

# Relationship of English-Only to Young Children's Social and Language Skills

WITH THE NOVEMBER 7TH PASSAGE OF PROPOSITION 103, Arizona became the 28th state in the nation to adopt English as its official language. It's the latest success of the so-called "English-only" movement which began in the 1980s. Supporters of the movement assert that bilingualism is harmful to children, hurting their self-esteem and preventing them from becoming proficient in English thereby impeding their academic success.

Not surprisingly the movement comes at a time when according to the U.S. Census the Latino population has grown by almost 60 percent in the past decade alone. Such growth affects almost every current policy issue, including how to best help young Spanish-speakers achieve school readiness. Today, more than 16 percent of children in preschool programs are not native English speakers.

Given the increasing number of foreign-born preschoolers, it is critical to address the claims made by the "English-only" movement, particularly as they fuel public policy decisions. A study in the April 2007 issue of *Early Education and Development* shows that such policies may not help children with English proficiency, and actually harm children in other ways.

Researchers showed that Spanish-speaking children with teachers who spoke some Spanish in the classroom were rated by their teachers as having better social skills and closer relationships with their teachers than children with teachers who did not speak Spanish in the classroom. Children experienced less bullying by their classmates, and teachers had a more positive view of these children. The amount of Spanish spoken in the classroom was not related to a child's English proficiency.

The study, "Spanish-speaking children's social and language development in pre-kindergarten classrooms," examined:

- The quantity and quality of language interactions between Spanish-speaking children and their teachers;
- The relations between language interactions children experienced in the classroom and children's social and behavioral competence as rated by teachers and independent observers;
- The relationship between language interactions and the teacher-child relationship; and
- Whether language interactions were related to changes in Spanish-speaking children's English and Spanish skills over the pre-kindergarten year.



## THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

Language plays an important role in children's social development. Yet many early childhood programs are moving towards a system that may isolate the English language learner, leaving them at risk for social and language problems.

Language also impacts the teacher-child relationship. That is why the quality of language interactions is a central component of how to measure classroom quality. These relationships are critical to future academic success.

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## QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF LANGUAGE INTERACTIONS

In general, Spanish-speaking children experienced less than 20 percent of their language interactions with teachers in Spanish, and 23 percent of children had no interactions in Spanish.

Teachers when speaking directly to a Spanish-speaking child used English two-thirds of the time. When teachers spoke in Spanish, they tended to have more elaborated conversations.

When speaking to a group of children, teachers typically used English. Almost a quarter of children had teachers who never spoke Spanish during group interactions, and another 18 percent had teachers who spoke Spanish less than 5 percent of the time. Only five percent of children had teachers who spoke Spanish more than half of the time.

## RELATIONSHIP OF LANGUAGE INTERACTIONS TO SOCIAL SKILLS

The amount of Spanish that children experienced in the classroom was significantly related to teachers' ratings of children's frustration tolerance, assertiveness, task orientation and peer social skills. In fact the higher the proportions of English interactions, the higher children were rated on conduct and learning problems and the lower they were rated on frustration tolerance.

In addition, the amount of Spanish spoken in a classroom related to bullying and teasing by peers. Spanish-speaking children with teachers who spoke Spanish more often were less likely to be the victims of aggression, bullying or teasing as rated by independent trained observers.

## TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Teachers who used Spanish talked more frequently to Spanish-speaking children. These teachers also rated their relationship with Spanish-speaking children as closer than did teachers who spoke less Spanish. In fact, teachers who spoke more English reported more problem behaviors and greater conflict in the teacher-child relationship.

## ENGLISH AND SPANISH PROFICIENCY

Neither the amount of Spanish spoken by teachers in the classroom nor the amount of English spoken in the classroom affected children's English proficiency. Given that teachers typically did not use much Spanish in the classroom, it is not surprising that there also was no impact in children's Spanish proficiency. Furthermore, it should be noted that due to limited resources and time constraints, language assessments on children were not conducted in both Spanish and English at each time point for all children. When children achieved a certain level of English proficiency, they were subsequently only administered the English assessment, which limited tracking of children's native language proficiency.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Many early childhood programs are funded to overcome the achievement gap between children from different racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups. Yet despite this intention, this study suggests that inequities are present in such programs which likely fuel the later gap.

An "English is best" approach largely ignores the complexities of and stressors for children's transitions into early childhood and school settings. Transitions can be difficult for all children, yet they may be magnified for English Language Learners. They do not have the English skills to gain academic knowledge or to foster relationships.

## ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Study participants came from the National Center for Early Development and Learning's Multi-State Pre-Kindergarten Study and the Study of State-Wide Early Education Programs.

- 345 Spanish-speaking pre-kindergartners in 161 pre-k programs
- Amount of Spanish spoken in the classroom varied.
- 89% live below 150% of the federal poverty level.
- About half of the teachers had Bachelor's degrees.
- 67% of the children attended pre-k in a public school building.
- 61% attended half day programs.
- 61% of parents reported that their preschooler did not speak English at home.

## METHODOLOGY

Bilingual researchers used the Emerging Academics Snapshot (Snapshot) to observe children's experiences within their classroom and measure teacher's language interactions. The Snapshot is a moment-by-moment observation measure that describes children's experiences within their program. Trained observers rated children's interactions with teachers on a continuum from more passive to more elaborated interactions. In addition, a code was used to note whenever a second-language interaction occurred. Children also were observed for social behaviors.

Teachers answered 38 questions in the fall and spring of pre-k regarding each child's social and behavior skills using the Teacher-Child Rating Scale. In the spring, teachers rated their relationship with the child using the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale.

Spanish-proficient data collectors were trained to complete the Spanish child assessment battery in addition to the English child assessment battery.

## To Learn More

Chang, F., Crawford, G., Early, D., Bryant, D., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., Barbarin, O., Clifford, R., & Pianta, R. (2007). Spanish speaking children's social and language development in pre-kindergarten classrooms. *Journal of Early Education and Development*, 18(2), 243-269.