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# The Impact of Increased Spanish Instruction

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The Impact of Increased Spanish Instruction on English Language Learners' Ability to  
Comprehend Text in English

by

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Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Science in Education

### Abstract

Increased amounts of Spanish instruction for English Language Learners who are trying to successfully read and comprehend text in English tend to be an effective and meaningful avenue for language acquisition. This study focused on three Spanish dominant students that received higher amounts of Spanish instruction to determine whether or not it would help them read better in English. The current study examined the impact of bilingual instruction for English Language Learners, and whether or not it allowed them to transfer over the necessary skills to read in English with more fluency and accuracy. Results of this study suggest that more time spent learning in a child's native language does allow students to make more progress in the target language. Implications of this research study are discussed.

## **Section One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

This project is an initial investigation on how increased Spanish instruction will impact struggling English Language Learners' ability to successfully comprehend text in English in a second grade transitional classroom. Bilingualism is a growing trend in our society today that occurs all over the world. Working with bilingual students presents a challenge to classroom teachers, as we are continuously researching what best teaching practices look like for these students. As a current classroom teacher of twenty four bilingual students, it is easy to get mixed up in the difficulties of teaching English Language Learners, and effectively at that. We tend to dwell over what they do not know, what they cannot do, and how we are going to move them from beginning to the end. What we are not keeping in mind is the very opposite; what they do know, what they can do, and how far they can push themselves if we help them. We are always so caught up in our struggles as the teacher that we forget to think about what it is like as a child learning in a bilingual classroom with multiple barriers against them. This project attempts to look at how increased Spanish instruction will help a select few students comprehend text in English more effectively after a period of native language arts instruction.

### **Problem Statement**

Bilingual classroom teachers need to be well informed of teaching practices that will have the most positive impact on their students, especially students reading well below grade level. Although there has been research done on the effectiveness of bilingual programs, no one approach fits all. Current research on this subject matter discusses the strong ability that children have to make gains in their target language after a period of instruction in their native language has been given. Although some researchers may disagree, a large population of researchers

would say that “two contributing factors to academic success are teachers utilizing students’ linguistic capital and fostering home-school connections” (Uchikoski, 2010). What this implies is that education starts in the home. We need to go beyond classroom walls to help our children become literate and bilingual. Bilingual children tend to be exposed to both languages and can potentially make more gains by being equally exposed to the languages in school and at home. Therefore, by delivering more instruction in Spanish to my native Spanish speaking students, I am looking to see how well they have the ability to transfer the knowledge over to the English language in order to help them better comprehend text.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Bilingualism has grown to be a trend that takes place in millions of classrooms all over the world. It has become the norm to see separate general education classes and bilingual classes in the same school. Although we assume that students will be placed in the right classes and receive the right services needed to excel, it always seems that there are more student needs than a teacher can handle. There are many “bilingual” students located in bilingual classrooms that need more individualized and differentiated instruction on a daily basis. For example, the three students that will be participating in my project are just some of the many that need more instruction in their native language in order to better understand and successfully perform tasks during literacy instruction. It is important that these students receive intense and effective services. In this case, what I am predicting to be more effective for these three students is more instruction offered in their native language to help them make gains in their target language. Without the ability to speak to students in their native language, how effective can we really be? For many students, the language barrier is what holds them back from academic success.

In addition to the language barrier impeding on the academic growth and development within children, we see that students are struggling with all aspects of literacy in general. Although this study will investigate if increased Spanish instruction will indeed help students comprehend text in English after being instructed in their native language, we cannot negate the fact that students come to us with minimal skills in either language. Struggling readers are prominent in today's classrooms, and a number of researchers have looked into the effects of how certain bilingual programs can stimulate growth in a child's ability to learn English as well as their dominant language (Lonigan & Farver, 2013; Tong, 2008; Uchikoshi & Maniates (2010). These researchers as well as many others have studied case scenarios where children are learning in their primary language to help stimulate growth in English. Although the specific effects vary in all studies, it has been stated as a common belief that exposure to and instruction in a child's primary language may initiate growth in the target language (Lonigan & Farver, 2013).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to look at how increased Spanish instruction will impact struggling English Language Learners' ability to successfully comprehend text in English after a period of native language arts instruction has been given. Many of my students who have already transitioned to the English language are capable of reading and writing in English. However, the select few that I have chosen to participate in this project still need that differentiated instruction in order to help them make more gains and become closer to transitioned students. This study is being conducted in order to develop an understanding of how increased native language arts will influence my Spanish speaking students, and to what extent it has allowed them to grow and further develop their reading skills in English.

### **Summary**

As bilingualism continues to grow all around us, our jobs as classroom teachers continue to expand and take on different forms and meaning. We need to carry on as being educated and well informed professionals that consistently demonstrate best instructional practices not just for English Language Learners, but for all learners. It is clear and evident that some students require different or more support services than others, and in this case the support needed is in a language other than English. This study will seek the effectiveness of increased Spanish instruction for a few Spanish speaking students on their ability to read and comprehend text in English. Like me, many researchers believe it is important to provide students with a rich and well rounded literacy experience in order to increase their growth and development in all areas of literacy. What that actually looks like is dictated by the students themselves.

## **Section Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Much research exists on the growing topic of bilingual education, particularly whether or not literacy skills from a child's native language can transfer over to his/her second language over time (Lonigan & Farver, 2013; Tong, 2008; Uchikoshi & Maniates (2010). This subject matter has become of such importance, being that teachers are continuously debating on the need to provide linguistic and academic accommodations to ELL's in their primary language or exclusively in English. The influx of Spanish speaking families has grown tremendously over the years and continues to grow, presenting major challenges to classroom teachers and other educators who work with students who speak two or more languages. The actual act of bilingual education encompasses a wide variety of programs featuring the deliverance of instruction in two languages to support the needs of all students. Although the goal is to promote literacy

development within all students, the types of bilingual programs are diverse in the way that instruction is delivered and reinforced, purposely for English Language Learners.

Some of the following types of bilingual programs include Dual Language, Transitional, Maintenance, and Structural English Immersion. Of these, a common theme that runs throughout would be the goal of having students learn and acquire English, while still using their native language to support and reinforce what is being taught in English. Students are so well immersed in the English language in classrooms today, that sometimes teachers lose sight of the fact that using a child's native language can actually be beneficial to additional acquisition of the English language.

### **Early Language Exposure**

“How does age of first bilingual language exposure affect the reading development in children learning to read in both of their languages? (Kovelman, Baker, Pettito, 2008).

According to these researchers there is a sensitive period for language development. These sensitive periods, which occur when children are young, represent time periods in child development where children have peaked sensitivity to particular information, and if exposed to the information during this time period, they will learn it most optimally. Young bilingual children exposed to two languages right from birth achieve more linguistic milestones than monolingual children. According to Kovelman, Baker, Pettito, and other researchers, there are benefits of bilingualism and certain types of bilingual education. It has been proven that metalinguistic awareness has shown to develop faster and more effectively in young bilingual children as compared to their monolingual peers. One of the factors that may contribute to this is that young children exposed to two languages must early on understand the arbitrary relationship between objects in the real world and their linguistic labels, the same dog can be called “dog” in

English and “perro” in Spanish (2008). Young bilingual children may also have an advantage in reading because of their ability to grasp the symbolic nature of sound-to-letter correspondence. According to Kovelman, Baker, & Pettito’s results when testing this theory, early bilinguals performed higher on the Passage Comprehension task as compared to late bilinguals, which supports the claim that there is a sensitive period for language development within children. In this study, not only did the researchers attempt to support the claim that there can be a transfer of skills from one child’s native language to another, but they actually showed the significant improvement in metalinguistic and phonological awareness in the students second language when taught in both languages.

According to Tong, (2008), the lack of English proficiency is an obstacle for English Language Learners, not only in terms of social relations and inclusion in schools, but also in terms of academic survival. For younger English Language Learners, oral proficiency is of greater importance because it is associated with the acquisition of English literacy skills. As Tong states, most “current research provides clear evidence that instruction through an ELL’s first language can facilitate their learning in the acquisition of the English language” (2008). Researchers of this study on accelerating early academic oral English development through a transitional bilingual program saw that students made academic gains after being placed in bilingual education for at least two years. Through intense instruction in both languages starting at such a young age, students were able to outperform their peers who were not enrolled in any type of bilingual program. According to Tong and other current researchers, what continues to remain a question is what best teacher practices in bilingual education look like from the start.

### **Transfer of Skills from Native Language to Second Language**

As mentioned earlier, Tong goes on to explain that by delivering instruction for an ELL in his/her native language it may encourage him/her to transfer those skills over to the second language allowing faster acquisition of the target language. What it comes down to is “choosing and implementing effective instructional strategies for students learning English” (Tong, 2008). In order for teachers to implement effective strategies for their ELL’s, they need to be very knowledgeable about goals of the bilingual program, as well as other components such as district expectations and available resources. Of course, the primary concern of teachers should be the individual needs of students; however, there are certain regulations that teachers need to follow in order to be in compliance with the district’s program.

Similarly to Tong’s research, Goodrich and Lonigan go on to discuss Latino statistics as they pertain to the literacy development of English Language Learners. First off, it is important to note that children’s language background is an important factor for evaluating students’ risk status for reading difficulties. Children who are exposed to a significant amount of Spanish in the home make up a huge percentage of the Latino population here in the United States. These children are automatically at risk for running into reading difficulties due to the language barrier. Researchers have over time investigated the relations between first language and second language emergent literacy skills of Latino children here in the United States. They have examined whether the level of proficiency of emergent skills in children’s first language predicts their abilities in the second language. Research has demonstrated that typically children with strong literacy skills in their primary language tend to have strong literacy skills in their second language. Lonigan goes on to explain that there is evidence indicating that children’s first language skills can predict their competency in their second language, and that these skills can transfer across languages. Cummins, an early researcher of bilingual education, introduced the

concept of DIH – developmental interdependence hypothesis. This suggested the cross-language transfer as an attempt to explain the development of language and literacy skills of children exposed to a language other than English in the home. In simpler words, the development of language related skills in kids' second language is dependent upon their development of language related skills in their first language. This study further advances the knowledge of the relations between a child's first language and his/her second language when exposed to bilingual instruction.

Uchikoshi and Maniates have stated in their research that despite the many reports that show ELL's tend to perform poorly on English reading comprehension measures when compared to their monolingual English speaking peers, the ELL's in this study performed just as well if not better than their monolingual peers in certain areas of literacy development. This was done by implementing three essential components of a successful transitional bilingual program. These three components included: the interdependence of strong first language skills and second language development, the use of first language to strengthen students' English reading comprehension, and the opportunity to foster strong home-school connections. Over the course of time, through the implementation of all the necessary components of a successful bilingual program, the participants of this study were able to see that bilingual education can enhance the students' academic achievement in English.

### **Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction can take many different forms to support the individual needs of students. For English Language Learners learning to read and write English, most everything needs to be scaffolded to support their diverse needs. Classroom teachers are overwhelmed with a number of things including keeping up to the curriculum's suggested pacing, providing high

performing students with challenging work, and then implementing best instructional strategies to keep ELL's engaged and making progress. Martinez-Alvarez and Peters-Burton discuss in their research study what best instructional practices for dual language learners look like as they improve their reading comprehension of scientific texts in Spanish. They also discuss the students' ability to transfer the strategies of questioning and self-monitoring from science to reading, important literacy skills that students need to master in all academic areas. Although Martinez-Alvarez and Peters-Burton discuss what this looks like in the content area of science, the act of differentiating instruction for students takes place in many shapes and forms across all curriculum areas. Because English Language Learners have the difficult task of overcoming a language barrier, teachers are being held accountable for differentiating their instruction to meet the needs of these diverse students. All curriculum, no matter how well planned and thought out, needs to be differentiated to meet the needs of all the students, considering no one fits into that "one size fits all approach." Much of the time we see students struggling to complete tasks not because they come to us with a lack of background knowledge, but because they are still learning how to speak and communicate properly in a language other than what they have been exposed to for so long.

Teachers provide this differentiated support for students in order to "catch them before they fall" (Lopez & Mendoza, 2013). Response to Intervention was first introduced into classrooms primarily to address the needs of all students through early identification and intervention. It was based on work with monolingual English speakers. Over the years, it has been promoted as a way to provide early intervention services to all struggling readers before they experience failure. However, what bilingual teachers tend to see is that large populations of the students that qualify for RTI are bilingual students, or students enrolled in some type of

bilingual program. This is perhaps because the students are struggling with reading or speaking in a language other than their primary language. Researchers have noted that “it is not appropriate to assess, instruct, and intervene with students through a one-size-fits-all-approach” (Lopez & Mendoza, 2013). Therefore, RTI has become a common way of differentiating instruction for those students who truly need it.

Differentiated instruction can take many forms, one approach being that a teacher can teach students in their native language to help advance their skills in English. It has been well documented that learners have multiple intelligences and learn in different ways from one another. Not only is teaching in a child’s native language effective for many children, but taking into consideration their learning style can also promote learning. Faulk and Faulk stated that “teachers should teach using different modalities that students both need and prefer. The teacher of today and the teacher of the future would need to have a wide diverse repertoire of skills, methods, knowledge, and strategies to facilitate optimal learning among all the children and each of the children in the classroom” (2013). Students themselves demonstrate the need for teachers to provide differentiated instruction, and the effective teachers do.

### **Parent Communication/Involvement**

As we consider the important role that parents play in their children’s education, we often suggest that providing instruction in the home in addition to at school increases the likelihood that parents, who typically speak little to no English, will be able to support their children’s education. In general, parents and teachers need to be able to communicate effectively which is why establishing a home-school connection is so important. Not only should teachers enrich students’ learning through engaging and challenging curriculum, but by also valuing where students come from and the communities that they are a part of. Just as parents count on being

supported by teachers to help their children learn, teachers count on being supported by parents in order to better reach students from all angles. It is a two-way street in which both lanes of communication should always remain open and honest. Continuous parent communication and involvement should be a priority to both parents and educators in order to help students reach their fullest potential.

### **Conclusion**

Debate on which language of instruction has been overshadowing classroom practice for years, and researchers and teachers have been continuously seeking best practices to most effectively educate English Language Learners. Because of the fact that second language oral proficiency is a huge obstacle for ELL's to overcome, instructional practices for these students need to be well thought out and implemented correctly. Researchers and educators are still in search of the best models for bilingual education that will initiate the most growth and development out of the ELL population. Although we know from much current research that instruction through an ELL's first language can facilitate their learning in the target language, "how to best educate ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and psychologically diverse students continues to be the challenge for educators" (Tong, 2008).

### **Section 3: Study Design**

#### **Methodology and Design**

I will be completing a qualitative study using the method of Discourse Analysis supported by Duke and Mallette (2011). I will be using Discourse Analysis through conversation, which according to Duke and Mallette is the analysis of human exchanges which can help formulate a social identity and formulate meaning in talk. Throughout my study I will be engaging in conversation with all three of my participants in both English and Spanish. Some

of this will be direct instruction; some will be informal conversation regarding the lesson's focus, and some of our conversation will be me inviting them to reflect. I will use our conversations to guide my native language arts instruction, and I will be continuously analyzing how this increased Spanish instruction is helping them to reach their ultimate goal; to better read and comprehend text in English.

Because I am giving more instruction in Spanish to my native Spanish speaking students, I am looking at their ability to transfer the knowledge over to English in order to help them better comprehend the text. I will gather baseline data for the students in reading comprehension in English using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System. Over a period of about four to five weeks, I will work with these students in both English and Spanish, on developing a few specific comprehension strategies that will improve their proficiency in reading comprehension in English. I will continue to provide the instruction for this in both English and Spanish, relying more on the Spanish language to reinforce the information they may or may not already know. Finally, I will reassess their ability to read and comprehend text in English using the same Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System, hoping to see that they have increased in independent reading levels. I will then use this collected data to analyze and plan further instruction.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

I have completed my Bachelor's Degree in Childhood Education with a concentration in Bilingual Education grades 1-6. During my undergraduate degree I completed both of my student teaching placements in urban settings where I taught both times in a bilingual classroom setting. Throughout the duration of both placements, I worked with students in small groups to strengthen their reading and writing abilities in English as predominantly Spanish speaking students. I saw the need for increased Spanish instruction to help initiate gains in the target

language. I then went on to teach in my own bilingual classroom still located in an urban setting, where many of the students that I currently work with need that intense and differentiated support to help make gains in the English language. Having my own classroom gives me the opportunity to do a study of this magnitude where I can fully see to what extent increased native language arts instruction can do for struggling English Language Learners.

### **Research Questions**

My methods and procedures were planned to attempt to answer the following questions:

- Does increased amounts of Spanish instruction impact English Language Learners' ability to read and comprehend text successfully in English?
- If so, how?

### **Participants & Setting**

Participating in this study will be a group of three second grade students, all between the ages of 6-7 years old. This study will take place in my classroom at Martin Luther King Jr. School 9, located in Rochester NY.

#### *Andres*

The first participant I selected to be in my small group is a native Spanish speaking student, who speaks primarily Spanish at home with family but has already transitioned to the English language. Andres is part of a big family and has multiple siblings that he lives with. Andres' mother keeps in contact when necessary. He is below grade level in both areas of reading and writing, but is a hard worker and consistently strives to do his best. He is not receiving any additional services outside of the classroom. Andres is a sweet, genuine, and caring boy who puts others before himself.

*Fabian*

Fabian is the second participant of this study who is also a native Spanish speaker that demonstrates a great need for native language arts instruction. He is well below grade level in all areas, particularly in his ability to decode text in order to read. Fabian demonstrates poor attendance at times which may impede on ability to learn. Fabian is a hard working boy who always demonstrates self control, kindness, and a willingness to learn no matter what it takes. Fabian is currently not receiving any additional services outside of the classroom, but receives all levels of tiered instruction from myself every day of the week.

*Adelina*

Adelina is the third participant of this study who is a very strong Spanish dominant student that has been enrolled in the bilingual program since Kindergarten. She is able to demonstrate strong verbal skills in her native language, but has difficulty transferring her knowledge over to the English language. Adelina is a sweet, caring, and motivated girl. She lives at home with her mother who is very supportive and willing to learn alongside her. Adelina is well supported by family and friends who encourage her to maintain a very positive attitude in school.

**Procedures of Study**

This study was conducted over a period of about four to five weeks during the months of December of 2014 and January of 2015. I implemented this study in my own classroom in the form of small group instruction three days a week for about fifteen minutes each time we met.

Because my students and I have already been engaging in small group instruction for the first two months of the school year, my students have established the rituals and routines that I

have put into place. During our first session, I assessed one student in English using a Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark. Once I established his/her instructional reading level, I continued for the following two days with the same procedure until I found the other students' instructional reading levels. Once these levels were established, I began by sharing common reading behaviors that I saw amongst the students. We discussed in their own words what it means to be a good reader and specifically what good readers do. I talked about what I saw each of them do and how we can use certain comprehension strategies to help us become better readers in English. These strategies were explicitly given to the students to practice based on what I saw them doing in their reading.

Over the course of these four to five weeks, I introduced these three students to new books that lend themselves nicely to using a few select comprehension strategies. I read these texts with students and discussed with them the story elements to help them gain a better understanding of the text. Through these discussions, I observed their reading patterns and behaviors, and listened for retellings of the text to gage their comprehension abilities. I introduced the comprehension strategies as needed, based on their performances and interactions with the text. This continued to guide my native language arts instruction. Observations occurred daily in order to ensure that my data collection was accurate and recorded to the best of my ability.

### **Trustworthiness**

Because we continue to receive more and more students with language needs and/or barriers, research studies can present an effective way to test out what methods bilingual teachers can employ to effectively teach bilingual students. Current research tends to advocate more for native language arts instruction as the primary source of student growth and development in the target language. This study showed the effects of increased Spanish instruction on struggling

English Language Learners' ability to read and comprehend text in English after a short period of intense native language arts instruction. Based on the following data, it has proven to be a valid and reliable way of discovering the effects of bilingual education.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study encompassed a few different types of data collection techniques to help me gather information in order to best investigate the research questions I have presented. I gathered information through observations, retellings, and formal benchmark assessments under the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System.

#### *Observations*

I completed formal and informal observations each time my students and I met. Because we met daily for a short period of time, I expected to complete a form of observing every day for the duration of this study (four to five weeks). I used observation to collect data by looking at how well students were using and applying the comprehension strategies that I taught them in order to better read and comprehend text in English. I also observed how well students were able to orally discuss the parts of the story such as setting, characters, and the plot, in order to assess their comprehension of the story.

#### *Retellings*

Retellings were used to determine students' reading comprehension of the text. This skill was assessed multiple times per week by each student. Because I started off with assessing student comprehension through retelling from a text in English in the beginning of the study, I continued to assess it as we progressed throughout the duration of the study. Towards the end of the study, I again assessed student comprehension in English through the technique of retelling. When the study was complete, I went back and compared all the retellings of the students to

determine how much growth they made in terms of their reading comprehension from the beginning to the end.

#### *Benchmark Assessments*

I used formal benchmark assessments under the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System designed by Irene C. Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell. I used student data that I collected earlier in the year to determine at what level the students would start being assessed. Their performance within these benchmarks determined the pace and intensity of my native language arts instruction over the course of four to five weeks. Towards the end of the study, I reassessed the students using the same leveled texts under the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark System to see if the increased Spanish instruction helped them make gains in the English language.

#### *Data Analysis - Andres*

Andres has been enrolled in the English dominant bilingual classroom setting since Kindergarten. Out of the three students I worked with, he is the highest reader according to the Fountas and Pinnell reading benchmark system. When we began our instruction about five weeks ago, he was reading independently at a level G. The first thing I did was test him using a level G fiction reading benchmark in English to see where he would fall. Andres was able to read it with 98% accuracy, had a fluency score of 1 which means he read primarily in two word phrases with some three or four word groups, and had little to no expression with slow rate most of the time. He had no self corrections and completed the questions at the end of the story with satisfactory comprehension. Knowing this about my student, I was able to pinpoint exactly where our work would start in terms of increasing his ability to read and comprehend text in English.

Every day that I met with him he brought me his book box that stored all of his leveled reading books. He would continue to read to me while I took notes. At times he would halt when

looking at a word and I'd say to him in Spanish, "What are the first two letters that you see at the beginning of the word?" He was always able to tell me in English what they were. We began by making those individual sounds and slowly putting them together. As we continued on, I was able to see Andres implementing that strategy of blending sounds and stretching out to reread words.

Towards the end of our instructional period together, I prepared to retest Andres with the next level benchmark, H. He read accurately until we came to the middle of the text. He self corrected on the word "Matt's." He originally read "my" but then realized that the word "my" was too short and he saw more letters there. This prompted him to stretch out the word and blend the sounds back together to correctly say "Matt's." He continued to read beautifully all the way to the end of the story. As I finished up tallying the results, I was able to see that he read with 97% accuracy and a fluency rate again of 1. He read primarily at a slower pace with little expression in his voice. Although I was hesitant to test his comprehension skills after this reading, we proceeded where I found myself unexpectedly surprised and satisfied with his comprehension. Andres was able to recall all important parts of the text with some specific details in between. He was able to restate, and soon after he changed the books in his box from a level G to an H. The beginning and ending data of Andres can be seen in the following chart.

Table 1

F&P Reading Benchmark Data

<u>Student</u>	<u>Book Title/Level</u>	<u>% Accuracy</u>	<u>Self-Correction Rate</u>	<u>Fluency</u>	<u>Comprehension</u>
Andres	Bedtime for Nick – Level G (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	97%	N/A	1	Satisfactory

Andres	The Sleepover Party – Level H (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	97%	1:11	1	Excellent

### *Data Analysis - Fabian*

Fabian, the second child of this research study, exhibited many of the same characteristics as the first child of this study. He has exhibited the need for native language support over the course of the past two years. Similarly to Andres, I began instruction with Fabian on the basis of his ability to read and comprehend text. I tested him on day one of our sessions, and found out that he was able to read independently at level C. Similarly to Andres, he read with high accuracy but demonstrated an inability to read with fluency. In his reading of a level C text he read primarily word for word and without any expressive interpretation. He paid no attention to the author’s meaning or punctuation, and read at a slow rate throughout the entire story. Oddly enough, Fabian still demonstrated the ability to recall details from the story to give a brief summary.

The weeks that followed were full of working on Fabian’s fluency, which meant focusing on pace, intonation, and expression. In that same week of testing his reading level, we started our work on using these specific strategies while reading using communication in both English and Spanish. We read a few different books together where I could model what fluent reader’s sound like. One book we read together was all about baseball. He came across the word “pitch” and stopped. That’s when I stopped him from reading and asked him to think about the word itself. I asked him in his native language, “Do you know what it means to pitch a ball? Have you ever seen a person do that?” We began to talk about how he likes to play baseball with his dad and how he has pitched before. This allowed me to realize that he actually had a lot of background

knowledge on this subject, but wasn't able to express that because of the difficulty of the word. After our conversation, he felt better knowing that he was knowledgeable about the contents of the text we were reading. It allowed him to finish reading the text accurately, with some intonation, and it even sparked some personal connections, too.

Finally, I decided to retest his ability to read and comprehend text at a level D. I was also trying to observe whether or not our native language conversations had really made a difference in his ability to read the text with a more confident attitude, and perhaps a better comprehension score. The level D fiction text was called "The Nice Little House." Fabian began reading flawlessly, and continued this way all the way up until the last page where he made one visual mistake. Due to his one error, he read the text with 99% accuracy, zero self corrections, and a fluency rate of 2. He read primarily in three and four word phrase groups, had expressive interpretation of what was happening in the story, and used mostly appropriate stress and rate with some slowdowns. This was a big difference noted from his previous benchmark. When it came time to assess his comprehension in English, I was very impressed with the amount of details he remembered from beginning to end. Fabian was able to summarize the beginning, middle, and end of the story with comments about the individual characters and setting. He was able to tell me what it was mostly about and earned himself a score of "Excellent Comprehension" this time around. The beginning and ending data of Fabian can be seen in the following chart.

Table 2

F&P Reading Benchmark Data

<u>Student</u>	<u>Book Title/Level</u>	<u>% Accuracy</u>	<u>Self-Correction Rate</u>	<u>Fluency</u>	<u>Comprehension</u>
Fabian	Socks – Level C (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	97%	N/A	0	Excellent

Fabian	The Nice Little House – Level D (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	99%	N/A	2	Excellent

### *Data Analysis – Adelina*

Adelina is a female student who is a native Spanish speaker at home but has nicely transitioned to the English language at school. She has been significantly below grade since she started Kindergarten and has never been able to obtain grade level standards in any academic area. Adelina speaks the English language proficiently but is below grade level in reading and demonstrates a real lack of strategies to help her decode and make meaning out of words.

I started out by testing her at a fiction level A in English. She needed several prompts to get through the text. With zero self corrections and a fluency rate of 1, reading primarily word by word with no expression, she gave me much insight as to what we could try in order to promote her reading skills. Similarly to Fabian, she was able to recall details from the text to summarize briefly what the story was about. This led me to believe that the strategies she needed were centered around her accuracy and fluency.

Our instructional time was a bit different than that of my time with the other two second graders. Because my students have all transitioned to the English language, I was able to scaffold in both languages. However, Adelina required much more support in the native language considering she was the lowest developmentally out of all three students. We began our work discussing in Spanish what the two strategies were to help her when she came across unknown words. Our sessions included some of the following statements in Spanish on my behalf: “What letters do you see in that word? What do they sound like by themselves? How do you put them

together? What does it sound like when you blend them all?" Prompting Adelina with these kinds of questions led her right to the strategies we had planned on using.

After many days of working on these same strategies in small group meetings, I decided to retest her to see if any help in her native language explaining how to use them made a difference in her ability to read text in English. We read a book called "Up and Down," a fiction level B. With a few miscues she was able to read with high accuracy and excellent comprehension. She had employed those strategies we had been working on, but still struggled in her ability to be fluent. Because of the progress I saw, I quickly introduced her to a level C book. We went through some of the vocabulary words together and did a picture walk to get a feel for what the book was going to be about. Adelina was highly engaged in the pictures and already making text to self connections. We went through and read the text together, frequently stopping to discuss in her native language what was happening in the book and what her thoughts were about it. Because of this day's session, I planned to work with her a bit more on her accuracy in order to really elevate her comprehension skills. I decided to retest her for the final time at the end of a five week period.

The day came where we sat down side by side to read a level C text titled "Socks." She ended up reading the text with only two errors leaving her with a score of 97% accuracy. More importantly to me were the comprehension questions. I proceeded to ask Adelina in English to tell me about what happened in the story. She was able to reiterate verbatim what happened in the story from beginning to end. She included both of the characters in the story and was able to tell me all of the different places that the cat slept. Towards the end I asked her two questions that were beyond the text, and she demonstrated excellent understanding of the text including all

important information. The beginning and ending data of Adelina can be seen in the following chart.

Table 3

F&P Reading Benchmark Data

<u>Student</u>	<u>Book Title/Level</u>	<u>% Accuracy</u>	<u>Self-Correction Rate</u>	<u>Fluency</u>	<u>Comprehension</u>
Adelina	Best Friends – Level A (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	100%	N/A	0	Excellent
Adelina	Socks – Level C (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	97%	N/A	0	Excellent

**Section Four: Findings and Results**

The purpose of this study was to test how a period of native language arts instruction could impact English Language Learners' ability to read and comprehend text in English. I conducted the study with my students in a small group setting for about four to five weeks, with the intentions of collecting data at the end of each session in order to see what kind of growth the students could obtain over the course of the study. After collecting the data I began to analyze it by reviewing the contents of the students' individual folders, looking for common themes throughout each of their reading behaviors. Looking for these themes has allowed me to organize not only the evidence provided to me, but my thoughts on my students' reading behaviors as well as my future steps for native language arts instruction.

I have found several situations within my formal and informal observations of the students that needed to be analyzed further. By reviewing these reading patterns and behaviors, I was able to identify a few strategies that the students implemented in their reading after a period of intense instruction in their native language. Much of the instruction was centered around using

these strategies to help guide their reading. The following findings are presented in such a way that the reader can zoom in on one child's reading behaviors to see the specific strategies that were used by the child. Additionally, common themes amongst all students are noted.

### **Strategy implementation after native language arts instruction reveals commonalities among students**

According to many researchers, "What matters most in educating English learners is the quality of instruction" (Calderon & Sanchez, 2011). In order to reflect this practice and meet Andres' goals, we started a period of bilingual instruction where I translated everything we did into Spanish to reinforce the skills in his native language. Day one instruction included looking at his benchmark together to identify areas of need. What we saw was that he was a beginning reader, which meant that he knew very few words but most letter sounds. His potential goals would be fluency and accuracy, which would help increase his comprehension in the end. We discussed in Spanish what he could do in order to learn more words to help him better understand the text. As a result of his reading from this day, we decided that he was going to work on practicing common sight words and high frequency words on a daily basis. This was an activity that we planned to have him complete each day while I was conferring with the other students. Alternative but beneficial strategies for him included blending sounds and stretching and rereading every time he came to an unknown word. Andres was unsure of what that should look like, so I modeled for him what it sounded like through a read aloud. Day one instruction allowed me to see that he quickly began picking that strategy up each and every time he came to a word he didn't know. This became habitual after explicit modeling.

All along, it was evident to me that Andres being able to read more accurately and fluently would help increase his ability to comprehend the text successfully. Not knowing how to

pronounce many of the words in the story, due to a lack of strategies, would most likely keep him reading at the same level of text. Although he wasn't able to increase his fluency in this short period of time, we did see gains in his ability to use specific strategies to help him decode words and ultimately better understand the story. As we carry out our work together, two things are clearly evident. The first is that he needs to focus his efforts additionally on his reading fluency, perhaps practicing how to read in larger phrases and using more intonation while he reads. The second observation would be that native language instruction has certainly helped him to read text more successfully, and it should be a continuing support to reinforce his skills in the English language.

Looking at Fabian's reading benchmark and taking into consideration my informal observations while he read, I was able to see that he struggled with many of the same reading behaviors as Andres. As a result of Fabian's inability to accurately and fluently read, I decided to have him work on the same reading strategy as Andres: blending sounds to reread words. Another strategy that I thought could be useful to him was to chunk letters together. The fact that he read word for word told me he had a hard time decoding words. This was because he didn't have a bank of strategies that he could use immediately when confronting new words. Because Fabian spends so much time trying to analyze words, it affects his comprehension to some extent. Although he managed to comprehend the text satisfactorily in a level C, he could improve this skill by becoming a more fluent reader.

Similar to Andre's reading performance, the use of blending sounds and chunking letters together had allowed him to gain a much better understanding of the text as a whole. Fabian is now reading independently at a level D, instructionally at a level E. As we continue our work together in small groups, I am seeing the benefit of intense instruction in Spanish to ultimately

help increase his ability to read and understand text in English. Now, we can see that native language instruction has been successful for not only Andres but Fabian as well.

Working with Andres and Fabian were both experiences that allowed me to see academic growth at a greater pace in a short amount of time. Working with Adelina gave me other insight. As we continued our work deciding on the two most important strategies that she could use to become a more accurate reader, we settled on practicing sight words and high frequency words daily, and blending out sounds when she came to an unknown word. Because she was a beginning reader and knew few words but most letter sounds, it only made sense to have her practice those common sight words to be able to identify more of them in text. Blending sounds is a useful and practical strategy that all second graders should employ when they arrive at a new word. Knowing the letters of the alphabet and the individual sounds they each make provides them the knowledge they need to blend vowels and consonants together to eventually make a word. Working with Adelina allowed me to see that intense Spanish instruction increased her ability to understand many parts of the text including characters, setting, and story events.

When we took the time to stop and have a meaningful conversation in her native language, it provided her more insight to understand what was really happening in the text. She was able to make significant connections to the characters which may have led to a more successful reading and understanding of the text. Additionally, as a result of our sessions together I learned that taking the time to talk about the contents of the book allowed me to see that she makes wonderful connections to the text and is able to relate well to the characters and their individual personas. Knowing this about Adelina, it did not surprise me in the end that she was able to comprehend many texts effectively. However, it is important to state that “Although

accurate decoding and fluency are necessary for successful text comprehension, research has demonstrated that these skills are not sufficient on their own” (Solari & Gerber, 2008).

Analyzing my data collection has allowed me to specify three major themes throughout my study.

### **Listening to participants read has positive outcomes**

The first theme that I came across has to do with common characteristics that were demonstrated amongst all three of my bilingual readers. Listening to each of my readers individually has benefited me in multiple ways. I was able to gauge where they were independent at the beginning of this study as bilingual readers, as well as how much they’ve grown by the end of it. More importantly, I have noticed similarities between my readers as they have struggled over time with many of the same components of reading.

Andres and Fabian struggled mostly with being able to pronounce words accurately. They came with little to no strategies in terms of decoding words and putting letters back together to make a word. Many times Andres and Fabian would know the beginning sound of a word, but fall apart towards the middle and end of it. In these instances, for both students I would prompt them first but keep encouraging them to sound out the letters individually and attempt to put the letters back together. This was a commonality I saw between both boys the entire period of time we worked together.

In addition to Andres and Fabian, Adelina struggled with the same aspect of reading. Adelina had a difficult time reading words accurately, but also reading them fluently. Because she would read every word so slowly and without any expression or correct pacing, we would work on her fluency in addition to the word accuracy. Her goal was to master common sight words and high frequency words in order to increase her words per minute while reading. Unlike

Andres and Fabian, Adelina struggled with this aspect of reading and may continue to do so if she does not master the sight and high frequency words in order to help her learn new words.

### **Benefits of bilingual instruction on participants' growth as readers**

The next theme I came across was in regards to how both instruction in English and Spanish had helped all three participants of this study. I was unsure at the beginning of this study what the instruction would look like on a daily basis, and how effective it would really be for students so below grade level. However, what I am able to see now is that the period of bilingual instruction has truly helped them in a very similar way. Because I teach mostly in English and they are consistently exposed to the English language, they naturally responded to me in English when I asked a question. However, that period of bilingual instruction was helpful to them because they benefited from the reinforcement in their native language. At times, they would be unsure of what I was asking or encouraging them to do, but after explaining it in Spanish it allowed them to use the words they already know in their native language to make meaning out of those words and perform what I was asking them to do. Only then were they able to complete the task with 100% accuracy. Hearing something a second time around usually helps people to understand what is being asked of them. In this case, hearing it in their native language was even better for them to be able to translate those skills into the target language. As stated above in section two, "Young bilingual children exposed to two languages achieve more linguistic milestones than monolingual children" (Kovelman, Baker, Pettito, 2008). Just as I am, other researchers support the claim that "There can be a transfer of skills from one child's native language to another, and they can actually show the significant improvement in metalinguistic and phonological awareness in the students' second language when taught in both languages" (Kovelman, Baker, Pettito, 2008).

**Differentiated small group instruction leads to increased reading abilities**

The last theme I came across after collecting and analyzing my data was centered around increased differentiation through consistent small group instruction. What I've been able to see is that not only is differentiating instruction setting students up for more success than whole group instruction, but doing it within small groups is even more effective if kept consistent. As mentioned earlier in section two, "It is not appropriate to assess, instruct, and intervene with students through a one-size-fits-all-approach" (Lopez & Mendoza, 2013). For this reason, the participants of this study were seen each day for about the same amount of time, which caused them to become responsible for meeting with me. It became a daily routine that they were ready to engage in every time. Small group instruction allowed me to zoom in on their individual strengths and weaknesses and plan for what I thought they could benefit from the most. I was able to pick up right where we left off the previous day, and all of the content that we were covering was always fresh in their minds because we met every day. Andres, Fabian, and Adelina started as being very dependent on me because in the beginning we had not developed any skills for word accuracy, fluency, or strengthening our reading comprehension. However, I could see them growing as more independent readers as the weeks passed on. Towards the end of our sessions together, they were the ones running it and always the ones guiding my instruction for the following day. Because of this, I enjoyed our small group sessions together because I knew what we were doing was being guided by the students themselves. In this way, small group instruction was very effective for these participants, and allowed me to help them develop their literacy skills as bilingual students.

**Summary**

Working with these three students for about five weeks focusing on increasing instruction in their native language seemed to be quite a helping hand in their abilities to read and comprehend text in English. Although they all performed diversely by reading different texts, needing slightly different prompts, and requiring different amounts of Spanish instruction, it all proved to be useful when I had noted that each child made at least one letter jump in their independent reading levels. Taking the time to slow down and have conversation in students' native language may appear to be back tracking and keeping them from progressing in the target language. However, what I experienced is that not only can it help them in the long run with integrating those important reading strategies to help them decode and make meaning out of words, but it can also be quite a pleasant and meaningful instructional period for all of those involved. It gave us the chance to slow down and focus on ourselves as readers, bilingual readers. Students were able to exercise their metacognition by stopping and thinking about themselves as developing readers. Investing the time to work with native Spanish speakers is just that – an investment of time. This investment of time we spent in native language arts was successful for all, and continuing with this investment is sure to be proven effective if native language instruction is not only what they need but carried out meaningfully as well. The effects of just a small portion of increased Spanish instruction for ELL's can be seen and analyzed using the following table.

Table 4

F&P Reading Benchmark Data

<u>Student</u>	<u>Book Title/Level</u>	<u>% Accuracy</u>	<u>Self-Correction Rate</u>	<u>Fluency</u>	<u>Comprehension</u>
Andres	Bedtime for Nick – Level G (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	97%	N/A	1	Satisfactory

Andres	The Sleepover Party – Level H (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	97%	1:11	1	Excellent
Fabian	Socks – Level C (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	97%	N/A	0	Excellent
Fabian	The Nice Little House – Level D (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	99%	N/A	2	Excellent
Adelina	Best Friends – Level A (1 <sup>st</sup> time)	100%	N/A	0	Excellent
Adelina	Socks – Level C (2 <sup>nd</sup> time)	97%	N/A	0	Excellent

### **Section Five: Conclusions**

#### **Summary**

Having the opportunity to work directly with English Language Learners has significantly benefited me as a bilingual classroom teacher. As I proceed to work with students whose native language may not always be English, I am continuing to see the importance of native language instruction. Classroom teachers do not have the power of selecting their own students, which at times can throw us a curve ball in the way that we prepare instruction for our students. We willingly take the students that come to our doors, no matter what strengths and weaknesses they may possess. To have the ability to work with students in their native language in order to improve a set of literacy skills provides a positive pathway for successful learning. Working with three of my own students has allowed me to become a stronger teacher, and prove to have completed a successful research study as well.

#### **Relation to Literature Studies**

Similarly to the researchers of previous studies focused on this topic, I have found many commonalities as a result of the data I collected. First, I can confirm that taking the time to differentiate small group literacy instruction for these three children proved to be meaningful and beneficial for all of us involved. Not only were my students able to converse in their native language in order to help them read in English successfully, but they also had many opportunities to learn new reading strategies from myself and each other. Other studies, such as the study completed by Martinez-Alvarez and Peters-Burton also report how effective small group instruction focusing on native language instruction can be. As more studies are being done in regards to the effects of bilingual instruction, researchers like me are noticing that instruction needs to be tailored to the individual needs of the students, as a “one-size fits all approach” does not work. After spending the time working with one another using both languages as a means of learning new information, they can now take the reliable reading strategies that we practiced and apply them in their independent reading. As mentioned earlier, it comes down to the teacher choosing and implementing the most effective instructional practices that students are truly going to benefit from. We spent much of our time focusing on strategies that the students could tailor to themselves as developing readers, and it proved to be successful as they were all able to increase their reading levels by one or more. Each child walked away from our sessions with something concrete that they can use each and every time they come across an unknown word in a new book. My students developed comprehension strategies to use independently, which is the ultimate goal of becoming a proficient reader. This was all made possible by the use of increased Spanish instruction as a support to their literacy needs. Time and time again, we see that “delivering instruction for ELL’s in their native language may encourage them to transfer those

skills over to the second language allowing faster acquisition of the target language” (Tong, 2008).

### **Implications**

This intense period of native language arts instruction has proven to be beneficial and advantageous in my bilingual classroom, as it has in other researchers’ classes who have proven that “bilingual education can enhance the students’ academic achievement in English” (Uchikoshi, & Maniates, 2010). Imagining that every other bilingual classroom teacher has the time to differentiate instruction so explicitly for English Language Learners like I have is quite an intriguing thought. However, is that truly a reality? This is a question I have been pondering well before my research study even started, and has been amplified by my thoughts, observations, and conversations with students and other teachers.

#### **Differentiated small group instruction leads to increased reading abilities**

What I’ve learned from this period of instruction is that although it has been valuable for all individuals involved, teachers need to continue to be realistic about their instructional expectations, as we have more than just a few students in our classrooms. I say that it has been valuable for my students for a number of reasons. I was able to provide intense instruction in their native language which is something I am not able to do on a daily basis. My students were also given the opportunity to work with one another to strengthen their individual weaknesses. Having the time to teach in a small group setting allowed me to focus much of my efforts on them as growing learners. Relaying the information whole group does not sink in as well as it does with a small group of students at your own table.

#### **Benefits of bilingual instruction on participants’ growth as readers**

The benefits of providing native language instruction outweigh the negatives and it constantly comes down to “choosing and implementing effective instructional strategies for students learning English” (Tong, 2008). Consequently, I continue to ask the question of whether or not this could be possible for all bilingual teachers in a day’s work. Bilingual education implies that teachers are prepared and willing to provide instruction in both languages to address the needs of all individual students. Because I had a small group of participants in this study, I was able to provide this instruction successfully for them. However, the task becomes more difficult and transforms into a challenge when more than three students are involved in needing this same kind of intensified instruction. Most bilingual classrooms have more than only three students that need differentiated instruction in both languages. If teachers can get passed the challenge, they begin to see how reinforcement in a child’s native language can truly help them acquire the target language faster. I was able to see this for myself with three very low struggling bilingual readers.

### **Listening to participants read has positive outcomes**

Lastly, this theme that I have encountered throughout my study truly applies to all readers, not just bilingual students. Being able to listen to my students reading out loud provided me very clear and explicit directives on where to focus my instruction. It provides a clear pathway for that necessary differentiated instruction in both languages. This was the first theme I discovered in my research, and it set the tone for the rest of our work together. Teachers should make time to listen to their students read on a daily basis for many reasons. It allows us to regain a better perspective on what the students need in terms of developing their literacy skills. It also helps us to stay on track with knowing how our students should sound as they become more proficient readers. Finally, it promotes self motivation and independence within young readers.

Students become more confident to read out loud and independently, and this is what we are striving for them to be able to do. Listening to my students read helped me to uncover the specific skills we needed to focus on in this study. Being able to deliver instruction in Spanish on those specific skills was just an added bonus contributing to the acquisition of the English language.

### **Limitations**

All teachers aspire to provide the most effective instruction possible for students. The reality is that in many bilingual classrooms there is only one teacher who is responsible for providing tier one, two, and in some cases, tier three leveled instruction. After this research study, I truly suggest native language arts instruction to be helpful and supportive for many, if not all English Language Learners. Looking at how to provide that consistent and meaningful instruction is the challenge for most, if not all bilingual teachers.

Having had this opportunity to work with my own students to increase their abilities to read and comprehend text in English was advantageous. As mentioned above, not only was it valuable for my hard working students but myself as well. Providing that time for small group instruction really allows teachers to dig deep down and focus on what students greatly need to become better readers. In this study, increased Spanish instruction was proven to be effective for all three children involved. However, what that implies is that all teachers who want the same or similar results need to carve out that time for native language arts instruction. I would agree and suggest that teachers who have English Language Learners do their best to configure their daily literacy instruction in order to meet the needs of all of struggling students.

I have suggested that teachers who work with ELL's try to meet their individual needs on a daily basis because the difficulties that lie ahead for struggling readers down the road outweigh

the difficulties they may exhibit right now. Knowing what we do about the rigorous state standards and high grade level expectations that all students need to achieve, it will become much harder for students to excel if they are more than one grade level behind. Working with students to overcome a language barrier at the age of seven is difficult enough, let alone trying to catch them up if they are performing multiple years behind grade level. Becoming a proficient reader is hard enough in one language, and for many students we teach they are battling it in two languages. It is our job as highly effective bilingual teachers to provide native language arts instruction no matter what the cost may be. We find that some things have to be sacrificed, considering there is not enough time in the day to cover all of the content and skills that many of our students so desperately need. Nevertheless, in the end teachers will see positive results from putting forth the hard work and effort into our commendable English Language Learning students.

### **Future Research Needs**

Although there have been many research studies conducted in the past on what bilingual instruction looks like, there is a definite need for more studies to be conducted now researching a similar topic. It is evident that increased amounts of native language instruction can be very beneficial to English Language Learners. However, what seems to be a concern are the other aspects of bilingual instruction; time, materials, and availability. Quite often classroom teachers need to make sacrifices in other areas in order to fit in native language arts to address the needs of those struggling students. Sometimes teachers lack the necessary materials to teach the curriculum effectively, or simply are not available at the appropriate times to fit in small group instructional time to address these needs. Studies addressing these concerns and finding solutions

or strategies to minimize these issues would greatly help all bilingual classroom teachers and students facing the same struggles.

### **Overall Significance**

This research study was created with the best intentions in mind for struggling readers, also known as English Language Learners. The opportunity to work with struggling students in all areas of literacy has enlightened many past and present researchers in terms of how effective bilingual instruction can be. It has been noted that increased amounts of Spanish instruction is helpful and even ideal for many struggling readers who need reinforcement in their native language. This knowledge is important to carry with us as we continue to work with English Language Learners who come to us with a variety of strengths and weaknesses in literacy.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A:**

During my observations, I will look for the following as well as any other notable observations:

- Student motivation
- Students' use of comprehension skills
- Students' ability to orally discuss story elements

## **Appendix B:**

Questions that may be asked during the retelling to assess comprehension of the text:

- What was this story about?
- Where did it take place?
- Who were the characters in the story?
- Can you summarize what happened in the story from beginning to end?
- Does this story make you think of anything? Can you relate to it?