Research Issues

Is Spanish Proficiency Simply Enough? An Examination of *Normalistas* Attitudes towards Spanish, Bilingualism, and Bilingual Education Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed a sample of *normalistas* (Mexican certified teachers) who were being considered as applicants to a university preservice bilingual education teacher preparation program. The purpose of the study was to critically examine whether their attitudes towards Spanish use, bilingualism, and bilingual pedagogy were aligned with the needs of linguistically and culturally distinct minority children.[1]

As expected the descriptive findings indicated that the *normalistas* use of Spanish, attitude towards Spanish and bilingualism were positive. When we compared these results with the findings of the pre-interviews, we noted a close match between the self-reported and the observed findings. We also note a high degree of academic language use and proficiency and positive attitude towards Spanish, bilingualism and bilingual education. However, as indicated by the multivariate results, having one does not guarantee the other. Interestingly, for example although bilingualism was valued, the notion that bilingual education may conflict with the attainment of American values and may cause bilingual children to have an accent in English strikes discord. These findings are especially important to consider when *normalistas* are being sought as prospective bilingual education teachers.

[1]Clark and Flores acknowledge the support of their University of Texas at San Antonio Faculty Research Grants.

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Introduction

As we move onward in the 21st century, we continue to see the disparity in the numbers of bilingual teachers as compared to the increasing numbers of language minority children (Reyna, 1993; Johnson, 1993). Additionally, recent positive reform efforts within bilingual education, specifically dual language programs, have confounded this picture. So the stakes have increased, not only is there a growing demand for bilingual teachers, but also the necessity for professional levels of language proficiency across domains in both languages

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(Snow, 1990).

Bilingual teacher educators would concede that bilingual teachers need to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency across domains in both languages to be effective bilingual teachers (See Guerrero, 1997, 1998 & 1999). Other researchers have reminded us of the shift towards the majority language in bilingual classrooms and the native language regulated to giving directions, clarifying issues, and maintaining classroom discipline (See Escamilla, 1994; McCollum, 1993; Pease-Álvarez & Winsler, 1994). For language minority children, this represents a subtractive environment that does not result in academic achievement (Collier, 1992; Lindholm, 1995).

In the case of bilingual education teachers in which the minority language is Spanish, this line of research has encouraged positive changes in bilingual teacher preparation programs. Across the country, in order to assure quality control in the level of Spanish proficiency, preservice bilingual education teachers are required to demonstrate proficiency on a state mandated test. However, as noted by Guerrero (1997), many of these proficiency tests merely create an illusion of competency. Some researchers have indicated that the current standards are minimal and that the stakes should be raised in order to assure that bilingual teachers can deliver cognitively and academically demanding text in the bilingual programs. Other researchers have noted that in order to establish a quality dual language program, bilingual teachers must be able to deliver scientific and technical content areas in Spanish that promotes the construction of the bilingual students' cognitive academic language proficiency (See Guerrero, 1997, 1998 & 1999).

Unfortunately, in many cases, university students pursuing bilingual teacher preparation have themselves been denied the opportunity to build their cognitive academic Spanish language proficiency in the K-12 school system (See Hernández-Chavez, 1996). In addition, often the university level courses in Spanish do not meet their needs as bilinguals with varying degrees of proficiency across language domains. Too often the foreign language departments' professors often assume that everyone in their classroom is a beginner with no knowledge of the target language. Bilingual education students are often reminded of their inadequacy in the target language, a language that once was and may continue to be their native language (Title VII Report Notes, 1992-1997).

Some universities recognizing the need for assuring the quality of bilingual teacher preparation to meet the growing demands of dual language programs have increased the number of content courses taught in Spanish and the number of formal language courses taken by preservice bilingual teachers. Nevertheless, these changes are minimal; Guerrero (1997) cautioned that most universities continue to prepare bilingual education teachers without any course work in Spanish.

Therefore, these efforts alone will not meet the pressing demands for highly qualified bilingual teachers. Thus, a compelling issue within many communities has been to look for alternatives in meeting this demand. Such efforts to increase the pool of bilingual teachers have included "home-grown" bilingual teachers or alternative certification programs (See Díaz-Rico, Lynne, & Smith, 1994; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Torres-Karna, & Krustchinksy, 1998). Although these efforts are valiant, neither the disparity issue and/or the assurance of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in the native language have been resolved. Another recent effort has been to recruit foreign-trained teachers from Spanish-speaking countries (Varisco de García & García, 1996). The rationale for inclusion of these teachers trained elsewhere is that there is a definite need to increase the number of competent bilingual educators. Since few studies focus on incorporating foreign-trained teachers into the existing pool and the feasibility of such actions, we must critically investigate their potentiality as prospective bilingual education teachers.

Rationale for Study

In an effort to assure that a highly qualified bilingual teacher pool is replenished, some universities are currently tapping into a new potential source of bilingual teachers within their own community. Specifically, Project Alianza[1], a comprehensive, collaborative project across five universities, is retooling foreign-trained Mexican teachers (normalistas) who are currently legally residing immigrants (Cantu, 1999; Supik, 1999; Clark & Flores, 2001, Petrovic, J. E., Orozco, G., González, E., & Díaz de Cossio, 1999). Some of the obvious assumptions are that these normalistas have not only the experience of classroom teaching, but also the cognitive academic language proficiency in Spanish.

However, as indicated by the title of this article, it cannot be assumed that Spanish proficiency necessarily indicates that normalistas have the sociocultural knowledge to meet the needs of language minority children in the United States. To make this assumption would suggest that a Spanish-speaking foreign-trained teacher will reflect the sociolinguistic milieu of the bilingual classroom as it exists in this country (Maroney & Smith, 2000). Calderón and Díaz (1994) noted that these realities are different for teachers working with Latino children and that they must be prepared to deal with the issues of cultural and linguistic differences.

In order to address these, it is imperative that we investigate normalistas' attitudes towards Spanish, bilingualism, and bilingual education pedagogy. Furthermore, it is important to examine if a relationship existed between their Spanish use and Spanish attitudes, bilingualism, and bilingual education pedagogy. Based on these premises, a study of the sociocultural contexts in which language use is embedded can play a central role in advancing our basic understanding of prospective bilingual education teacher language competencies. This exploratory study will assist in conceptualizing and informing bilingual teacher preparation programs designed for the transformation of normalistas (Mexican trained teachers) residing legally in the US. Thus, the following three main research questions were explored in this study:

(1) What is normalistas' proficiency and use of Spanish?
(2) What are normalistas' attitudes towards Spanish, bilingualism, and bilingual education pedagogy?
(3) What is the relationship between Spanish use and attitudes towards Spanish, bilingualism, and bilingual education pedagogy?

Review of Related Literature

The review of literature provided a theoretical framework to establish the importance of Spanish proficiency and use, attitudes of teachers towards Spanish, bilingualism and bilingual education pedagogy. This review of related literature assisted in defining the constructs to be measured in the study.

Spanish Proficiency and Use

Language is the fundamental vehicle for realizing the full potential of humans. Because language and literacy are what enable one generation to pass its cultural heritage and traditions on the next generation, it is of vital importance that teachers value and develop the first language of children (Romo, 1999).

Scholars interested in language and linguistics have illuminated ethnic, gender, and class distinctions embodied in language varieties spoken by different groups within the US. Researchers have studied the embedded nature of language within education and social stratification issues. Sociolinguists' explorations of dimensions of language in communities have led to better understanding of neighborhoods, families, social status and relationships (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986; Heath, 1995, 1986; Phillips, 1983; Kramarae, 1981).

> "There are credible implications that many bilingual education teachers do not command the academic Spanish language at a native or near-native level of proficiency. Furthermore, when they are expected and presumed to be

capable, their lack of proficiency may - in conjunction with other factors - negatively impact student outcomes (as cited by Guerrero, 1999, p. 32)."

The everyday requirements of language and literacy and culture and identity are also closely tied to the social contexts of ethnic group and class interactions, to gender roles in families and the community, and to details of a transnational political economy.

Of great import is to provide language minority children with teachers who share a common first language and who are of their same cultural background, thereby, alleviating many cultural and linguistic challenges that arise in our schools and classrooms (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Reed, 1998). That the Spanish proficiency of teachers is related to students' achievement in Spanish as well as in English was a finding of Merino, Politzer and Ramirez's (1979) work. Quintanar-Sarellana (1997) suggests that Spanish speaking teachers can be viewed as linguistic brokers for language minority students and are valuable assets to schools. She also states that "Spanish proficiency is a variable that enhances teachers' understanding of the language and culture of Hispanic students. Thus, the expectation of proficiency in the students' language merits closer scrutiny and consideration." (p. 51).

For language minority students, the most direct way to communicate and to provide instruction is through the primary language (Cummins, 1981). One of the most effective means for communicating and interacting with children is through the language the student already knows, especially, when the primary language is used to teach academic content (Krashen & Biber, 1988). According to Hernandez (1995), to deny a student the use of their primary language at the critical thinking level is to deny them access to their normal cognitive development. Quintanar-Sarellana (1997) found that teachers with high Spanish proficiency perceived linguistic minority students and bilingual education programs in a more positive light.

In a recent study by Maroney and Smith (2000) with foreign trained teachers, respondents discussed a major incongruity in students' schooling experiences being the students' and parents' limited English proficiency and the limited Spanish used in schools. The respondents saw parents being excluded as partners in their children's education because of the language incongruity that exists between the home and school: "Also, the push to learn and speak English at school can sometimes introduce additional personal and cultural conflicts for students who live in Spanish-speaking homes; the language they learn at home is one and at school is another one" (p. 4).

Hernandez (1995) commented that teachers may question their effectiveness in providing instruction to language minority students because their lack of language proficiency affects the quality of presentation of content instruction. "[But] if the child has a bilingual teacher that speaks his/her own language, he/she is going to help that child" (Maroney & Smith, 2000, p. 8). As evident in Jiménez & Gersten (1999) recent study, it was not only the language used in the classroom by the Latino teachers, it was the "unconditional linguistic acceptance" by the teacher that created a climate that mediated the acquisition of literacy.

Attitude to Spanish and Use

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about minority students' language and culture play a critical role in determining students' performance in the classroom (Telese, 1997; Savignon, 1976). Saracho and Spodek (1995) noted that a teacher's attitudes, values, and competencies with respect to one language and culture has not been critically studied. They posited: "However, little attention has been given to the teacher as a person - how s/he feels about the students that s/he teaches, and what s/he believes about teaching language minority students in an English-dominant U.S. society" (p. 57). Smith's (1999) study suggested that children are aware of a teacher's attitude towards the native language based on the their degree of Spanish language use.

> 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 enjoy. 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 (p. 279).

According to Hernandez (1995), crucial for school success is the teachers' ability to use the students' primary language, thereby, exhibiting a positive attitude not only to the language but also to the community culture

Attitude to Bilingualism and Bilingual Education

There is a lack of research that has been done with teacher's attitudes toward bilingualism and bilingual education. In the evaluation of the competencies of preservice and inservice bilingual education teachers, Clark and Milk (1983) found that their responses were generally positive. The analysis was useful in discerning differences between these two groups, with preservice bilingual teachers being more optimistic towards their competency as a bilingual educator and the role of bilingual education. Shin and Krashen's (1996) study demonstrated that teachers supported the principles of bilingual education. These teachers strongly believed in the development of bilingualism and instruction in the native language. Further, they also noted that the theoretical rationale for the usage of two languages in instruction led to cognitive benefits. Quintanar-Sarellana (1997) in her study found that Hispanic teachers with high Spanish proficiency had positive perceptions regarding bilingual programs. In a recent study conducted by Maroney and Smith (2000), foreign-trained teachers' thoughts regarding bilingual education were positive in nature. They believed that bilingual education: a) is an important tool for developing literacy in two languages; b) provides a structured environment for children to learn English in; c) fosters biliteracy and biculturalism; and d) validates English and the native language. They also felt that bilingual education in United States is "necessary, important, and indispensable" (p. 17). The foreign-trained educators in the Maroney and Smith study regard bilingual education as consistent with the aims of bilingualism and biliteracy that Baker (1997) cited as being present in strong forms of bilingual education programs. Baker describes "strong" types of programs as fostering bilingualism and biliteracy, thereby, encouraging pluralism, enrichment and the maintenance of both languages. In strong bilingual education programs, we note the delicate balance of language proficiency and use in relation to bilingualism and bilingual education. This balance triggers positive educational outcomes.

Therefore, it is toward this goal that we should strive in the preparation of bilingual education teachers. Clark (work in progress) suggests that preservice teachers must be assisted in their transformation/metamorphosis process. This review of literature clearly delineates the need to investigate Spanish use and proficiency, and attitudes towards Spanish, bilingualism, and bilingual pedagogy of prospective bilingual education teachers. If the goal of recent recruiting programs is to transform normalistas as bilingual education teachers, we must critically examine their views as well. As bilingual education teacher educators, we must not leave these issues to chance.

Methodology

A static survey design was employed to address the three research questions. A bimethodological approach was utilized to conduct the data collection and analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative data was organized by emergent themes and triangulated (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with the

findings of the quantitative data.

Description of Participants

The participants were applicants to Project Alianza at a local university. This project provides a program for normalistas (i.e., teachers certified in Mexico) to obtain a Texas bilingual education and elementary teaching certification. Participants were conveniently selected from the pool of applicants and were assured that their responses or participation did not impact their selection to Project Alianza.

Procedure. A graduate student, a recent immigrant who had been an educational psychologist in Mexico, scheduled appointments for a group administration of survey instruments. Out of sixty normalistas contacted, 47 (78%) agreed to participate in this study. All directions and instruments were in Spanish. Participants' identity and records were kept confidential. Participants were told that there were no right or wrong responses and that they should respond honestly.

Instruments

A careful review of the literature revealed no availability of specific instruments to measure the defined constructs. Four Likert-scale instruments were employed in this study. The Use of Spanish (US), Attitude to Bilingualism (AB), and Attitude to Spanish (AS) are instruments developed by Baker (1997). Clark and Milk (1983) developed the Bilingual Teacher-Training Project Questionnaire. All four instruments were translated by a professional bilingual translator, educated in Mexico, and checked for accuracy by the researchers and bilingual colleagues.

The following three instruments were judged as practical for measuring the constructs of Spanish use, attitude towards Spanish, and attitudes towards bilingualism.

Use of Spanish (US). Baker (1997) developed this 21-item instrument that determines an individual's use of Spanish in social settings. The researchers modified the US to a 4-point scale with 4 = Important and 1 = Unimportant.

Attitude to Spanish (AS). Baker (1997) constructed this 20-item instrument to reveal an individual's attitude towards Spanish. The researchers attached a 5-point scale to the response choices with 5 = SA and 1 = SD.

Attitude to Bilingualism (AB). Baker (1997) designed this 24-item instrument to measure an individual's attitude towards the English and Spanish languages. A 5-point scale was affixed to the response choices with 5 = SA and 1 = SD by the researchers.

Bilingual Teacher-Training Project Questionnaire. (BTTPQ) is a 5-point (5 = SA and 1 = SD) Likert-scale instrument. Clark and Milk (1983) employed this instrument in the evaluation the competencies of preservice and inservice bilingual education teachers in a Title VII bilingual teacher training project. Over the years, this instrument has been revised and used as a means to determine the competencies of Title VII preservice bilingual teachers. Therefore, this instrument was selected as an appropriate measure for determining the normalistas attitude towards bilingual education teacher pedagogy.

Unstructured Interviews. In addition to the scale data, the researchers examined transcripts from the pre-interviews conducted by the Project Alianza selection committee. These data were used to triangulate with the findings from the quantitative analysis.

Data Analysis

We employed SPSS v8 (1998) to assist with the data analysis. Items that were reverse order were recoded to reflect the same directionality (e.g., 5 = 1, 1 = 5). Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed for each of the survey items. Archival data was gathered from an open-ended protocol used as pre-interview for the Project Alianza. Themes were generated from the pre-interview responses. These themes were cross-referenced with the descriptive results and were used to deepen our understanding of the findings. We recognize the limitations of our static-design study because of the sample size and

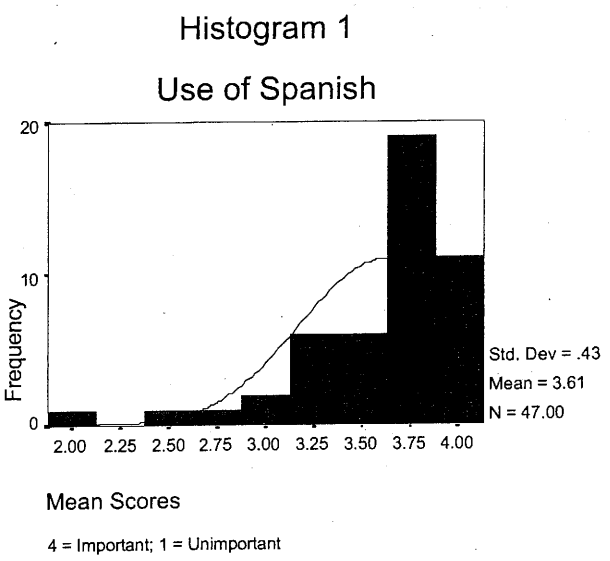
the use of volunteers, we nevertheless, feel that the findings merit consideration. In order to clearly delineate the findings each research questions' results are presented and discussed in the subsequent paragraph.

Results and Discussion

What is normalistas' proficiency and use of Spanish?

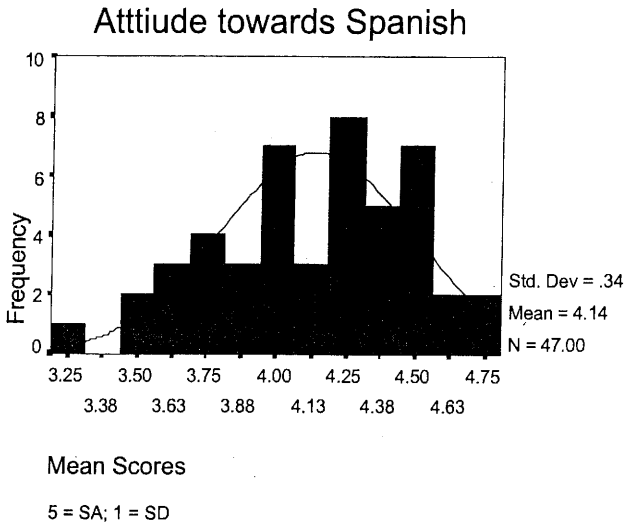
Spanish Proficiency and Use. The daily use and preference of Spanish as the means of communication was very evident in the pre-interviews and the survey items. During the pre-interviews, when asked to respond to a question in English, the majority of the normalistas expressed great discomfort in their ability to speak English. In fact, some would simply respond in Spanish rather than responding in English. When asked to switch to English by the interviewers, some revealed that they could not speak in English despite the fact that the majority of the normalistas had been legally residing in the US for an average of 5 years. The pre-interview committee rated all of the normalistas very highly on their oral Spanish proficiency. However, one of the instructors remarked that in individual cases, normalistas' Spanish writing skills may be lacking. Therefore, although the normalistas are very comfortable and proficient in their native language, their Spanish writing proficiency cannot be taken for granted in all instances. As bilingual teachers, they will be expected not only to model oral proficiency, but Spanish writing as well.

Interestingly, a difference was noted for normalistas who have been employed in US schools as paraprofessionals - these individuals were more likely to feel comfortable switching to English when prompted in English and in some cases code-switched throughout the interview. Nevertheless, the survey data still revealed a high use and preference for the total group on a four point scale (4 = Important) for Spanish in their daily lives (M = 3.61; SD = .43; See Histogram 1



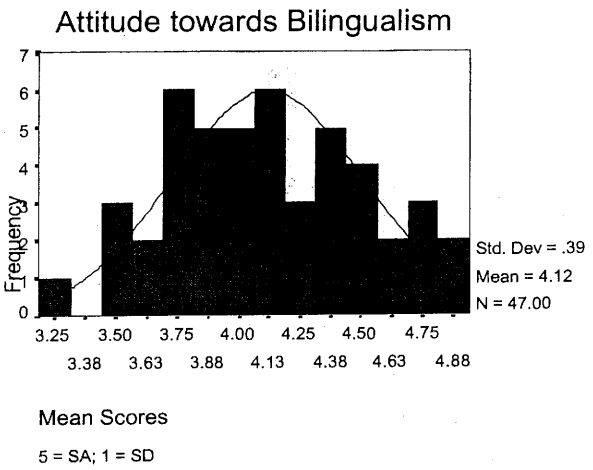
that Spanish was a major language spoken in this hemisphere as well as in Europe (M = 4.14; SD = .34; See Histogram 2).

Histogram 2



Attitude towards Bilingualism. In general, there is a positive attitude towards bilingualism, the role of the school in assuring that children become bilingual and biliterate, and that being bilingual creates job and financial opportunities (M = 4.12, SD = .37; See Histogram 3). While a number of the items indicated a high level of positive agreement towards bilingualism, several items were in the neutral range: (a) Knowing Spanish and English makes people intelligent (M = 2.89, SD = 1.28); (b) Speaking two languages is not difficult (M = 3.77, SD = 1.12; (c) I feel sorry for people who cannot speak both English and Spanish (M = 3.0; SD = 1.21; and (d) People know more if they speak English and Spanish (M = 3.46, SD = 1.23). Thus, while they consider bilingualism important, the normalistas were neutral as to whether bilingualism makes an individual more knowledgeable or more intelligent.

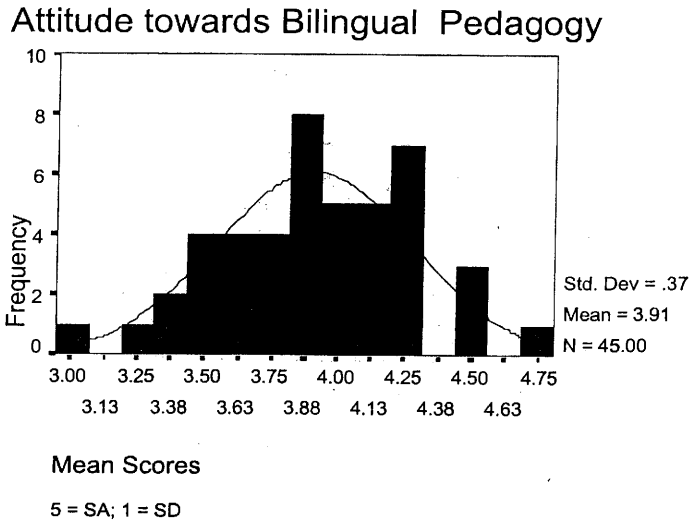
Histogram 3



Attitude towards Bilingual Education Pedagogy. Again, overall we see a positive attitude towards bilingual pedagogy (M 3.91, SD = .37). In general, the normalistas agreed that teachers should be well prepared, be able to teach math and science in Spanish, and be able to employ a high degree of Spanish usage in the bilingual classroom. The normalistas also noted the role and importance of cultural history, parents, and bilingualism.

However, they were neutral as to who had the responsibility in the implementation of the bilingual program indicating that the principal held the responsibility (M = 2.7; SD = 1.13); that perhaps cultural activities took too much time from other learning activities (M = 2.34, SD = 1.3); that bilingual education would prevent bilingual students from learning American values (M = 3.34, SD = 1.14; that the loss of the native language was necessary to learn American values (M = 3.4, SD = 1.38, and that learning in the native language in a bilingual classroom would result in the child learning English with an accent (M = 3.68; SD = .99).

Histogram 4



In sum, all the normalistas readily identified the important role of the teacher within the bilingual classroom. In addition, a number of the normalistas had preconceived notions regarding bilingual education pedagogy and the role of bilingual education in the education of language minority children. Furthermore, we note the conflict normalistas perceived as to the acquisition of American values within the bilingual education classroom. Interestingly, the pre-interview data confirmed that several of the normalistas were against bilingual education because of these same preconceived notions and because they regard the level of proficiency of bilingual education teachers to be inadequate. Therefore, they felt that they could do a better job with their children in Spanish and thus, the role of the school was to educate their children in English. A couple of them remarked how some of their children did experience difficulty, but they did not see a connection between the lack of native language instruction in school and the academic difficulty their children were experiencing.

What is the relationship between Spanish use and attitudes towards Spanish, bilingualism, and bilingual education pedagogy?

In order to examine if there was a relationship between Spanish Use and the other three variables, the researchers used a general linear model (SPSS, Version 8 for Windows, 1998). The Spanish Use independent variable was dummy coded into two groups dependent on their degree of use and proficiency in Spanish only. The Box M indicated homogeneity of the dependent variables and the use of the general linear model reduces multicollinearity (Stevens, 1996). The findings indicated no significant relationships, as well as no main or between subject effects. Therefore, simply assuming that normalistas will have positive attitudes towards Spanish, bilingualism, and bilingual education pedagogy because they possess a high degree of Spanish proficiency is not a given.

Conclusions

As expected the descriptive findings indicated that the normalistas use of Spanish, attitude towards Spanish and bilingualism were positive. When we compared these results with the findings of the pre-interviews, we noted a close match between the self-reported and the observed findings. We also note a high degree of academic language use and proficiency and positive attitude towards Spanish, bilingualism and bilingual education. However, as indicated by the multivariate results, having one does not guarantee the other. For example although bilingualism was valued by the normalistas, the perception that bilingual education may conflict with the attainment of American values and may cause bilingual children to have an accent in English strikes discord. This is especially important to consider when normalistas are being sought as prospective bilingual education teachers.

Central concerns regarding language and literacy range from policy decisions about the language of classroom instruction to the nature of language and literacy interactions among students and teachers, among students, and among different groups within the community. Within this sociolinguistic context, teachers need to know more about the roles language and literacy play in the cognitive and social potential of students. Teachers need to be aware of the role of culture, language and literacy in shaping gender and racial and ethnic relations. Schools should adopt educational policies in regards to the native language that reduce the negative impact of prejudice and intolerance in order to maximize the opportunities available to all students. Thus, teachers must be aware of the ways culture, language, gender and ethnicity influence the social construction of identity (Clark & Flores, 2001) and how these processes affect teachers' expectations of students (Clark & Flores, 2000).

Important to remember is that in the US, language minority students have unique sociocultural-linguistic experiences that are different than those experienced by the normalistas. Therefore, these findings have implications for teacher educators and prospective employers. Prospective employers need to be cautious in their selection of normalistas as prospective bilingual education teachers. Although we do not recommend that normalistas be hired prior to any bilingual education teacher preparation, school district personnel must be careful to address the aforementioned issues. Studies about foreign-trained teachers will assist teacher educators in making sound decisions in designing a program of study in bilingual education for them. The type of minimal coursework that these students may need include: (a) foundations in bilingual education, (b) cultural history of language minorities in the US, (c) research addressing the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy, (d) sociocultural-linguistic issues, such as language loss and language dialects within language minority communities, (e) critical teaching practices, for example addressing language use and attitudes towards LMS' language variety.

We must also acknowledge that some normalistas may be dogmatic in their belief systems and that these beliefs may be difficult to change. Therefore, these individuals may not be positive assets as prospective bilingual education teacher candidates or for the community. Our research indicates that simply having Spanish language proficiency is not enough. Normalistas must undergo training to prepare to deal with language minority students in the US and therefore, we must not assume that they will be cognizant and sensitive to the needs of language minority students.

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