between these three distinct methods.

The most intense approach is an immersion, or dual language program. In an immersion classroom, some or all of the academic subjects are taught in the second language. Students learn to use the new language as a medium of communication. Many students become fully bilingual, and develop native-like pronunciations (Stewart, 2005). While this type of program obviously develops a higher level of fluency, it also requires the teacher to have advanced competencies in

both languages, and be capable of teaching the subject matter in both languages. It also forces the students to learn grade level curricular content in a foreign language, which sometimes can lead to miscommunication or confusion.

For example, false cognates, or words that appear to have the same root, but in fact, emanate very different meanings, may mislead individuals who have not yet had enough experience with the Spanish language. Novice learners might mistakenly indicate that their male friend is pregnant (*embarazado*) when they meant that their male friend is embarrassed (*avergonzado*). A beginning student might mistakenly use the verb “*asistir*” (to attend) to mean assist (*ayudar*). When students see the word “*ropa*” (clothes), they could think it refers to rope, when, in fact, “*ropa*” translates to “clothing”. These are just some of the false cognates that can confuse a beginning learner. Daily exposure and practice with a foreign language can help students learn how to avoid these common mistakes at an early age.

FLES stands for Foreign Language in Elementary School. In this type of program, the foreign language is taught as a subject once or twice a week. Students learn to speak and use the language, and develop cultural knowledge as well (Met, 1999). This is common in many private schools. It is not different from the foreign language instruction often provided in high school, but students benefit greatly from starting their exposure to a foreign language at a younger age. While this program may be a good idea in theory, many teachers do not have enough time to teach Spanish as a separate subject during the school week.

The third type of program is known as FLEX, which stands for Exploratory Foreign Language or Foreign Language Experience. With this method, one or more foreign languages are explored on a regular basis. Children study the language and associated cultures. This helps build

the foundation for further study of language and good pronunciation in the future (Stewart, 2005, p. 12-13). This type of program can be accessible for primary teachers who may not have full fluency in the target language, or do not possess the means to alter the pre-established school curriculum.

The FLEX program is clearly the most manageable to the many teachers who lack competence in a second language. Schwarzer, Haywood and Lorenzen assert, “We believe that any teacher can encourage multiliteracy in the classroom without being a speaker of those languages” (Schwarzer, Haywood & Lorenzen, 2003, p. 453). One of the best assets of the FLEX program is that it requires no additional instruction time. With today's academic calendar already full, teachers are compelled to multitask. Orozco (1982) demonstrates that the Spanish can be easily added without altering the curriculum that is already established. Some of the many ways in which the Spanish can be integrated into daily classroom activities are discussed later in this review.

Before integrating the Spanish language into their classrooms, teachers must first identify the most effective methods in which to do so. Carol Gaab, the president of Teaching Proficiency Through Storytelling Publishing, has pinpointed three main components for successful language teaching. She believes it should focus on the interests and needs of individual students, provided in manageable doses, and driven by high-frequency vocabulary words that are taught in various contexts (Gaab, 2014). The FLEX methodology is accessible to all these aspects of strong language instruction, and has many additional advantages. Byrnes (1991) argues that of the available options, the FLEX program best meets the needs of elementary teachers and learners. Students have the opportunity to learn the words and phrases that are relevant for use in their daily lives, language teaching occupies minimal instructional time and takes various forms

throughout the school day. In utilizing FLEX methodology, a foreign language such as Spanish, can be integrated seamlessly into the preset curriculum and throughout daily classroom activities.

One of the easiest and most authentic ways to incorporate a foreign language is through transitions and student requests (Coballes-Vega & Walters, 1979). Thus, Spanish can be used for communication throughout the day without making any modifications to the predetermined curriculum. The teacher can explicitly teach a few commands, transition words, and applicable question and answer phrases, and encourage students to use during the day.

Transition times can be chaotic, even for the most experienced teachers. Ceo-DiFrancesco (2014) notes that some of her most difficult moments during the school day are when students are in transition. However, the use of Spanish during these times has unexpected additional benefits. Students focus on understanding and applying the desired command. Because comprehension in a foreign language requires more attention, there is less opportunity for students to be off task.

When students are instructed to take out their textbooks, they might be asked in Spanish instead of English. When students are told to get in line, they may be invited using Spanish rather than English. When children ask to use the bathroom, they can make their request in Spanish instead of English. This is an easy way to incorporate a foreign language in many contexts throughout the day, without altering the curriculum. Coballes-Vega and Walters (1979) reiterate the importance of explicitly teaching and demonstrating all phrases and vocabulary words that students may need, so that children have an applicable means to communicate in the language. In this way, students will begin to learn Spanish more naturally, as a regular part of the day, as opposed to entering “Spanish mode” as they walk into a foreign language classroom.

With practice, students will be able to use the foreign language smoothly throughout the day, but first, teachers must take the initiative to establish expectations for foreign language use. Shrager (2014) recommends that the educator explicitly teach the specific words and phrases that students will be expected to use at the beginning of the school year. These phrases must be placed somewhere visible in the room, and be accompanied by pictures to help students remember what they mean. The teacher should model and demonstrate what each command looks like. The teacher should also give examples of what not to do. This can provide humor for students, but also reinforces desired behaviors, setting the stage for the rest of the year.

Moreover, there are ample ways that Spanish can be integrated into the subjects and academic content as well. Met (1991) notes that content-based foreign language instruction links to direct objectives from the curriculum. This actually helps to reinforce the concepts that students are already learning, allowing them to deepen the cerebral connection as they gain practice with the same concept in two languages. Cioffari (1954) argues that even the most basic skills taught in early childhood, such as numbers and colors, can be made more engaging and germane when taught in two languages. In this way, Spanish is viewed as an additional construct for developing deeper meaning. It enriches and supports new knowledge and connects the language to a meaningful learning experience. When students use the foreign language later in life, it will be more easily accessible, as students learned the appropriate usage of Spanish vocabulary at the same time they developed it in their native tongues (Met, 1991).

The most obvious choice for integration is during Language Arts. As previously mentioned, children's literature is very appropriate for students at the early childhood level. Teachers have the opportunity to present vocabulary in a real context, and offer students a purpose for discussion. Children can practice retelling the story or participate in reader's theater

to act out the plot. Bernard (2014) recommends using puppets to help children speak in the target language. Young children will get in the mindset that the puppet can only “speak” and “understand” Spanish, motivating them to use only the target language (Orozco, 1982). Students can also use puppets to create their own scenarios. This gives students the opportunity to practice critical conversation in a way that also encourages imaginative play.

Lichtman (2014) notes that one of the many benefits for teaching language through storytelling is that books provide students with a “shared context”. Although children have differing amounts of prior academic and general knowledge, when discussing a shared theme in a second language, they are on equal ground. In a classroom of predominately native-English speakers, all children are provided with same amount of instruction in the target language, so opportunities for success are more level. This can serve to boost the confidence levels of many children who have experienced repeated difficulties in other academic areas.

Additionally, reading in a foreign language provides further literacy development in the native language as well. Rajic and Prtljaga (2013) note that as children learn to read in a foreign language, they also practice and reinforce reading strategies, such as using context clues, deriving meanings of unfamiliar words, noticing grammar patterns, and deepening comprehension skills that can also be applied to text in their native languages. Books provide relevant means for introducing children to new vocabulary and grammar in the target language, and create a forum to strengthen reading skills in their home language. Furthermore, children's literature is an easy way to introduce students to international cultures and beliefs in context.

In creating global citizens, it is important to educate all children about different countries and cultures. The introduction of a foreign language is the perfect starting point to explore

foreign places during Social Studies. Students can learn about the many countries where Spanish is spoken. In Geography, children can learn how to locate each country on a map, search for the nation's flag, and examine cultural traditions, food, clothing, parties, music, and ethnic aspects that relate to each place. Foreign lands are suddenly relatable as students consider what life is like for children their same age living in a different country. Technology can be incorporated as students research what it is like to attend school, participate in recreation activities, and live in the community. Children can use online resources to visit tourist attractions and videos depicting cultural events. This gives students the opportunity to explore places that they would otherwise never get to experience.

Some critics argue that it is more difficult to integrate a foreign language in the subjects of Math and Science. However, this is not necessarily the case. Most introductory language programs teach children how to count. Children can extend this skill by practicing reading computations in the foreign language as well. Orozco (1982) suggests asking students to recite their solutions to math problems aloud, in Spanish. Not only does this activity provide another opportunity to practice pronunciation, but also gives children critical “drill and skill” practice of their basic math facts in a more stimulating way. Of course, this method could be used to cover problems in addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and more.

Another way to combine mathematics, culture, and speaking, is by creating a classroom store. Carton-Caprio (1975) proposes that students can learn to “buy” and “sell” items in a fictional classroom store. They would be required to speak in the target language and could enhance the experience by using the currency of a country where the target language is spoken. This could be done to add cultural enrichment to a unit on money, trade, economy, imports and exports, and more.

Spanish can be included in science content with the creation of a “mystery box”. Each student would close his/her eyes and reach his/her hand to touch an unknown object in a covered box (Bernard, 2014). This object would provide an introduction to the upcoming science lesson that relates to the lesson. The student could then say a word that describes the object in Spanish, (i.e., soft, hard, soft). This word could be written on the board. After each student has had the opportunity to feel the object, the class would work together to figure out what it was (Orozco, 1982). This is a great way to introduce new vocabulary and make students excited to learn about the marvels of science.

Some educators remain adamant that a foreign language should not be introduced until students have developed sufficient skills in their native language first. However, studies have shown that this wait time is not necessary. Rajic and Prtljaga (2013) observed that the process of learning a new language helps to strengthen a child’s understanding of his or her first language. However, teachers must take conscious steps to make a foreign language accessible to young learners.

First, continuous scaffolding is key. As with teaching most subjects at the early childhood level, teachers should serve as a guide for students, supporting them until they are able to use the language independently. Shrum and Gilsan (2009) remind teachers to plan for a range of student ability and interest levels. Teachers must be prepared to engage children in activities that are designed to meet their specific learning needs. This can occur individually, in a small groups or whole class. As the expert, the teacher should allow novice learners to set their own language goals. Even at an early age, goal setting serves as a motivator and offers students a sense of accomplishment and pride (Shrum & Gilsan, 2009). Struggling students can be paired with more

advanced children to provide them with peer support. Advanced students can strengthen their own language skills as they help others with correct usage and pronunciation.

It is essential that teachers use gestures, demonstrations, and model expectations. While a child may not understand everything that is spoken in a foreign language, gestures can help fill the gaps in order to allow the child to understand the main ideas. Bernard (2014) suggests using props, pictures, and visuals to help students understand. She comments, “In my experience, using gestures increases language retention” (Bernard, 2014, p. 36). If the teacher makes an exaggerated movement to show students what something means, they will be more likely to remember it in the future. Instead of telling students what each Spanish word translates to in English, teachers can be more creative with the use of bold images and vivid demonstrations.

Crouse (2014) emphasizes the importance of posting meaningful visuals around the room. He believes that students need to see the language as they hear it, so they can begin to make connections between the oral and written forms of the Spanish language. Key words can be posted around the classroom as they are introduced. Just as word walls have their place in elementary classrooms, the teacher can consider making a second word wall with terms and phrases in Spanish. Classroom objects can be labeled in both English and Spanish. Shrager (2014) notes that the visuals can provide just the right amount of scaffolding in the target language and help students make comparisons between the foreign language and their native tongue. A study by Bisson, van Heuven, Conklin and Tunney (2013) found that a combination of both pictures and words is the most effective way to build children’s vocabulary in a foreign language. They note that even brief, multi-modal exposure can help children acquire new terms. Nevertheless, as young students look at visuals and watch stimulating demonstrations, they may wish to engage physically in the language as well.

One of the best ways to capture the attention of young children is through movement (Met, 1991). Total Physical Response (TPR) is a well-known language program that integrates movement into instruction. This method connects a specific physical movement to each vocabulary word or phrase as it is introduced. When the teacher says a word, the students are asked to repeat the word and demonstrate the corresponding movement or sign. Shrager (2014) feels that these movements help students to extend their understandings by creating a physical association with each term. Bernard (2014) supports this argument, stating, “Language associated with the movement will make the process of language acquisition easier” (p. 35). Partaking in movement makes an abstract term more concrete for young learners. They can establish both a mental and physical connection to the newly acquired word, which will help them to store it in their memories (Byrnes, 1991).

Another way to engage students physically is by using familiar children’s games and nursery rhymes. Levine (1992) successfully integrated Spanish into her classroom, in part, by playing games that children are already familiar with in the target language. In her classroom, students often play “Simón Dice” (Simon Says), during which one student gives a command, and others respond. The class also learned the parts of the body through the song, “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes”, in which students touch each body part as they say its name in Spanish. Castaño (1999) also supports the use of songs and rhymes to practice pronunciation. She believes the rhythm of the music, rhymes, and tongue twisters help children to develop fluency and native pronunciation. Perhaps elementary teachers could take a few minutes of circle time or morning meeting each day to practice songs, rhymes and tongue twisters in Spanish. This is a fun way to reinforce pronunciation and allow the class to practice speaking.

Whenever students are introduced to an entirely new concept, such as a foreign language, it is essential that teachers take periodic assessments to evaluate student understanding. Otherwise, the teacher may be unaware of student frustration or misconceptions. These comprehension checks can be formal or informal. Even at an early age, most children are able to assess their own progress, and self-monitor their own level of understanding. For example, Shrager (2014) asks her students to show “thumb arribas (up)” or “thumbs abajos (down)” to demonstrate how well they understand a concept. This is a quick way to let her know that students understand, and that students need more support. Bernard (2014) believes that if the majority of students do not understand, the teacher should present the concept in a different way. This helps to ensure that the teacher is meeting the instructional needs of the students.

As teachers ask questions to gauge comprehension, it is important to question students on different levels of thinking. Bloom's Taxonomy has divided types of questions at different levels of processing. These range from basic knowledge skills to thorough analysis and evaluation. Gaab (2014) recommends that teachers progress from basic to more advanced questioning as students become more comfortable with the language. By asking various types of questions, teachers can involve advanced and struggling students in the class conversation.

While there are a multitude of ways to make learning interesting and fun, Ceo-DiFrancesco (2014) has found that it is best to use a variety of methods to keep students engaged. In this way, the teacher will be sure to reach all students in the way he or she learns best. However, it's okay if not every word is understood. At this level, the goal is to expose children to a foreign language, not to make them completely fluent. Teachers should help students realize that they need not know every word in order to ascertain the main idea (Bernard, 2014). Ceo-DiFrancesco (2014) reminds her class that they may not know the exact meaning of

each word they hear or read in their *native* language. Reading and listening in a foreign language is much the same. Students can find the main ideas without knowing every word. Crouse (2014) believes that after students make peace with the fact that they will not know everything, they will be more open to the use of the new language. It is very important that students receive a positive exposure to the language so that they can continue to study and improve in the future. Shrum and Glisan (2009) remind teachers that it is crucial to keep the Spanish content meaningful. Teachers should teach students words that are relevant for use in their lives. We must constantly show students the benefits of knowing a second language and how they can utilize the advantages of bilingualism. When children can see when and how to use a foreign language in everyday life, their experiences with the language will reach a greater richness and depth (Hickey & de Mejia, 2014).

Even if the students' ability to use the language in conversations without support remains minimal, introducing a foreign language enables students to develop a unique sense of awareness about the diversity in our world. When we expose students to a language and a culture that is different from their own, it has the power to break down cultural barriers and challenge stereotypes, while creating a student dynamic that embraces diversity. With a knowledge and appreciation of foreign languages, children will be able to interact with their peers around the world. Young children are not so quick to judge those who may differ from themselves. Primary teachers should capitalize upon this time of young curiosity and encourage children to immerse themselves in a foreign language. The door to multilingualism can be opened while learning is still as fun as singing a song, playing a game, or reading a book.

Methodology

The information acquired through this review of the existing literature was applied in the implementation of a qualitative action research study that investigated the question, What are the most effective planning and implementation processes for incorporating the Spanish language into a predominantly heterogeneous, native-English speaking kindergarten classroom in the United States? A qualitative approach best suits the focus of this study because it explores all possibilities for incorporating Spanish in the early childhood setting, without prescribing a particular program. According to, Mills (2007), action research falls within the qualitative paradigm and is described as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, researchers, or other stakeholders in the teaching or learning environment to gather information about how their schools operate, how they teach, and how well students learn. The information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment, and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved. Creswell (1994) emphasizes that in action research, the researchers interact with those they study, through observing informants over a prolonged period of time, or actual collaboration.

Based on the programs and best practice for implementation identified in the literature, I developed a pilot Spanish program at a local elementary school. The setting of the research was a suburban kindergarten classroom in the Northeastern United States. The participants were the kindergarten teacher and the school principal. I was also part of the team, serving in the roles of researcher, consultant, and observer of the implementation process. In assisting the team to design and execute a pilot Spanish program at the kindergarten level, I analyzed the school's initial needs and the course of their planning phase. I also examined their curricular materials and their ease of implementation in the classroom, as well as evaluated the outcomes. The analysis associated with this part of the study was achieved through my observation of implementation

within the classroom, and semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the school personnel. Data from the interviews was collected to determine key themes that emerged. Observations of the implementation process focused on how the teachers translated the original plan into day-to-day practice in the classroom. I used a checklist accompanied by observational notes to indicate the presence or absence of research based methods during the execution of the program.

Data was acquired through informal conversations combined with observational notes regarding the implementation process. Additionally, key themes from the interviews were analyzed and member checking was used to ensure the validity of the findings. All of these segments of the analysis process were combined to determine the overall results and limitations of the pilot Spanish program, which was shared with the members of the team.

Results

A qualitative action research study was designed to investigate the question, What are the most effective planning and implementation processes for incorporating the Spanish language into a predominantly heterogeneous, native-English speaking kindergarten classroom in the United States? The study began during the summer of 2015, when the researcher met with several faculty members of a suburban elementary school located in the Northeastern United States. The school principal, a kindergarten teacher, and the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher completed an initial assessment of the school's needs. Together, they determined that due to the school's relatively high population of native Spanish speakers, Spanish would be introduced at the kindergarten level. The purpose for executing this study within a kindergarten curriculum was to introduce students to a foreign language while enhancing communication between English Language Learners and their native-English speaking peers. The principal felt

that introducing a second language at an early age would have a powerful impact on student achievement, communication, and awareness of diversity. Research supports the idea that beginning foreign language instruction in early childhood has numerous advantages. Students are apt to learn a second language faster and reach more native like pronunciation when the language instruction is embedded in meaningful tasks at the primary level (Hickey & de Mejia, 2014). The kindergarten teacher hoped that adding Spanish to the curriculum would allow the children to simultaneously develop bilingual vocabularies. She also hoped that it would bridge communication and acceptance between native-English and native-Spanish speakers.

After some discussion, it was determined that the researcher would serve as a guest Spanish instructor and teach 30 minute, explicit Spanish lessons approximately once per week. The classroom kindergarten teacher would then incorporate what was taught throughout her daily instruction. The teacher wanted to ensure that the Spanish language would be fully integrated throughout all parts of the school day in creating a bilingual classroom. The pilot program would be implemented for 12 weeks and continued by the kindergarten teacher if successful.

Based on the findings in the aforementioned research, the team decided to utilize the FLEX methodology to initiate the pilot language program. Led by data-driven practices as discussed in the literature, the team agreed that Spanish instruction would primarily serve to reinforce current curricular topics, as well as be integrated into daily instruction and transitions. Specific themes included vocabulary relating to numbers, colors, shapes, family members, manners, and seasonal topics concerning autumn. These topics were selected due to their appearance in the general kindergarten curriculum of the school district. The team selected a variety of children's literature, signs, posters, videos, and music for use during instruction. Some materials were ready-made, while the researcher and kindergarten teacher created others that

would be specific to the pilot program. The team collaborated via email to compile a specific set of preliminary resources for the program, which is included in the appendix section. Money was used from a school sponsored curricular grant to purchase these materials after they were approved by the building principal and school financial officer.

As these resources were compiled, the kindergarten teacher began to post bilingual environmental print labels for common objects in her classroom. The class calendar was also posted in both English and Spanish. Photographs of signs and labels can be found in the appendix section of this paper.

Spanish was incorporated into both the morning and afternoon kindergarten classes and began in mid-September. During the first week of school, the teacher established that out of 42 total students (morning and afternoon classes), six were English Language Learners. Three spoke Spanish in the home, while one spoke Chinese, one Arabic, and one Karen. The remaining 36 children were native-English speakers and had not been exposed to a foreign language beforehand. A letter was sent home to all families that explained the purpose of the study. While the principal anticipated the possibility of parental aversion, all families responded positively to the introduction of the Spanish language. Families commented that they were excited for their children to learn Spanish, and hoped the language integration would continue beyond the length of the study. The teachers and principal continued to receive only positive feedback from parents as the instruction continued. It became apparent that as they learned, the native-English speaking students were using Spanish both in school and in the home.

The children began using Spanish immediately after instruction was initiated. The kindergarten teacher noted that the students exhibited an immediate eagerness to learn and use

new words. The researcher continued to introduce new vocabulary through literature, music, rhymes, and conversation. These words were then utilized daily by the kindergarten teacher. The kindergarten teacher had no prior knowledge of Spanish, speaking only English and German. However, findings by Schwarzer, Haywood, and Lorenzen (2003) were confirmed in this study, in that the teacher's lack of background knowledge with the language did not hinder students' learning. Spanish became a natural part of the school day. The teacher used a combination of both English and Spanish during instruction and the students used words from both languages in conversations during group work. As the students gain competence and confidence, they began to use Spanish more frequently. The kindergarten teacher noted that providing numerous opportunities for repetition and practice helped the students to gain deftness in pronunciation, which led to a greater use of Spanish during both academic and social times.

The team was concerned that the students who spoke languages other than English and Spanish in the home would become overwhelmed by the introduction of an additional language, but as suggested by Lichtman (2014), these children proved to be equally competent in using Spanish. The kindergarten teacher was surprised that the native-Spanish speakers did not lead their classmates in using more Spanish. Instead, they too, seemed to speak with a balance of Spanish and English that was comparable to their peers. All students were engaged by the continued appearance of Spanish within multiple modalities. The use of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic practice opportunities seemed to reach the learning needs of all students. At the kindergarten level, emphasis was placed continuously upon developing a conversational vocabulary and speaking, rather than on grammar and writing. The team felt that this type of pedagogy would be more conducive to the developmental stages of the students.

As instruction continued, the kindergarten teacher noted that the students were using Spanish more frequently and comfortably. The use of Spanish became nearly as instant as English. Student performance in math and reading also improved. The teacher believed that this was due to the repetitive nature of instruction. The same curricular concepts were being taught twice, – once in English and immediately again in Spanish. The teacher, too, began to feel more comfortable with the language. She was able to use her own acquired knowledge to increase communication with the Spanish-speaking families. As a result, she noted additional gains in the academic performance of the native Spanish-speakers, which she attributes to improved cultural awareness and contact with the families.

Overall, the principal, kindergarten teacher, ESL teacher, and researcher agreed that the incorporation of Spanish into daily lessons had a positive impact on the students. They determined that the FLEX methodology, in which the Spanish language and culture were seamlessly integrated throughout daily classroom activities and conversation, was a realistically achievable method for introducing a foreign language in early childhood. The kindergarten teacher noted that the most beneficial pedagogical technique was consistent review and repetition. She also felt that the combination of multiple learning modalities made the language accessible for all students. She commented, “I liked how we used music, videos, visuals, regular movement, and engaging books to accommodate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles.” The principal noted that the Spanish vocabulary terms the children seemed to use the most were the words that they were already using in their daily interactions. The terms that directly aligned with their kindergarten curriculum became a regular part of students’ speech. However, the kindergarten teacher recognized that some of the uniquely Hispanic cultural traditions might have been more difficult for the students to grasp. “I think some of [the students]

struggled with the more cultural components because they had a hard time connecting that vocabulary to their daily lives.” In turn, the team decided that while it was beneficial to expose the children to Hispanic culture and heritage, the language that would become most readily ingrained in their speech and writing was that which supported by the pre-established school curriculum.

Conclusion

This study supports the effectiveness of using the FLEX methodology in introducing children to a foreign language during early childhood. A pilot Spanish program was designed and implemented in a predominantly heterogeneous, native-English speaking kindergarten classroom at a suburban elementary school in the United States. Short periods each week were allocated for the explicit teaching of new Spanish words through multiple learning modalities. Opportunities for practice and use were presented to students throughout the day, and seamlessly integrated into the classroom curriculum. Soon, the foreign language became a regular part of student speech and interaction.

During the study, it became apparent that while adding a foreign language to an early childhood classroom is readily achievable for all teachers, it requires careful planning and support from both the school and local community. The language is learned best when the vocabulary is meaningful to the students, and assimilated into what they are already learning. Further research is needed to investigate how enacting a similar program over several years might impact student proficiency, language use, and additional academic and social gains. It would also be intriguing to expand the design and implementation team to include native-Speaking community members as further resources.

Appendixes

- A. List of materials ordered for the study
- B. Guiding questions for semi-structured, open-ended interviews with school personnel
- C. Checklist to direct observational notes
- D. Photographs of classroom environment

Appendix A – Materials Ordered

Books

1. *¿Hola, cómo estas? / Hello, How Are You? Spanish-English Reader With CD (Dual Language Readers with CDs) (English and Spanish Edition)* By Kim Mitzo Thompson
2. *Senor Felipe's Alphabet Adventure* By Sharon Hawkins Vargo
3. *Say Hola to Spanish* By Susan Middleton Elya
4. *My Colors/Mis Colores (English and Spanish Edition)* By Rebecca Emberley
5. *Colors and Shapes / Los colores y las figuras (English and Spanish Foundations Series) (Bilingual) (Dual Language)* By Gladys Rosa-Mendoza
6. *Spicy Hot Colors: Colores Picantes* By Sherry Shahan
7. *My Numbers/ Mis Numeros* By Rebecca Emberley
8. *Perritos: Un libro para contar y ladrar* By Sandra Boynton
9. *Weather / El Tiempo (Bilingual First Books, English-Spanish)* By Clare Beaton
10. *Calabazas/Pumpkins* By Melvin and Gilda Berger
11. *Too Many Tamales* By Gary Soto and Ed Martinez
12. *Daniela's Day of the Dead* By Lisa Bullard
13. *Day of the Dead* By Julie Murray
14. *Amigo Means Friend* By Louise Everett

Posters

1. Spanish Poster Set
2. Weather Poster – “El Tiempo”
3. Spanish Calendar Set

4. Usborn Language Cards: Spanish Words and Phrases By Felicity Brooks and Mairi Mackinnan

Videos/Music

1. *Rock N Learn Spanish Volumes 1 &2*
2. Various free songs and videos from Youtube

Appendix B – Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interviews with School**Personnel****Preliminary Questions (Asked during weeks 1-2 of the study)**

1. What is your purpose for introducing Spanish into the kindergarten curriculum?
2. Why did you select kindergarten as the grade in which to pilot this program?
3. How does learning Spanish relate to the specific needs of your students?
4. What do you feel is the best way to plan for Spanish instruction?
5. Discuss the use and timing of Spanish in your classroom. Will your instruction be isolated, or will it occur throughout the school day?
6. How will you go about selecting the materials to use in instruction?
7. What specific methods will you use in instruction and why?
8. How do you predict the students will respond to learning Spanish?
9. What challenges do you anticipate in this overall process?
10. What do you hope to gain by introducing Spanish into the curriculum? What outcomes do you expect?

Secondary Questions (Asked during weeks 5-6 of the study)

1. How are the students responding to the introduction of Spanish in the classroom? How are you measuring their progress?
2. Which methods seem to be the most effective for teaching Spanish in your classroom?
3. Are there any methods you have eliminated? Why?
4. Which resources do you find to be the most useful? Please give examples.
5. Are there any resources you stopped using or have not used? Why?

6. Do the students use Spanish at times other than during direct instruction? If so, when and how? If not, why do you suppose they aren't using Spanish at other times?
7. What challenges have you encountered and how did you handle them?
8. Does Spanish instruction appear to be impacting your students' performance in other academic or social areas? If so, how?
9. Has anything surprised you thus far? If so, what?
10. How will you plan your instruction from here? What will remain the same and what, if any, changes will you make?

Tertiary Questions (Asked during weeks 11-12 of the study)

1. What, if any, progress have you noticed in your students? Are they using Spanish more frequently and comfortably?
2. Which methods did you find to be the most effective for teaching Spanish in your classroom? Please support with examples.
3. Which methods did you find to be the least effective? Please support with examples.
4. Which resources do you find to be the most useful? Please support with examples.
5. Which resources did you find to be the least useful? Please support with examples.
6. When and how do you notice students are using Spanish throughout the school day? Does it feel natural or forced?
7. Has Spanish instruction impacted your students' performance in other academic or social areas? If so, how?
8. What was the most rewarding outcome of including Spanish in the classroom?
9. Is there anything that you wish you would have done differently? Please explain.

10. How will you use the information we gained in the future? Will you continue with Spanish instruction after the study is over? Why or why not?
11. After reflecting upon this experience, do you think other early childhood educators should include foreign language instruction in their curriculums? Why or why not? What recommendations would you have for your colleagues?

Appendix C – Checklist to Direct Observational Notes

Key Themes Checklist

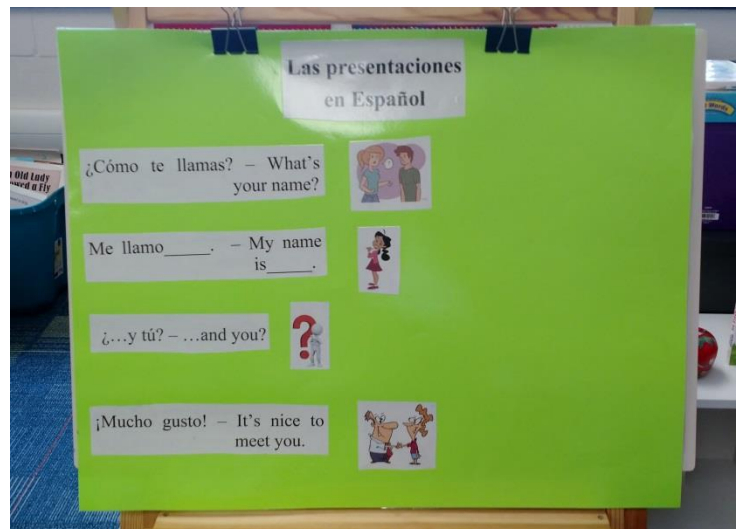
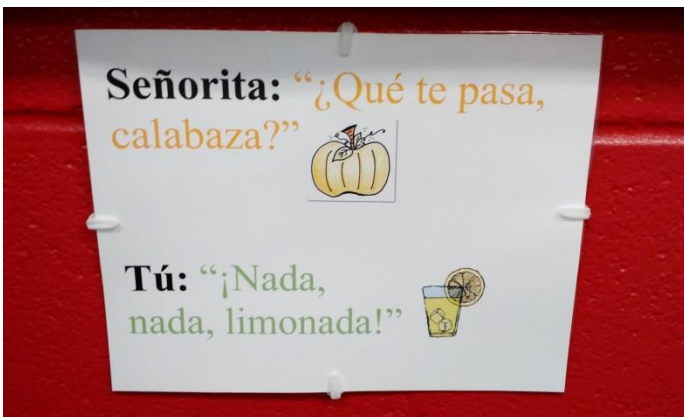
The researcher will indicate the presence (or absence) of the following items as she reviews information collected through semi-structured, informal interviews with school personnel and her observational notes regarding the process of incorporating Spanish in a specific early childhood classroom. The items listed below were selected due to their recurring presence in related research publications. Additional comments and explanations will be added by the researcher to provide precise examples and further information.

Indicate the presence of...

1. ...modeling by the teacher in the target language
2. ...modeling by a community member in the target language
3. ...children's literature in the target language
4. ...puppets speaking the target language and/or reader's theater in the target language
5. ...choral reading in the target language
6. ...call and response in the target language
7. ...students repeating phrases spoken by the teacher in the target language

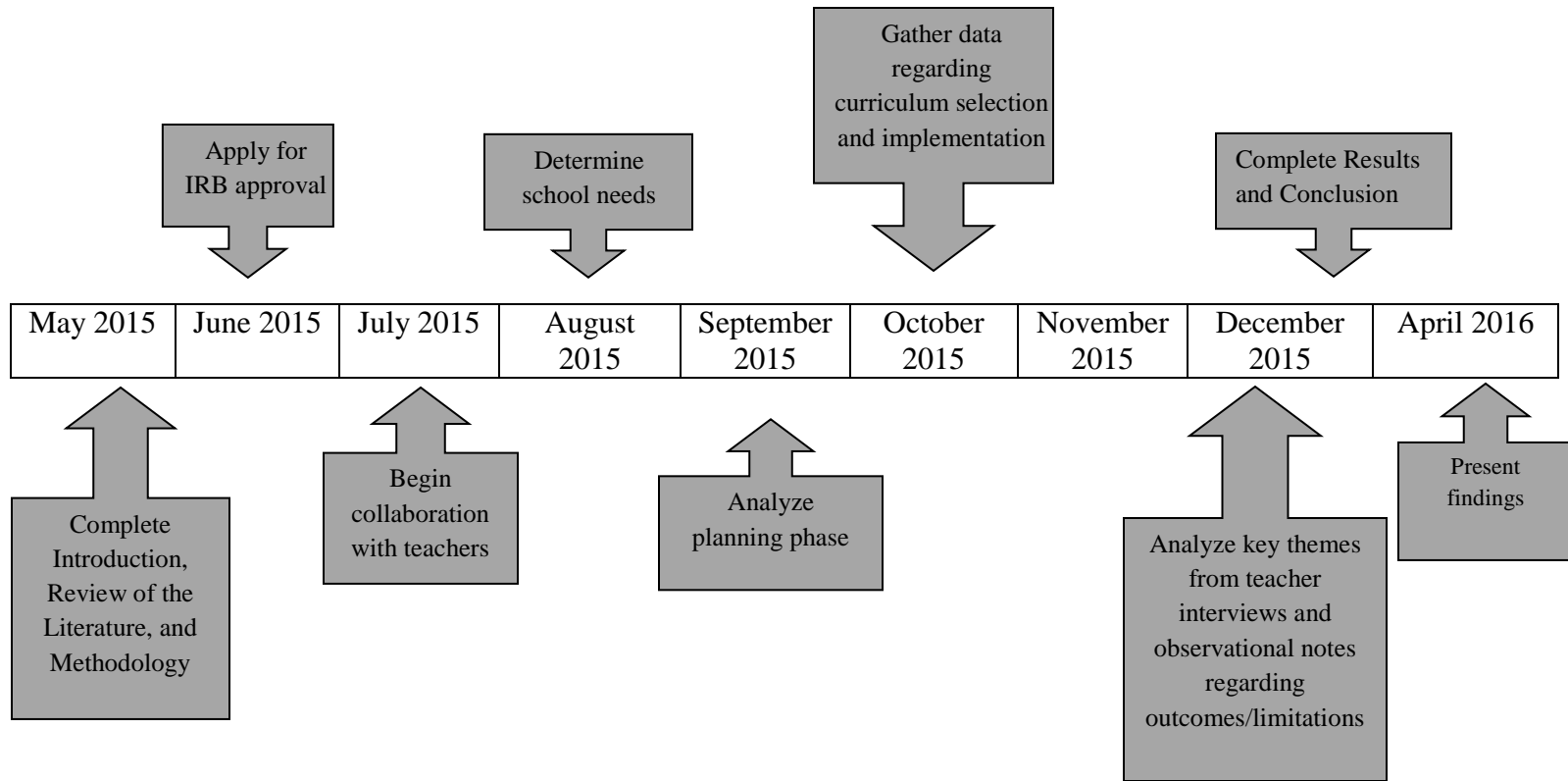
8. ...listening to songs or rhymes in the target language
9. ...singing or speaking songs or rhymes in the target language
10. ...visuals with a picture and text in the target language only
11. ...visuals with a picture and text in both the native and target language
12. ...repeated body movements or hand signs in instruction
13. ...opportunities for peer conversation in the target language
14. ...listening to recordings or watching videos in the target language
15. ...playing games in the target language
16. ...a “Mystery box” in the target language
17. ...group discussions on culture
18. ...group discussion on foreign countries where the target language is spoken
19. ...students using the target language during foreign language instruction
20. ...students using the target language during transitions
21. ...students using the target language during other instructional times
22. ...students using the target language during social times (i.e. lunch, recess, small group work, etc.)
23. ...the teacher using the target language during foreign language instruction
24. ...the teacher using the target language during transitions
25. ...the teacher using the target language during other instructional times
26. ...the teacher using the target language during social times (i.e. lunch, recess, small group work, etc.)
27. ...pre-established curricular topics being reinforced or practiced in the target language

Appendix D – Photographs of Classroom Environment





Projected Timeline



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