

**EFFECTIVE SPANISH LANGUAGE
SUPPORT FOR BILINGUAL TEACHER
CANDIDATES**

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INTRODUCTION

- Across the U.S., the acute need for bilingual education teachers continues to be critical (Flores, Sheets, & Clark, 2011) as there is a greater demand for dual language or bilingual education programs.
- As the popularity increases, the need to have highly qualified bilingual teacher candidates is of great importance. Bilingual education teachers must be able to engage children in culturally and linguistically appropriate practices that promote their bilingualism and biculturalism.
- While we highly value bilingual education teachers' cultural proficiency and efficaciousness, the focus of this manuscript is on their Spanish language proficiency as a pedagogical tool.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- We are approaching our research from a social justice and democratic principles lens. As such, we contend that individuals must be given the opportunity to participate within a democratic society.
- In the case of teacher education, providing teacher candidates opportunities to learn demonstrates our commitment to social justice and democratic principles (Cochran-Smith, 2010; McDonald, 2005).
- More specifically, in the preparation of BTECs, social justice and democratic principles are further actualized through opportunities to enhance their bilingualism and biculturalism.
- We must recognize that BTECs must have the capacity to deliver content and engage children using academic Spanish in dual language and bilingual education programs. Lastly, they must be able to communicate with parents (Aquino-Sterling, 2016).

- In a quest to ensure quality, standards can become gate-keeping mechanisms that prevent teacher candidates from moving forward in their program of study or in their career (Clark & Flores, 2002; Flores & Clark, 2004).
- While there is indeed a need to ensure that teachers can demonstrate academic Spanish language proficiency (Guerrero & Valadez, 2011) within the classroom and the school setting, we must also recognize that many of bilingual education teacher candidates have maintained their native language with little to no support throughout their schooling.
- Yet, upon arrival to the bilingual education teacher preparation program, we often negate or look down upon the Spanish of the home.
- In addition to dissuading potential candidates, essentially, we are contributing to the bilingual education teacher shortage and promulgating social injustice.

- As a result of implementation of an exit Spanish language proficiency test based on standards identified as necessary for the bilingual teacher candidate, we have created a high-stakes testing situation.
- According to Valenzuela (2004), policies result in high-stakes testing which further exacerbate the inequities of schooling. Such marginalization counters social justice and democratic principals.
- Rather than simply enacting policies and standards, to ensure social justice and democratic participation, we must create institutional mechanisms to ensure the success of bilingual education teacher candidates.

- Support systems, such as learning communities, have shown promise in supporting bilingual teacher candidates (Flores, Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007).
- Other support mechanisms include course work delivered in Spanish and professional development.
- In Sum, rather than disenfranchising potential bilingual teacher candidates, democratic principles and ethics require that we, as teacher educators, respond in a manner that provides the support and space for linguistic growth, efficacy, and ethnolinguistic identity.

RATIONALE

- Rather than allowing standards and testing to act as gate-keeping mechanisms, it is important that teacher education programs provide the infrastructure support to their teacher candidates.
- We must conceptualize a model in which we consider the holistic linguistic development of BTECs, while keeping in mind that candidates must have the competencies to engage in linguistic practices that support their future bilingual learners' language development (Sawyer et al., 2016).

METHODOLOGY

- The focus of this manuscript is to examine the efficacy of the mechanisms employed to support bilingual education candidates' Spanish language proficiency.
- We will employ *testimonios* as oral narratives. *Testimonios*, as a qualitative tool for research, are powerful as a safe space to share the participant's voice.
- These *testimonios* guided the development of the case studies (Yin, 2009) in which we explore five participant's linguistic experience within the home, community, and the varied support structures.
- The use of multiple cases assisted in triangulating the data and member checking ensured the credibility of the findings.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **Cross-case analysis will assist us in responding to the following research questions:**
 - **1. What is the impact of Spanish Language Proficiency standards and testing on bilingual education teacher candidates?**
 - **2. In what ways does the program's infrastructure support assist candidates achieve their goals of becoming bilingual teachers and ensure success on the Texas Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test?**

SETTING

- Our university is located in the southwestern part of Texas, approximately 150 miles from the Texas-Mexico border. As a Hispanic-serving Institution, the majority of our bilingual teacher candidates are Latino first-generation students.

- As a teacher preparation program, we have long recognized that to ensure that our bilingual education candidates can demonstrate Spanish academic language proficiency, at our university, we have used a multi-prong approach:
 - (1) Approximately one-third of our teacher preparation course work is offered in Spanish

 - (2) Spanish is threaded into campus and student activities, such as the Bilingual Education Student Organization, after school service learning, and professional development at bilingual conferences

 - (3) Dual language field experience and clinical teaching sites are carefully selected so that BTC's have an opportunity to observe and teach in these settings

 - (4) Spanish language support services are offered as part of the teacher preparation program. However, we have yet to explore the impact of such infrastructural support

DESCRIPTION OF SPANISH LANGUAGE SUPPORT SERVICES

- **A wide net of support: advancing the level of Spanish language proficiency.**
 - (1) The language proficiency diagnostic test, ALPS
 - (2) The Individual Language Development Plan
 - (3) The BTLPT Workshop
 - (4) The University's Bilingual Education Student Organization (BESO at UTSA)

CASE STUDIES

- Five bilingual education teacher candidates were asked to participate in this multiple case study.
- The second author collected these testimonios using a protocol that asked candidates to reflect on their linguistic experiences.
- These *testimonios* were culled for linguistic capital attained in the home/community and then for evidence of support systems assisting their development of Spanish language proficiency in the bilingual education teacher preparation program.
- To date, three have provided their *testimonios* and this preliminary analysis presents their cases.
- Pseudonyms are used to protect candidates' identity.

CASE ONE: CELESTE

- Celeste is a first-generation college student in her junior year. She was born in Mexico and arrived to the U.S. at the age of six. Celeste's native language was Spanish and participated in a bilingual program up to 3rd grade in school. It was family and friends that ensured she maintained her Spanish.
- When reflecting as to her motivation to become a bilingual education teacher, Celeste reflected:
 - “Because I want to work in a lot of Title I schools and if I want to work in Texas, in San Antonio. I think my Spanish will help a lot. I can use my Spanish for something good.”It is clear that Celeste is driven by social justice motives and recognizes the use of Spanish as a pedagogical tool.
- Upon entry into the bilingual education teacher program, Celeste felt comfortable with her spoken Spanish, as well as her reading and comprehension capacity, but recognized the need to develop her academic proficiency. She was less confident in her writing abilities.
- Since Celeste is a junior, she has begun to take courses in bilingual children's language development and linguistics. While these courses have been helpful overall for supporting her Spanish competencies, Celeste conceded that there have been limited opportunities to engage in writing with the exception of a course in Spanish specifically targeting writing development.
- Celeste has been actively involved with BESO and she sees this as another opportunity to practice her academic Spanish. Since the meetings are conducted in Spanish. Celeste also expressed the value of attending conferences in supporting her Spanish language development:
 - “The TABE conference that I went with BESO. I think that one helped me a lot because I got to learn a lot of academic vocabulary in Spanish and I got to speak to a lot of professionals already in the field, all in Spanish. “
- When Celeste was asked about the bilingual education standards that require Spanish language proficiency as measured by the BTLPT, while concerned about her writing ability, she confidently proclaimed:
 - “I think they are needed just because, as future teachers, you need to make sure that you have an understanding of the language and you are able to communicate in the language in a proficient way”
- In sum, while Celeste is a junior, she has been given both formal (through coursework) and informal (through BESO and conference) opportunities to maintain and acquire academic Spanish competencies. It is also evident that Celeste greatly values her bilingualism as part of her heritage and recognizes Spanish proficiency as a pedagogical tool.

CASE TWO: DANIELA

- Daniela, a 22 year-old female, was born and raised in the United States; her father was born and raised in Zacatecas, Mexico and her mother was born in Acuña, Mexico, but raised in Del Rio, Texas since she was 3 years old. Daniela self-identifies herself as a Hispanic, or Mexican and is currently a student teacher. While Daniela learned Spanish in the home and was in a transitional bilingual classroom, she acknowledges that she has become more English proficient.
- Daniela reflected on the importance of maintaining Spanish in her personal life and values her bilingualism
 - "...because it defines me, and my culture." When selecting a major, Daniela desired to become a teacher and intentionally selected bilingual education."
- Upon entry to the bilingual education program, Daniela rated herself at the intermediate level for speaking and writing; she was more confident in her reading and comprehension level, rating these as advanced. While Daniela has not completed the BTLPT workshop, she had been evaluated using the ALPS when she entered the bilingual education teacher program.
- She further acknowledged that her block methods classes, taught predominately in Spanish, have greatly assisted her in maintaining and increasing her academic Spanish proficiency. Interestingly, for the majority of courses that were taught in Spanish, while discussion and assignments were completed in Spanish, most readings were in English. Daniela contended that this experience helped her to develop her academic English as well.
- In addition, other experiences such as *La Clase Mágica*, BESO membership, and attending conferences have supported the maintenance of Spanish development.
- When reflecting upon the standards requiring bilingual education teachers to demonstrate Spanish language proficiency as measured by the BTLPT, Daniela conceded:
 - "I think it's important because it measures obviously to see how proficient the teacher is and as a future teacher I think it's important to describe for my kids the right language, the right usage ... use the language the correct way and model the correct language for them"
- In sum, Daniela clearly values her bilingualism, identifies with her native language and culture, and her comments suggested that bilingual teachers must have academic proficiency in both languages. Daniela is scheduled to take her BTLPT test later this semester.

CASE THREE: JULISSA

- Julissa, a 29 year-old female, identifies herself as Mexican, Hispanic. As a senior, she is currently completing her student-teaching semester. Julissa was born in Mexico and arrived to the U.S. at the age of sixteen. Julissa attended school in Mexico and was educated in Spanish. She acquired English as a second language (ESL) learner in school and at work. However, Julissa recognized that her Spanish lacked academic proficiency.
 - “Well, the Spanish that was spoken in the area where I used to live in Mexico was not, like, academic Spanish. Um, I was used to say, for example, “así” is the right way. “Ansina” they say in the place that I’m coming from.”
- Julissa’s metalinguistic awareness and recognition of different registers motivated her to better her Spanish proficiency through listening and speaking with others and reading. Further, Julissa was highly motivated to become a bilingual teacher and recognized the importance of knowing Spanish and English to assist her future students:
 - “I knew that teaching in Spanish, not just English, it would be better for me. On top of that, coming here to UTSA and being classified as ELL student, it motivates me to be a teacher and teach students that are also learning English, like I did at one time.”
- Julissa also confirmed that she was confident in her Spanish proficiency in her block methods coursework because she had taken the Spanish language development course. While these block courses reinforced and maintained her Spanish, Julissa felt that the Spanish language development course provided her with the foundation to be successful. Julissa felt that she needed feedback to support her learning.
- When Julissa was asked about her thoughts about the Spanish language proficiency standards, she stated:
 - “Well, I think that’s great because, as a teacher, you have to demonstrate and you have to be a model of the right language that students will be speaking. ...and if you’re speaking, like, academic Spanish then your students will be able to speak academic Spanish.”
- In sum, Julissa’s case presents a late-arrival to the U.S. As such, she was an English language learner. Moreover, while formally educated in Mexico, Julissa’s academic Spanish language needed to be further developed. It was evident that she appreciated feedback to further her Spanish language competency. Julissa also valued her bilingual capacity and understood the importance of academic Spanish as a pedagogical tool.

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

- These three cases demonstrate the importance of the family and community in maintaining the native language. All of the three cases valued their Spanish, demonstrated their ethnolinguistic pride in maintaining their heritage language, and understood the importance of being bilingual.
- Interestingly, the first two cases had been products of transitional bilingual education programs. While this program is considered a weaker model, the fact that their home and community supported, or perhaps demanded, that they maintain Spanish also ensured that they had a strong foundation from the onset.
- Julissa had been educated in Mexico and did attend U.S. schools as a ESL learner beginning in high school.
- They all had clear goals in becoming bilingual education teachers and recognized the importance of having language proficiency standards. Perhaps their support for the standards stems from the fact that all have been given the tools and the support to be successful toward this goal.
- The BETCs were also adamant that as a bilingual education teacher, it is important to be proficient in both languages. Hence, it is important to ensure that candidates who are more Spanish dominant, who perhaps late-comers or recent arrivals, also have the experience and support to develop academic English.
- What also is evident is that these bilingual candidates required both the development of Spanish language proficiency as well as experiences in using the language in coursework. While the various support structures either supported or maintained their Spanish proficiency, it was the use of academic Spanish student teaching that further augmented their competencies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- Preliminary results show bilingual education teacher candidates' academic language proficiency was maintained and increased overtime and, as a result, candidates will likely pass the state's exit Spanish language proficiency assessment. Also, Candidates' sense of efficacy in delivering and writing lessons and activities across content areas increased.
- It is evident that to increase the bilingual education teacher pool and to ensure teachers have the academic Spanish language proficiency requires concerted effort on the teacher preparation institution and candidate alike.
- We cannot simply assume that teacher candidates arrive with a level of Spanish needed to be successful as a candidate and as a future teacher.
- A singular experience is not sufficient. Language support structures must build on each other.
 - In the case of our university, we use ALPS as a diagnostic tool to provide an individual language plan for teacher candidates.

- What we note is that the candidates' Spanish language development is idiosyncratic
 - i.e., some require overall support, whereas other need specific support in areas such as writing.
- Candidates' Spanish language development is supported through specific tailored courses and then further maintained through the coursework delivered in Spanish.
- Informal activities such as La Clase Mágica, BESO, and professional conferences further support or augment their Spanish Language Proficiency.
- Collectively these experiences provide BETCs the confidence and efficacy to be effective bilingual teachers who will provide linguistic experiences to their students.
- Moreover, candidates' capacity to deliver content and engage children using academic Spanish ensures equity, social justice, and democratic participation in their future classrooms.

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