Literacy Models and Diversity: Challenges Facing Bilingual Preservice Teachers Tutoring Bilingual Kindergarten Students in an Urban Context

Valentina Blonski Hardin, Ed. D.

University of Houston – Downtown

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Abstract

The present study was undertaken to find ways to help bilingual preservice teachers become more aware of diversity and more questioning of methods for literacy development in order to address issues of critical literacy. Twenty-five bilingual pre-service teachers, enrolled in a Spanish Reading Methods at the university tutored 25 kindergarten bilingual students for 20 sessions for 12-weeks. The research sought to find: a) how did tutoring influence preservice teachers' perceptions of literacy development in Spanish, b) how did the use of poems, rhymes, and repetitive-pattern books affect their perceptions of literacy development, and c) whether tutoring and the use of genuine language activities promoted questioning as to whether phonics is the most effective way of literacy development in Spanish. Qualitative methodology of data collection and data analysis were followed. In-class written reflections were collected at the beginning, at mid point and at the end of the course. The researcher classified categories of themes from the reflections into those that were similar and those that were unique. The results indicated that 7 (28%) out of 25 pre-service teachers would incorporate these activities in their future instruction, 8 (32%) would continue to use phonics, and 10 (40%) would not commit one way or another. The researcher concluded that the tutoring, instructional activities, and discussions brought about perception change only for a minor number of Teacher Candidates'. Recommendations for the future include: incorporating additional research articles to supplement the textbook readings and allocating more time to examining the need for differentiated instruction.

Student diversity is a reality in our elementary schools as well as in our universities. This diversity is embodied in many forms, not just ethnically, but also in terms of students' interests, economic background, and academic preparation. Yet, many of the bilingual preservice teachers in our Urban Education Department enrolled in our Spanish Reading Methods and on the brink of entering their Practicum, do not always appear to acknowledge student diversity in their lessons. Additionally, they perceive literacy not as a process of developing and integrating the various facets of language arts in preparation for critical literacy, but rather in narrow terms of acquiring the mechanics of reading, and seem quite invested in the traditional phonics-based models through which they were taught to read in Spanish. If our goal is to prepare a diverse population of learners become critical thinkers, an important question would be: how do we help preservice teachers internalize the reflective, questioning perspective necessary to prepare diverse emergent learners for critical literacy development?

The present study arose out of the need to sensitize preservice teachers to the benefits of becoming reflective instructors, aware of diversity, of the need for critical literacy, and to question traditional models of transmission pedagogy; and, to familiarize them with a multi-dimensional sociopsycholinguistic model (Freeman & Freeman, 2007) of literacy development that includes cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural dimensions. To this effect, in the present action research study, preservice teachers tutored bilingual kindergarten emergent readers, instructing phonics in a non-traditional manner through the use of repetitive-language-pattern books, poems and rhymes, in order to help those emergent readers with low print concepts for whom phonics is too abstract to grasp. The use of these books links academics to the young students' home and cultural backgrounds. The goal of the pilot study was to find ways to help teachers accept paradigms of literacy that address diversity and critical literacy.

Objective of the Study

In this pilot study 25 bilingual preservice teachers (here also referred to as Teacher Candidates or TCs), enrolled in a Spanish Reading Methods course in an urban university, tutored 25 kindergarten bilingual students from 2 different classrooms in a partner elementary school, for 20 sessions over a 12-week period. The objectives of the study were to determine how working directly with emergent readers and using genuine language activities (poems, nursery rhymes and repetitive language-pattern books) influenced TCs' views about literacy development in Spanish; and, whether these activities helped TCs understand the diversity of the emergent readers who enter school with various levels of print concepts and the need to contextualize the teaching of phonics for them.

Research Questions:

1. How does the experience of tutoring bilingual kindergarten students influence bilingual Teacher Candidates' (TCs') perceptions of literacy development in Spanish, as expressed through in-class reflective writing?

2. How does the use of genuine language activities (repetitive-language pattern books, poems and rhymes) in the native language to contextualize the teaching of phonics, influence bilingual TCs' perceptions of literacy development in Spanish, as expressed through in-class reflective writing?

3. Does the tutoring of emergent readers and the use of genuine language activities promote bilingual TCs' questioning as to whether synthetic/phonics approaches are a more effective method of literacy development in Spanish?

Theoretical Framework

Literacy development in Spanish has traditionally focused on the teaching of reading through synthetic and analytic approaches, with an emphasis on letters, syllables, and isolated words, taught in a sequential manner (Freeman & Serra, 1997). No emphasis has been placed on the use of authentic language activities as an entry point for phonics instruction. However, a research study with Spanish-speaking emergent readers (Barrera, 1983), revealed that literacy development through meaningful activities enabled elementary school children to become better comprehenders and more interested in reading. Studies with miscue analysis (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996; Goodman & Marek, 1996) and monolingual students have indicated that poor readers are unaware of the meaningful nature of reading and focus on sounding out words, not skipping words, and conceptualize reading as a set of sub-skills, unlikely to help them meet the demands of successful reading. Recent research studies (Herron, 2008) with monolingual students point to the fact that speech is the foundation of reading and that the process of learning to read should start with students constructing and pronouncing words, which enables them to recognize their meaning. Accordingly, conventional phonics methods which start by teaching visual letter recognition are not helpful since speech memory is key when good readers look at thousands of words and instantly recognize their meanings (Herron, 2008). Thus, the use of authentic, meaningful language activities should be a powerful tool in the literacy development of all students.

Slavin, et al., (2009), in their synthesis of reviews of research on the achievement outcomes of four major approaches to improving the reading success of children in the elementary grades, concluded that although phonics and phonemic awareness instruction are important to initial reading success (National Reading Panel, 2000), they are not sufficient in bringing about widespread improvement in children's reading. Other elements, such as

classroom organization, motivation, grouping, assessment, professional development play a very important role in positive outcomes. In fact, the national evaluation by Gamse, et al., (2008) of the federal Reading First Initiative found that there were no significant positive effects due to adopting books with more phonics and spending more time each day on phonemic awareness, as recommended by the NRP (2000). Similarly, a large study of professional development focused on phonics instruction by Garet, et al., (2008) found no effects on the reading skills of second graders. In conclusion, there are many factors other than phonics that are consequential to children's success in reading.

In regards to activities that can promote teachers' change in perceptions of literacy there are few studies; but such change does not appear to be an easy endeavor. The case studies conducted by Wuthrick (1995) and related to teacher change from conventional to holistic literacy instruction indicate that several factors must be present. For example, teachers reported on the importance of a colleague experimenting with holistic strategies, workshops, graduate classes, and administrative support, all being influential factors contributing to change. The work of Blachowicz and Wimett (1995) suggests that autobiographical reflections can also be useful in helping preservice teachers get in touch with their initial constructs of literacy and literacy instruction and to elaborate ways in which these constructs have changed, starting a looping process that leads to more reflective behaviors and metacognitive awareness. Another study (Standerford, 1995-96) of preservice teachers who worked weekly with children in an elementary classroom designing appropriate instruction for students' needs and a variety of assessment activities yielded themes that suggest a long process towards agency, collaboration, and becoming teacher researchers. Therefore, the process could be arduous, require multiple and varied activities, sustained over a long period of time.

Within bilingual contexts, one must consider that bilingual children are being prepared not just for literacy but also for biliteracy. Preservice teachers are even less familiar with the process of preparing students in this area. The work of Gonzalez and Yawkey (1994) is relevant to this topic. In their review of research in bilingual reading they conclude that the psycholinguistic model of reading and schema theory, both of which move beyond defining literacy simply as reading acquisition, provide the best models for explaining bilingual reading processes. These models take into consideration sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic factors specific to the bilingual child. Such conceptualizations explain the transfer of literacy concepts across languages on a global level (macro-transfer), such as meaning construction, metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness, and promote bilingualism as a point of strength that helps in literacy development across languages to promote biliteracy. A conceptualization of reading as the acquisition of the mechanics of reading, related to phonological awareness, word recognition, and vocabulary knowledge only, holds that there is a lack of transfer of these concepts across languages since the focus is on the micro-transfer level, where one finds the differences between languages. The latter view leads to instruction from a deficit view of bilingualism; that is, that the student's bilingualism "interferes" with literacy development in the second language. Therefore, bilingual preservice teachers' perceptions of how literacy develops become very important in a bilingual, bicultural context.

As a gateway to reaching academically diverse learners who may otherwise not be reached through the use of traditional methods of literacy development, to ensure the development of reading comprehension strategies, motivation to read, biliteracy, and critical literacy, a need exists to have bilingual preservice teachers question traditional paradigms of literacy. However, there is little research pointing to the best methods for promoting these

questioning attitudes and behaviors related to emergent literacy issues. The present pilot study seeks to answer this query through tutoring experiences and authentic language activities with bilingual children, and reflective writing to determine their effect on bilingual TCs' perceptions of literacy development in children whose first language is Spanish.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative methodology of data collection and analysis as explained below. Teacher Candidates were involved in tutoring Kindergarten students and used poems, nursery rhymes, or repetitive-language pattern books, and engaged in self reflections. They produced the following artifacts related to this study:

1. Initial written reflections about how they believed literacy develops;

2. A mid-point reflection about how genuine language or holistic activities were evolving with the kindergarten students;

3. A final reflection on the best instructional approaches to literacy development; and,

4. An end-of-semester written case study related to the tutoring of the kindergarten students: challenges faced, students' progress, and suggestions for future instruction

The program is field-based; therefore, all tutoring sessions took place at the elementary school were classes were conducted. TCs were provided a suggested outline for activities to be followed during the tutoring sessions and a rationale for adopting a sociopsycholinguistic perspective (Freeman & Freeman, 2007). Two university professors monitored and provided guidance with the tutoring sessions. Teacher Candidates were observed during their tutoring sessions and coached if necessary. Classroom discussions included the challenges encountered

during the tutoring, as well as the rationale for different approaches, methods, and activities for literacy development in Spanish. The textbook required in the course (Freeman & Freeman, 2007) focused on various literacy approaches.

Data analysis involved eliciting patterns from the written reflections and the observations of the tutoring sessions.

<u>Spanish Reading Methods for Teacher Candidates</u>

Preservice teachers enrolled in this course learned to implement a balanced reading approach based on a sociopsycholinguistic perspective of literacy, with the following instructional and curricular components: reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading (small group instruction) and classroom organization, independent reading, writing, development of thematic units, all within the context of a Dual Language Bilingual Program (Freeman & Freeman, 2007). Activities to be implemented during whole-group or small-group instruction included: shared reading, oral language development through book discussions and work with traditional Spanish poems/rhymes, comprehension strategies, vocabulary, phonics, and writing.

They also learned about synthetic methods which focus on phonics exclusively, as has been the tradition to teach reading in the Spanish-speaking world (Freeman & Serra, 1997). In Spanish, such methods include: the alphabetic, the phonetic, the onomatopoeic, and the lexical methods; plus the analytic methods that have as starting points words, sentences or pictures but still subscribe to the perspective that word recognition and decoding are at the center of reading instruction, with skills presented sequentially (Freeman & Freeman, 2007).

Materials

All books and textbooks used as well as the instruction conducted by the preservice teachers and the course instructor/researcher were in Spanish (the kindergarten students' native language and a language, which the preservice teachers knew well). Specific materials used during the tutoring were Spanish nursery rhymes, small Spanish books of repetitive patterns made by the preservice teachers, bought, or checked out from the school library, manipulatives and other materials for the explicit teaching of phonics.

The use of the repetitive pattern books and poems/nursery rhymes

Preservice teachers checked out and/or made repetitive-language-pattern small books and practiced how to use them in the tutoring sessions. Hand-made books could have a repetitive sentence on each page of the book. Example from a small 4-page book: Me gusta comer pan, me gusta comer arroz, me gusta comer manzanas, no me gusta comer espinacas (I like to eat bread, I like to eat rice, I like to eat apples, I don't like to eat spinach). All small books had a title page, illustrations, and the name of the author and illustrator. The books were not necessarily as simple as the example given and some children and teachers made books together. Teachers could also use poems or nursery rhymes as practice passages to contextualize phonics.

The following cycle was suggested for general use during the tutoring sessions:

- Read the book to the child (or have the child read it) and discuss it.

- Ask the child to follow with the teacher reading the book (more than once if needed).

- Ask the child to read the book alone (with help if necessary). Students may memorize the book to "read" it.

- Ask questions as the book is read and discussed.

- The child may write in his or her journal about the story in the book or a related topic.

- On the second day, the same book may be reviewed. This time the TC conducts a mini lesson related to print concepts, phonics, vocabulary, or a specific area of reading on which the student may need to focus. Example: The teacher writes a short sentence on a sentence strip. The student and the teacher cut it into words. The student then re-assembles the scrambled words into a sentence. (In later mini lessons, they may cut words into syllables and put them back together. They may chant and count syllables, learn letters). Students write words in their journals.

- On the third day, a new book is begun or the concepts studied are reinforced through a game (e.g., Bingo, Concentration).

Analysis

Data analysis consisted on eliciting themes or patterns from the reflections and case studies that the TCs submitted. The number of participants in the study was small; therefore, patterns were determined by categorizing themes into those that were similar and those that were unique. The number of students that subscribed to the various patterns was determined.

Results

Tutoring Sessions– Observations

- In the beginning, all TCs felt uncomfortable with the tutoring sessions since phonics was not to be used as an entry point, even though they were given guidelines and had seen the new strategies modeled. Many felt uneasy working with poems, cutting the poem's lines into strips to be matched, working with words and then letters.

- Some TCs felt more comfortable after testing the new approach for a few sessions. One person experienced an "aha" moment when the new approach helped the tutee move forward in a mental process that the preservice teacher witnessed.

Initial Reflections:

- TCs had all learned to read in Spanish through synthetic/phonetic approaches and were very familiar and comfortable with these traditional approaches.

- All TCs believed that students would learn through synthetic approaches and could not conceive that starting out with phonics may not work with some students.

- Those who worked in school districts as assistants were exposed weekly to the traditional use of phonics in reading instruction.

- Many TCs stated that these approaches "work" so why not stick to them.

- Those TCs who knew that they would be working for the same district after they graduated and knew that they would likely be required to follow these approaches, expressed little motivation to learn new approaches.

- TCs did not appear to be familiar with or considered whether one approach may be more effective than another depending on the children's background and prior knowledge (in terms of oral language development or print concepts).

Mid-point Reflections

- Six out of the 25 TCs expressed great concern about how to keep the tutees motivated and interested in the activities.

- Four TCs concluded that reading was not just decoding but a process. One TC wrote, "Students may learn to read through other processes, such as developing oral language and writing."

- Four out of 25 felt that with a balanced method students make connections to previous knowledge.

- Seven TCs mentioned that they learned new ways to teach reading and about literacy development from their kindergarten student.

- Three TCs expressed how very difficult it was to teach reading.

- Other individual topics that came up at this mid point included: each student learns differently, many activities must be prepared, some students need explicit instruction; and, phonics can be taught with a book in a contextualized manner.

Final reflections and Case studies

- Some TCs reported that holistic approaches are harder to implement (ready-to-use phonics kits would be given to them in the schools districts).

- One very insightful TC reported that she was still doubtful about using a holistic approach because though her student could read the little books, she could not read (or decode) words in isolation.

- Most TCs still believed that the best way to teach reading in Spanish was through phonics because the Spanish language follows a syllabic-type of pattern so regularly that it would be a shame not to teach the vowels, a few consonants, and have the students decoding right away. They gave less importance to other issues, such as oral language development, reading comprehension strategies, motivation, contextualizing phonics for students with no print concepts, etc.

Overall results

The overall results revealed that:

- All the TCs in this study attempted to use poems/nursery rhymes and repetitive-language pattern books, with varying degrees of success.

- Of 25 respondents, only 7 (28%) stated that they would attempt to utilize holistic approaches to contextualize phonics,

- 8 (32%) stated that would definitely continue to use phonics as the main method for literacy development,

- 10 (40%) did not provide specific or clear information about which approach they preferred.

Conclusion:

Out of 25 TCs, only 7 indicated a willingness to incorporate authentic language activities in their classroom instruction for the literacy development of emergent readers. Therefore, it appears that the tutoring sessions, the use of pattern-language books to contextualize the teaching of phonics, and the personal written reflections, plus the reading of the required textbook and the discussions about different perspectives of literacy development contributed little to change bilingual preservice teachers' perceptions that phonics-based approaches are the most effective approach to literacy development in Spanish in the early primary grades.

Significance of the Study

A sociopsycholinguistic model of literacy development addresses issues of background differences and critical literacy. It supports the use of authentic language activities for literacy and oral language development, individualized instruction, motivation through student autonomy in choosing reading material, integrating reading across the curriculum, gradual student independence in their own learning, and a conceptualization of the teacher as a facilitator rather than imparter of knowledge (Freeman & Freeman, 2007). Bilingual preservice teachers today are aware that they will face a diverse student population, some of whom will arrive in their classrooms with different levels of print concepts, academic vocabulary, familiarity with books,

and understanding of the reading process. These preservice teachers express anxiety about reaching such diverse population and want to know the most effective ways of developing literacy. However, most of them feel more comfortable using traditional phonics methods with which they are familiar; do not question the effectiveness of these methods for some students, and some resist adopting activities based on more holistic approaches.

The present action research study explored ways for bilingual preservice teachers to become more reflective and curious about the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to literacy development, and more motivated to adopt new literacy paradigms for Spanish-speaking learners. To prepare teachers as agents of change, who can help their students become critical readers, teacher preparation programs, particularly for bilingual, bicultural students, must address issues of teacher perception.

Future Research

Further research should be conducted to determine whether activities, such as incorporating additional research evidence, electronic discussions, or a more extensive review of literature, should be included in addition to tutoring sessions, the use of repetitive-language books, and in-class reflections, in order to promote a more reflective and questioning attitude towards approaches to literacy development. It would also be relevant to investigate whether preparing teachers for action research or training them in metacognitive strategies would enhance their ability to examine and critique various methods. In regards to the group who participated in the present research, it may be interesting to conduct in-depth interviews with those willing to contextualize phonics in their instruction and those with a preference for the traditional phonics-based approach. Multi-faceted approaches may be needed to change preservice teachers'

perceptions of literacy from the narrow view of reading acquisition to a broader view which may

lead to critical literacy for diverse learners.

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