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Vocabulary and Sentence Structure in Emergent Spanish Literacy

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Abstract

Dual language and bilingual education programs are increasing in number and popularity across the country. However, little information is available on how to teach children to read and write in Spanish. This article explores some of the similarities and differences in vocabulary and sentence structure in Spanish and English and considers the resulting implications for teaching emergent Spanish literacy. Understanding linguistic aspects of both languages enables teachers to better support the development of biliteracy and bilingualism.

Vocabulary and Sentence Structure in Emergent Spanish Literacy

By Allison Briceño, Ed.D.

Although dual language programs are growing, information about Spanish literacy is scarce. Examples from a first grade classroom show the importance of vocabulary and sentence structure in emergent Spanish reading.

“Literacy is language and language is literacy” (Hudelson, 1994, p. 102).

“This book doesn’t make sense,” my student said in Spanish, “That’s a picture of a *mono* (monkey), but this word starts with /ch/!” The text used *chango*, but my student knew the word *mono* for monkey instead. A beginning reader, she was understandably confused. When selecting this book I had not considered the wide array of Spanish vocabulary students bring to school from all over Spain and North, Central and South America.

Dual language (DL) programs, like the one in which I taught, are a growing trend, with an estimated 2,000 nationwide (McKay Wilson, 2011). One of the reasons for the rapid growth of DL programs may be their efficacy: The results have been highly compelling for both Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) and native English speakers (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010; Lindholm-Leary & Hernández, 2011; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Verde Peleato, 2011). Recent studies found that EBs in Dual Immersion caught up to their peers in English-only instruction on English language arts assessments by fifth grade, out-performed them by seventh grade and throughout high school (Valentino & Reardon, 2014), and were more likely to be reclassified as fluent English proficient (Umansky & Reardon, 2014). Unlike their peers, they were also bilingual and biliterate.

While students from all over the world bring a wide variety of languages to U.S. public schools, approximately 75 to 79 percent of students classified as English learners share Spanish

as a home language (García, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008). Some students are sequential bilinguals, learning a second language after learning a first. In contrast, simultaneous bilinguals grow up in bilingual households so both Spanish and English are native languages. For this reason I do not use the terms first language, second language and second language learners. Instead, I use Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) to describe all students who are learning two languages and who may be navigating two cultures.

This article addresses some of the complexities of teaching young children to read in Spanish. It first discusses transfer between languages and then explores some differences in sentence structure and vocabulary between Spanish and English. The examples throughout are from a representative teacher, Inés, in a first grade DL classroom in California; all names are pseudonyms.

Transfer Between Languages

A core principle of dual language instruction is the idea that what you know in one language transfers to another language (Cummins, 1979, 2008; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008). Cummins' interdependence hypothesis (1979) states that when academic language is developed in an L1 it transfers to the L2 under the appropriate conditions. While much of the reading and writing processes are similar in both languages, knowing the similarities and differences between languages allows both teachers and students to use what they know in one language to support learning in both languages (Escamilla et al., 2014; Schmidt, 2001).

Cummins' (2007) "common underlying proficiency model" (p. 113) (CUP) posits that two languages develop symbiotically to enhance both languages. Background knowledge is critical in helping students to use what they know in one language to support the other language.

Cummins' (2008) explained, "If students' prior knowledge is encoded in their L1, then their L1 is inevitably implicated in the learning of L2" (p. 67). Students may know a concept, such as community, in their home language. The transition to English then, is a question of whether or not students know the English label for "*comunidad*" (community) and how to talk about communities in English.

Spanish reading has been found to promote higher levels of reading achievement in English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006; Slavin & Cheung, 2005), and recent research shows that literacy, like language development, is bidirectional: Literacy learning in one language supports the other and vice versa (Gebauer, Zaunbauer & Moller, 2013; Proctor, August, Carlo & Barr, 2010; Reese, Garnier, Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2000; Talebi, 2013). EB students use both languages to communicate, and their writing develops alongside their understandings of the similarities and differences between the languages (Rubin & Galván Carlan, 2005). Both languages are a resource for children as they learn to communicate their ideas, and "there is no evidence that the use of two languages causes children to become confused" (Escamilla, 2000, p. 123). Understanding the linguistic aspects of both languages enables teachers to better support the development of biliteracy and bilingualism (Beeman & Urow, 2013; Escamilla et al., 2014).

Cummins (2008) cited five specific types of transfer that support bilingualism. The first is transfer of conceptual elements. Once concepts such as community or photosynthesis are learned in one language, they are known. The concepts do not change in a second language; only the vocabulary and the language structures required to communicate the concepts are different. The second type is transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies. Comprehension strategies, for example, can be used in multiple languages once learned. The third is transfer of pragmatics,

such as turn-taking in conversation or the use of gestures to supplement oral communication. Fourth is the transfer of specific linguistic elements, including cognates and morphology. Finally, phonological awareness is also transferable from one language to another. This article focuses on transfer of concepts, metalinguistic strategies and cognates to consider how teachers can accelerate students' language and literacy development in both Spanish and English.

Key Aspects of Spanish Emergent Literacy: Sentence Structure and Vocabulary

As teachers, it is our responsibility to identify and develop conditions that support students' ability to transfer what they know in one language to another language. Part of teaching students to use transfer is knowing what can help or hinder them as they bridge Spanish and English (Escamilla et al., 2014). It's important that teachers of emergent Spanish readers develop a sophisticated understanding of Spanish sentence structure and vocabulary in order to help students use what they know in one language to learn the other.

Vocabulary

Cognates. Cognates, or words that look or sound similar in two languages and have a similar meaning, have been found to support ELs' English vocabulary and reading comprehension (Dressler, Carlo, Snow, August & White, 2011; Ramírez, Chen & Pasquarella, 2013). Students' ability to use cognates when reading is correlated with increased reading comprehension in both Spanish and English (Ramírez et al., 2013).

In English, Latin-based words are often more sophisticated than other words, but the same is not true in Spanish. For example, "construct" and "*construir*" are cognates descended from the same Latin word "*construere*" (Lubliner & Hieber, 2011). While a Spanish-speaking child would learn Latin-based words such as "*construir*" from a young age, an English-speaking child is more likely to use "build," which could be considered less academic. In theory this

should provide Spanish speakers with a “cognate advantage” (Kelley & Kohnert, 2012, p. 192) in learning academic English, particularly in the sciences where Latin terms dominate. In fact, up to 76% of vocabulary words in fourth-grade science units were found to be English–Spanish cognates (Bravo, Hiebert & Pearson, 2007), as were 68% of the words judged to be difficult in middlegrade texts (Carlo et al., 2004). However, in practice EBs’ vocabulary tends to lag behind their native English speaking peers, compromising their ability to comprehend text (August, Carlo, Dressler & Snow, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006). Part of the reason may be that students tend not to notice cognates without explicit instruction (August et al., 2005; Goldenberg, 2008; Nagy, 1995; Nagy, García, Durgunoglu, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993), especially younger children (Kelley & Kohnert, 2012).

Instructional implications. Cognate walls, a version of word walls, can be used to show students that some words in Spanish and English resemble each other, either in how they sound, how they are spelled, or both (Williams, 2001). Cognate walls hold pairs of Spanish/English cognates, often with all the Spanish words written in one color and all the English words written in another. Bilingual dictionaries can also be used to support dual vocabulary development (Anuthama, 2010). Explicit instructional conversations about language (Briceño, 2014) focused on cognates also help students to realize that what they know in one language could help them in another language. For example, when one of Inés’ first graders was writing about a trip to the hospital in English, he stopped because he did not know the English work for *hospital*. Inés was then able to show him and the whole class how *hospital* and hospital were written the same even though they were pronounced differently, and she added the words to the cognate wall. She explicitly stated that sometimes words in one language look or sound similar to words we know in another language, and that can help us when we’re reading (Briceño, 2015).

Vocabulary variations. Spanish has been interacting with English for many years in the U.S. so some words and language varieties reflect this interaction. Many EB students in California use the word *lonche* for “lunch” instead of *almuerzo*, showing an interaction with the English word. In Texas, some students use *soquer* instead of *fútbol* (soccer) due to the prevalence of American football in Texas. A student’s language variation reflects his or her home language and culture so teachers must respect the language students bring to school.

Additionally, Spanish in the U.S. comes from a variety of countries in North, Central and South America and Spain, so a wide range of vocabulary differences exist (e.g., Parodi, 2014; Zentenella, 1997). For example, while most of Inés’ EB students called her *maestra* (teacher), a newly-arrived Peruvian student called her *profesora* (teacher), providing her with an opportunity to talk about different words for the concept of “teacher.”

Instructional implications. Since emergent readers use their oral language as a foundation for reading and writing, it is important that the child sees in text what she expects to see. A book’s language should match the child’s language as much as possible (Clay, 2005), otherwise an emergent reader might: (i) easily get confused and either ignore the print entirely, say what they expect to see and move on, or (ii) stop, unable to problem-solve due to the vocabulary difference. (Sounding out won’t help the child to make meaning if the word is unknown!)

For example, when one of Inés’ students was reading about a pig he expected to see the word *cerdo* on the page, but the text used the word *puerco*. He monitored and stopped, realizing that a word that starts with “p” can’t be *cerdo*, but was unable to help himself. Inés explained that *puerco* was another word for *cerdo*, and the student was able to continue. “Now you have two ways of saying that!” she told the student.

A teacher can prevent this confusion by being familiar with the child's oral language, selecting books that share the child's language, and providing book introductions based on the child's strengths and needs (Clay, 2005, 2004). A teacher may point to the pig and say, "What is this?" If the child says "*cerdo*" or another synonym for pig the teacher can say, "In this book it's called a *puerco*. Let's look at the word together." If the child says "*puerco*", the teacher might ask the child to find that word on the page.

We can teach some academic vocabulary without disparaging the child's home language by presenting the new vocabulary as a synonym, adding to the child's repertoire (García, 2009). Consider the implications in the statements "That's not how we say it, the correct word is *almuerzo*," versus, "Another way to say *lonche* is *almuerzo*. Let's say it together." The first corrects the child without honoring his language, while the second introduces a synonym and provides practice with the new word.

The diversity of vocabulary that students bring to the classroom can be used to teach new words through small- and whole-group discussions, book talks, read-alouds, guided reading, interactive writing and word walls. Small- and whole-group conversations about synonyms, antonyms and gradations in word meanings provide opportunities for children to share their personal language with the class and learn from each other. Inés had students share synonyms and antonyms as a game as they line up to leave the classroom. For example, she said *rostro* (face) and the first student in line provided its synonym, *cara* (face). Like cognate walls, synonym walls are used to foster word consciousness (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2011) and celebrate students' home vocabulary. Words like *mono* and *chango* would be placed next to a picture of a monkey, and *puerco*, *cerdo* and *cochino* could be next to the picture of a pig.

Synonym walls respect the different vocabularies students bring from all over the world and give the words a place of honor in the classroom.

Nouns and articles. Spanish nouns are gendered, male or female, so there are more articles in Spanish, and the article changes if the noun is plural. (English articles include “the,” “a” and “an.”) In English we would say “**the** cat” and “**the** cats,” but in Spanish we say “*el gato*” for a male cat, “*la gata*” for a female cat, and “*los gatos*” for more than one cat.

The article helps emergent readers anticipate what word(s) might come next in a sentence. While it is usually easy to distinguish which nouns are female (end in –a) and male (end in –o), there are some exceptions. Some nouns, like *lección* (lesson), end in consonants and their gender must be memorized. Despite ending in –a, *mapa* (map) is male: *el mapa*. *Moto* (motorcycle) and *foto* (photo) are female as they are short for *motocicleta* and *fotografía*, respectively. *Agua* (water) is preceded by “*el*” if singular but “*las*” when plural, *las aguas*. Some objects vary in gender depending on which vocabulary word is being used: The translation of “a boat” can be *un barco*, which is male, or *una lancha*, which is female.

Instructional implications. Explicit instructional conversations about language can support students’ development of linguistic rules such as gender and number (Briceño, 2014). Tricky noun-article combinations, such as *la moto*, can be taught explicitly, using language such as, “Even though *moto* ends in an “o” we say *la moto* because it is short for *motocicleta*.” Instruction on gender, number and articles can be handled explicitly as issues arise.

Gender and number aid students’ ability to anticipate what word might come next in a sentence. For example, if the first word in a sentence is “Los,” the next word must be male and plural. If a child sees that the next word starts with a “p”, the “*los*” before it means that the next

word cannot be *papá* (dad, singular) or *pata* (paw, female), but it could be *perros* (dogs) or *palos* (sticks), which are plural, male nouns. Inés explained this to one of her students:

Adriana: [misreading “*el gato*”] *El gata*=

Inés: =¿*Qué te suena major, el gato o el gata?*

Adriana: *El gato.*

Inés: *Exactamente. Si lees “el,” tendrá que ser gato, no gata.*

Adriana: [misreading “the cat,” *el gato*] *El gata*=

Inés: =*What sounds better, el gata or el gato?*

Adriana: *El gato.*

Inés: *Exactly. If you read “el,” it would have to be gato, not gata.*

The article provides a syntactical clue as to what word might come next, helping students narrow down the choices and supporting more rapid use of visual information. This ability to “feed-forward” makes the reading process more efficient (Clay, 1991). Shared reading, interactive writing and small group guided reading are instructional practices in which mini-lessons on using articles can be incorporated.

Not all EB children may need explicit instruction on this topic. Teachers can analyze students’ writing and listen to their oral language to notice varying uses of articles and gender. Observing what needs to be taught and to whom will enable teachers to more efficiently support students’ linguistic and literacy progress in Spanish. Some bilingual teachers may assume that emergent bilinguals already know the rules to the Spanish language. While some students will know many rules and exceptions, others will not.

Sentence Structure

Sentence structure in Spanish is more flexible, can be more complex at early text levels, and tends to have more words per sentence. The way sentences are written can confuse a child when the structure is complex, not yet part of the child's oral language, or not what the child is anticipating. Clay (1991) explains:

If children have been slow to acquire speech or have been offered fewer opportunities to hold conversations (for many reasons) there can be limitations in the grammar they control, which might mean that they have difficulties with comprehending oral and written language. Such children may not have control of some of the most common sentence structures used in story book English and therefore are unable to anticipate what may happen next in the sentences of their reading texts. (p. 38)

Structure is a primary source of information for both emergent and proficient readers (Clay, 2005, 1991). Familiarity with a breadth of sentences structures enables students to predict what may come next when reading, thereby aiding fluency and comprehension.

Sentence flexibility and complexity. Sentence structure can be more complex in Spanish texts than in English texts, even in lower-level books. One reason for this is the flexibility of word order. Consider the basic sentence, "Yesterday I went to the park." Table one shows that the Spanish sentence may be written 12 different ways, but in English there is less flexibility with word order. Only the first two English sentences sound conversational. The others, while not incorrect, sound archaic or poetic.

Insert table 1: Spanish Sentence Flexibility

Students need to develop flexibility with language in order to understand all the different ways in which a sentence may be written in Spanish.

In addition, Spanish has many common reflexive verbs in which the subject and the object of the sentence switch places as compared to English. For example, in the English sentence, “I like pizza,” “I” is the subject of the sentence. However, in the Spanish translation, “*Me gusta la pizza,*” (“Pizza is pleasing to me”), the subject is pizza. The difference in sentence structure caused by reflexive verbs may be confusing to some students.

Spanish sentences are often longer and more complex than English sentences, which tend to be written in a more direct manner. While many young children often start their sentence with themselves (e.g., *I went to the park, I played tag,* etc.), many books for emergent readers start sentences with prepositional phrases in both Spanish and English. If this structure is new to students it could be confusing. Consider the following two pages out of different level 4 books:

Insert images 1 and 2 here

Both of these repetitive books start their sentences with a prepositional phrase. If, in his own speaking and writing, a child is starting sentences with “I” (“*Yo*” in Spanish) or the subject of the sentence, she may be unable to use her sentence structure to predict what these texts might say. As a result, the book may be frustrating for the child even though she might be able to decode the words. Clay (2004) tells teachers not to avoid linguistically complex texts, but to “prepare their pupils ahead of time to work with new, unexpected and unusual structures” (p. 5). Note that what is new, unexpected or unusual will vary from child to child.

Instructional implications. Adrián started first grade writing only brief sentences that started with a subject, such as the following sentence, “The horses eat grass.”

Insert image 3

Inés worked to expand Adrián’s language to bring it closer to book language. Inés intentionally asked questions that elicited prepositional phrases thereby making the sentence

more complex: “Where? When? With whom?” Knowing what questions to ask is key: Asking the color of the horse adds an adjective but does not increase sentence complexity. The pre-writing conversation follows:

Adrián: The bulls jump.

Inés: Really! What else do they do?

Adrián: They kick.

Inés, modeling a longer sentence: Oh, the bulls jump and kick. Wow! Where?

Adrián: In the rodeo.

Inés: Wow, the bulls jump and kick in the rodeo, that’s exciting! You say it.

Adrián: The bulls jump and kick in the rodeo.

Inés: Very nice, we can also say, “In the rodeo the bulls jump and kick.” How would you like to write it?

Notice that Inés maintained authenticity in the conversation by expressing genuine interest in what the child was saying while simultaneously and intentionally expanding the child’s utterances. Very soon, Adrián was writing sentences that started with prepositional phrases, such as in his writing below, “In the rodeo the bulls jump and kick.”

Insert image 4

Intentionally expanding Adrián’s language resulted in more interesting, complex writing and also helped him to become a more efficient reader. He was better able to use sentence structure to anticipate what words might come next in a sentence, and he understood a wider variety of structures when reading. In order to expand students’ repertoires, the teacher must notice the type of language structures students use in their writing and talking in both languages.

Teaching for language flexibility and language play can help students better comprehend sentence structure when reading or listening. Shared reading of nursery rhymes, songs, poems and chants can develop students' fluency with a variety of sentence structures. Teachers can write sentences from these well-known texts on sentence strips, and have the children form sentences in different ways at a literacy station. Book introductions also support sentence complexity. When planning book introductions, teachers can look for long and possibly confusing sentences in books and scaffold those for the students by explaining the sentence in a book or asking students how they might say it.

Sentence combining has also been found to be helpful for developing students' facility with more complex sentence structures from kindergarten through 6th grade (Berninger, Nagy & Beers, 2011; Limpo & Alves, 2013), as well as for students with special needs (Saddler, Behforooz & Asaro, 2008; Saddler & Preschern, 2007). "Sentence combining provides direct, mindful practice in manipulating and rewriting basic or kernel sentences into more syntactically mature or varied forms," explained Saddler (2005, p. 468).

For example, Inés wrote two sentences on the board: "*A Andrés le gusta escribir. A Paula no le gusta escribir.*" (Andrés likes to write. Paula doesn't like to write.) The students then combined the sentences using an appropriate conjunction. One student wrote, "*A Andrés le gusta escribir pero a Paula no.*" (Andrés likes to write but Paula doesn't.) Another wrote, "*A Andrés le gusta escribir, sin embargo, a Paula no le gusta.*" (Andrés likes to write, however Paula does not.) Both responses were correct, and students learned from each other that sentences can be constructed in different ways.

Sentence combining has been shown to be effective in increasing opinion-writing quality and length, improving writing at the sentence and discourse level, and increasing self-efficacy

and writing quality (Limpo & Alves, 2013). It can be used as a series of mini-lessons in a writer's workshop framework (Saddler, 2005) to develop sentence flexibility and complexity.

Conclusion

The complex issues surrounding Spanish vocabulary in the U.S. require sensitive teachers, like Inés, who provide explicit, additive instruction. Similarly, understanding the complexity and flexibility of Spanish sentence structure can enable teachers to better support students' Spanish language. The ability to use school vocabulary in sophisticated sentence structures will significantly improve students' access to literacy.

Regardless of language, comprehension is still the primary purpose for reading. Students come to school knowing how to make meaning out of their multicultural worlds and sociocultural contexts, as "Reading the world always precedes reading the word" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 23). Our role is to help children see the connections among reading, writing and talking in Spanish and English in order to support biliteracy and bilingualism.

Captions for Figures

Figure 1 caption (translation) - With my new shoes I can kick.

Figure 2 caption (translation) - My horse I will wash.

Figure 3 caption (translation) - The horses eat grass.

Figure 4 caption (translation) - In the rodeo the bulls jump and kick.

Table 1

Example of Greater Sentence Flexibility in Spanish

Spanish	English
<i>Ayer fui al parque.</i>	Yesterday I went to the park.
<i>Ayer yo fui al parque.</i>	I went to the park yesterday.
<i>Ayer fui yo al parque.</i>	I went yesterday to the park.
<i>Fui al parque ayer.</i>	To the park I went yesterday.
<i>Yo fui al parque ayer.</i>	To the park yesterday I went.
<i>Fui yo al parque ayer.</i>	Yesterday to the park I went.
<i>Al parque fui ayer.</i>	
<i>Al parque yo fui ayer.</i>	
<i>Al parque fui yo ayer.</i>	
<i>Ayer al parque fui.</i>	
<i>Ayer al parque fui yo.</i>	
<i>Ayer al parque yo fui.</i>	

Take Action!: Vocabulary

Concepts	Instructional implications
<p>Vocabulary variation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Spanish comes from a variety of countries and has a wide range of vocabulary • Spanish has been interacting with English for many years; students' vocabulary may reflect this interaction • Instruction should respect all language varieties from all over 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers position a book's language as new or different from the child's instead of superior to it • Teachers select books with student's vocabulary or provide the new vocabulary word in the text • Small- and whole-group conversations about vocabulary • Explicit instructional conversations about language • Synonym word walls • Games about vocabulary • Read-alouds, guided reading, interactive reading and interactive writing can also be used to explore
<p>Cognates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can learn to use cognates to understand a word in another language 	<p>All the above plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognate word walls • Metalinguistic strategies such as, "Does this word remind you of a word you know in another language?"
<p>Gender and number</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nouns are gendered in Spanish so there are more articles • The article also changes depending on whether the noun is singular or plural • Don't assume all students are familiar with rules for gender and number; young children are language learners! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit instructional conversations about language • Shared reading • Small group reading instruction for students who need help using the articles to predict the next word • Observe oral and written language to know what needs to be taught

Take Action!: Sentence Structure

Concepts	Instructional implications
<p>Sentence structure can be more complex and/or flexible in Spanish</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence structure helps students anticipate what might come next in text and can impact comprehension • Students need to be flexible with language to understand the ways in which a sentence may be written in Spanish • Spanish sentences are often longer and more complex than in English at early text levels • Students may not yet know the syntactical rules of their L1 or L2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching for language flexibility and play, including rhymes, chants, poems and songs • Identify long or confusing sentences in books and scaffold them for students by saying it in a different way or asking students how they might say it • Sentence combining • Intentional language expansion • Write a sentence multiple ways during interactive writing • Re-arranging words in a sentence using sentence strips

Pause and Ponder

- How can teachers develop students' understanding that what they know in one language can help them in the other?
- How might similarities and differences between Spanish and English impact your instruction?
- What is important to consider about vocabulary and sentence structure when teaching emergent readers in Spanish?

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Other sets can be purchased at: <http://www.hameraypublishing.com/oral-language-development-series>. Teachers can also develop their own books in Spanish and English using the structures provided.

Resources from the Association for Two-Way and Dual-Language Education,

<http://atdle.org/resources/>

The National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)'s journal, *NABE Perspectives*, <http://www.nabe.org/Publications>. NABE also has state-level organizations in many states.