

Language Use By Bilingual Special Educators Of English Language Learners With Disabilities

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Using an exploratory case study approach, the language use of five bilingual special education teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) with disabilities was examined. Audio tapes, classroom observations, and teacher interviews yielded data on the language used by the bilingual teachers. Data revealed information on the frequency of the use of English and Spanish, patterns of language use for each language, and differences in the way English and Spanish were used in the classroom. Implications for teacher preparation programs are discussed.

There are many challenges that teachers face in the classroom particularly when working with students at risk of academic failure. Students with disabilities and those who are not fluent English speakers, have certain needs that are not always addressed by traditional teaching methods. For students who present two or more at risk factors, the probability of academic failure is exponentially increased (Baca & Cervantes, 2004). As with all students, their opportunities for academic success are dependent on having well prepared teachers who understand the strengths and limitations the students bring to the classroom. These teachers must be able to address students' linguistic and cultural differences as well as their cognitive, emotional, and/or physical disabilities so they can achieve to their maximum potential.

The persistent overrepresentation in some categories of special education, while underrepresentation in other categories, for ethnic and language minority students in special education is of grave concern (Losen & Orfield, 2002). This racial inequity, coupled with the projected increase in the numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) with disabilities receiving special education services (Heubert, 2002), is cause for alarm. The identification, assessment, and instruction of these students are as complex and diverse as the students themselves.

Most of the literature on English Language Learners with disabilities addresses issues related to overrepresentation in high incidence categories such as learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotionally handicapped whereas there is an under representation in classes for talented and gifted students (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

A review of the literature on ELLs with disabilities generated many articles on the assessment and identification of the students (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000; Keller-Allen, 2006). However, there are a limited number of articles on teaching these students (Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001; Gersten, Baker, & Marks, 1998) and the preparation of teachers for this target population (Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2002).

The demand for special education teachers is expected to increase due to an increase in the number of students identified with disabilities and the low retention rate among special education teachers (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2003). Tyler et al. (2002) argue that cultural diversity among teachers is important as well as cultural competence. This is of particular concern given the shortage of special education teachers who are culturally and linguistically diverse. In fact, the United States Department of Labor (2006) has recognized the need for bilingual special education teachers and those with multicultural experiences due to the rise in the number of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds identified as having special needs. This demand for teachers prepared to work with students from different backgrounds with disabilities accentuates the need for teacher preparation programs for preservice teachers and professional development opportunities for inservice teachers.

Theoretical framework

ELLs with disabilities need special education teachers who are fluent in their native languages and have a sound understanding of their cultures in order to effectively instruct and assess their needs (Baca & Cervantes, 2004). Support of the native language is critical to facilitate the process of learning content area subjects, while learning English as a second language (Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001; Gersten et al., 1998). For many ELLs with disabilities, the emphasis of instruction is on language development in English only without support in the student's native language. Misconceptions among educators about the relationship between the first and second language development (August & Hakuta, 1997) and the nature of bilingualism (Cheng, 1997; Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004; Goldstein, 2004) have been documented. Furthermore, development of first language proficiency which is the basis for learning the second language (Cummins, 1984, 1994; Krashen 1991, 1997; Thomas & Collier, 1997) often times is not supported. These misunderstandings about language and the lack of support for the first language can negatively affect the language development of students with disabilities.

Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Stephenson, Pendzick, and Sapru (2003) found that when ELLs with disabilities received more instruction in English, they were less likely to receive extended services for English-as-second-language or significant instruction in their native language than ELLs without disabilities. Unfortunately for many ELLs with disabilities, these decisions are made to only teach them in English "so they will not get confused." Nevertheless, Maldonado (1994) found that bilingual instruction was beneficial for students with learning disabilities. After three years, ELLs with disabilities in integrated special education programs who received native language instruction and cultural development attained higher levels of English language proficiency than those who were in regular special education.

There is a lack of agreement on how and when to use the students' native language. However, there is agreement that students' fluency and proficiency in English is essential to their academic success (Tellez & Waxman, 2004). As in all teaching, the ultimate goal of teaching ELLs with disabilities is to assist the all students in learning cognitively, linguistically, and affectively to their maximum potential. Therefore, special education teachers of ELLs should utilize the students' language and culture as a medium of instruction since they are the foundation upon which new experiences, knowledge, and skills will be taught (Baca & Cervantes, 2004).

Furthermore, an extensive nationwide survey study of personnel who served students with disabilities was conducted by Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, and Willig (2002). Among their results on different aspects of educational process of students with special needs, they found that the participants felt least skillful in accommodating the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. However, those who did feel skillful in teaching the target population reported using different instructional practices than those who did not. These instructional practices included teaching key vocabulary prior to the lesson, developing lessons specifically designed for English language development, and extending language development opportunities. Of the teachers who were fluent in the languages of their students, many reported using the native language of the students to teach English language skills and academic concepts.

In a study of teacher efficacy of special education working with ELLs with disabilities, Paneque (2004) found that proficiency in the language of the ELLs was positively correlated with high teacher efficacy and accounted for significant variance in predicting the level of teachers' perceived efficacy. Participant responses included that knowledge of the students' language facilitated understanding and teaching the students as well as communicating with the parents more effectively. Several of the participants noted that having gone through the process of acculturation and speaking English as a second language was most helpful because it allowed them to relate better to their students.

The current study was an exploratory examination of five special education classrooms where the special education teachers were bilingual in English and the native language, Spanish, of the ELLs with disabilities. The research questions posed were:

1. Did the special education teachers use both English and Spanish for instruction?
2. If so, how were English and Spanish used?
3. Were there differences in the use of English and Spanish by the special education teachers?

Method

A case study approach was utilized in the present study due to the unique needs of ELLs with disabilities and the continuum of special education services to meet their needs. Yin (2003) supports the use of case study research that is exploratory in nature to study how or why an event or behavior occurs. Stake (2005) agrees that case studies are useful to gain greater understanding of a *case* where it occurs naturally. This is particularly appropriate for pilot studies to initially study a phenomenon, as in the use of the native language by special education teachers of ELLs with disabilities where there are few articles (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Ortiz, 2001).

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in the southeast region of the United States in a large, urban school district offering a wide range of educational programs including programs for students with disabilities and those who speak English as a second language. Two elementary schools were identified because of student population with a high number of culturally and linguistically diverse students as well as students receiving special education services. At the first school, 87% of the student body was Hispanic and 18% of the students received special education. At the second school the student body was comprised of 95% Hispanic students and 14% of the students received special education services. At each school special education teachers who were fluent in Spanish were invited to participate in the study. Five teachers volunteered, two from the first school and three from the second school. The volunteers were all female, Hispanic teachers who held full-time positions as special educators and worked in self-contained classrooms. Teacher characteristics are presented in Table 1.

The teacher participants were all bilingual in English and Spanish, Four of the five teachers reported that Spanish was the first language they had learned and then later English. One of the teachers reported that she had grown up in a bilingual home where both English and Spanish were spoken; she learned both languages simultaneously.

Olga and Annie worked at the first school. Olga worked with 13 students with orthopedic impairments in grades 2 and 3. Ten of her students were ESOL. She had earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees in special education with ESOL endorsement. Additionally, Olga held special education certification and had 12 years of teaching experience.

Annie worked with 20 students who were educable mentally handicapped, 17 of whom were ESOL. She had earned a Bachelor's degree in psychology and had only one year of teaching experience. Annie had passed the special education teacher certification examination, although she had not taken any special education courses. In addition, she was not ESOL endorsed.

Table 1:
Participating Special Teacher Characteristics

Participant	Student characteristics	Language skills	Degrees earned	Number of years teaching
Olga	K – Grade 3, physically impaired	L1* – Spanish L2** - English	BA and MA in Special Ed with ESOL endorsement	12 years
Annie	Grades 3 to 5, Educable Mentally Handicapped	L1* – bilingual Spanish and English	BA in Psychology	1 year
Mari	Pre-K, Varying Exceptionalities	L1* – Spanish L2** – English	BA and MA Special Ed with ESOL endorsement	16 years
Carolina	Pre-K, Autistic	L1* – Spanish L2** – English	BA in Early Childhood Ed	2.5 years
Elsa	Grades 2 to 3, Autistic	L1* – Spanish L2** – English	BA and MA in Special Ed	15 years

Note: L1* = First language learned, L2** = Second language learned

Mari, Carolina, and Elsa worked at the second school. Mari and Carolina worked with PreK students. Mari taught in a reverse mainstream setting comprised of ten students. Seven had varying exceptionalities and of these five were ESOL. Mari had earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees in

Special Education with ESOL endorsement. She was certified in Special Education and ESOL endorsed. She had 16 years of teaching experience.

Carolina's nine students had autism and of these seven were ESOL. Carolina had a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and was certified in this field. In addition she was ESOL endorsed. At the time of the study, she was not certified in Special Education although she was working towards a Master's degree in the field. Carolina had 2.5 years of teaching experience.

The fifth teacher, Elsa, was in a second-third grade combination class with eight students with autism, three of whom were ESOL. Elsa held both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Special Education. She was certified in Special Education, but not ESOL endorsed. Moreover, she had 15 years of teaching experience.

In sum, the five teachers varied in their educational background in the field of special education as well as their ESOL preparation. None of the teachers had received specific instruction in their teacher preparation programs or subsequent professional development activities regarding the use of the students' native language as a medium of instruction. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 15 years.

Data Collection Procedures

Information for these five case studies was gathered from three sources to facilitate triangulation of data. The data collection procedures used in this study included classroom observations of the special education teachers, audio recordings of the teacher lessons, and teacher interviews

Classroom observations. The participants were observed during five class periods over the course of a six week period. The observations were conducted by the principal investigator (PI) of this study. The PI took notes during the class periods describing the context of the classroom learning situation, with particular emphasis on teacher-student classroom interactions and the teacher's use of both English and Spanish. At the first school, Olga was observed in the mornings during language arts class and Annie was observed during science and social studies classes in the afternoon. At the second, Mari and Carolina were observed during the morning routine and language development periods. However, Elsa was observed in the afternoons during language arts class.

Audio recordings of teacher lessons. Each time the teacher was observed, the PI made audio recordings of the teacher lessons. These recordings were later transcribed and coded for frequency of language used and how the language was used, i.e., to clarify, to question. Interrater reliability was established by a second coder who is also bilingual and familiar with the process of coding and analyzing audio tapes.

Teacher Interviews. After the last classroom observation, each teacher was interviewed individually to gather additional data on their use of English and Spanish in the classroom. Information regarding the teachers' processes of becoming bilingual, i.e., learning English and Spanish, was gathered. In addition, information on their teacher preparation programs and professional development for working with ELLs with disabilities was obtained.

Data Analysis

The classroom observations were analyzed through the development of patterns of language use for each teacher participant. Patterns of language use and frequency were observed and classified. The audio recordings were transcribed and coded for the frequency of the use of English and Spanish and how the language was used, i.e., to clarify, to question. Interrater reliability was established by a second coder who is also bilingual and familiar with the process of coding and analyzing audio tapes.

Results

The data collected and analyzed on the five bilingual special education teachers who participated in the present study yielded findings on the frequency of language used and the way each language was used. The data revealed that the teachers were using both English and Spanish for instruction with the ELLs with disabilities. Analyses of the data indicated that overall the teachers used English over 90% of the time during instruction. Spanish was used most often with those students who were less fluent in English particularly to clarify content instruction. Additionally, Spanish was used to redirect students'

attention to task oriented activities as well as to praise and reprimand students. Differences in language use among the teachers were observed.

Differences in the use of English and Spanish analyzed across teacher cases. All of the lessons observed began in English and English was the primary language of instruction. Spanish was used to clarify concepts and keep students on task. These differences in language use were attributed to the level of English fluency of the students and the nature of the learning activity. In each class, ELLs ranged in English language proficiency from beginning level to native-like fluency.

The following are some examples of the teachers' use of Spanish in interactions with students. During a language arts lesson Olga was explaining the concept of action verbs using gestures, pictures, and actions. She gave examples such as *running*, *clapping*, and *hopping*. For the beginning English level students, the teacher gave the example [*él*] *está cocinando* [he is cooking]. This example demonstrates the transfer of knowledge about action words from the first language to English.

The second teacher, Annie would elicit answers from students by encouraging them to respond in Spanish if they did not know the answer in English. One example of this was observed during a lesson on personal hygiene. The teacher asked what a person should wash to keep clean. This teacher used cognates in explaining personal hygiene by saying *hygiene personal* in Spanish. When the beginning English level student could not respond, she said *Dímelo en español*. [Tell me in Spanish]. The student did not know how to say *hair* in English.

Mari and Carolina were observed during the first activity in the morning, which was the greeting circle. Both teachers engaged in a fairly scripted routine with songs and patterned speech to promote English language development among their students. Spanish was used primarily to redirect students especially those who were beginning English learners. The teachers spoke only in English with students who were already fluent in English.

Elsa worked with students with autism. She used Spanish to keep the students focused on the task at hand and to encourage student participation. She used Spanish primarily with the students who were less fluent in English.

All five participants viewed the use of Spanish for instruction as positive. The teachers reported that decisions on language selection and use were based on the needs of their individual students. All of the teachers reported their ability to use Spanish was an asset and planned on continuing to use it in the class as the need arose. Moreover, the teachers expressed that they were at an advantage when working with the parents and families of their students. Many of the families were not fluent in English and speaking with them in their native language facilitated communication.

Implications for Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

In the present study, the bilingual special education teachers used both English and Spanish in the classroom. Decisions on the language of instruction were made by the teachers, even though these teachers had not received formal training in delivering instruction in two languages. In the Mueller, Singer, and Grace (2004) study, special education teachers with even minimal language skills in Spanish used the language to communicate with their ELLs with disabilities. Similarly, they found that decisions about the language of instruction were made by the teachers even though most of the teachers in their study had not been trained to teach using two languages either.

Implications for special education teacher preparation programs fall into three major areas. First is the importance of recruiting bilingual students into special education teacher preparation programs. Second is the inclusion of special teacher preparation coursework that develops proficiency in and understanding of languages other than English for the special education teachers. The third area is preparing teachers on how to use the students' native language to strengthen the development of English language skills and understanding of content area material.

In this research study, all of the teachers knew the students' native language, Spanish, yet they had varying degrees of proficiency in Spanish. Concerns about bilingual teachers' language proficiency have been raised (Sutterby, Ayala, & Murillo, 2005). No studies were found that specifically addressed the language skills of bilingual special education teachers, although Guerrero (1997, 1998) has examined the Spanish language ability of bilingual general education teachers. He addressed several

important issues related to the teachers' foreign or non-English language ability given the fact there is a shortage of bilingual teachers.

Teaching strategies and instruction that use the native languages of the students can foster English language development because it will build on their prior knowledge. Explicit instruction on transferring skills for one language to the other will allow students maximize their learning by drawing on their background knowledge. Furthermore, using the native language to introduce new concepts and provide explanations for complex concepts will facilitate learning (Gersten et al., 1998). Preparing teachers to use effective instructional strategies that will build on the students' prior knowledge and assist in developing fluency in English that is essential for academic success will benefit all students.

Conclusion

Results from the national survey of public school districts in the United States regarding services for limited English proficient students with and without disabilities revealed that three-quarters of the district coordinators reported shortages of qualified teachers to serve their ELLs with disabilities (Zehler et al., 2003). Additionally, as Keller-Allen (2006) indicated in a study of state practices on services for ELLs with disabilities, there is insufficient personnel training in the areas of second language acquisition, cultural competence, bilingual education, instruction in English-as-a second-language, and use of prereferral interventions for both special and general educators.

This dire need, coupled with the limited number of studies that examine how non-English languages are used by bilingual special education teachers working with ELLs with disabilities, presents a significant challenge given the significant number of ELLs with disabilities and the need for highly qualified special education teachers to provide instruction. This exploratory case study is a beginning attempt to contribute to the gap in the area of using native language instruction for children with disabilities research how special education teachers can use bilingual skills when working with ELLs and how this language-based differentiated instruction affects ELLs learning. These initial findings suggest that teacher preparation programs should include instruction on how teachers can incorporate the use of their students' native languages as well as English to address their cognitive, emotional, and/or physical needs. Further studies in this area are recommended.

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