

Perspectives of High School Students in a Spanish Immersion Program

Lucy Welbourn Johnson
lwj2k@Virginia.edu
Ph.D., University of Virginia,
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The Problem

➤ In second language acquisition:

The relative inadequacy of regular classrooms for developing advanced levels of proficiency in target language (VanPatten, 2003)

➤ In culture learning:

The dearth of knowledge about foreign language immersion students' experiences with culture learning in formal and informal settings (Wesely, 2009)

The Setting

- **A large suburban public high school in Virginia**
60% White; 32% Black; 6% Hispanic;
2% American Indian, Asian, Hawaiian
- **The 27 participants: 18 White, 4 Black, 5 Hispanic**

20 native English speakers (NES), 5 native Spanish speakers (NSS); 2 heritage Spanish speakers (HSS)

The Study: Data Collection Methods

➤ Interviews and Focus Groups

- Language development
- Immersion experience
- American culture
- Cultures of the Spanish-speaking world

The Findings: Second Language Acquisition

- **Social interaction played a critical role in developing proficiency in Spanish.**

Communication + time on task +
constant feedback from peers and teachers

Social Interaction and SLA

➤ Students comment on the spoken language (NES, NSS):

“Constantly applying that language, constantly hearing it will improve your speaking, your vocabulary. That’s probably by far one of the most important things in this program.” (11th grader, NES)

“You learn different ways to help people break down barriers between languages. I drew pictures one time. [I used] different words in a similar language.”(12th grader, NES) [**The impact of the Spanish-only policy: communication strategies**]

Social Interaction and SLA

➤ Native Spanish speakers:

“I know slang from Mexico, so it’s kinda harder cause we want to use slang and it’s not used here.”

(10th grader, NSS)

Social Interaction and SLA

➤ The affective role of social interaction: The Immersion Family

Initially, most students were challenged beyond their linguistic comfort level. They *felt like scared church mice.*

Social Interaction and SLA

➤ Support from teachers: linguistic and emotional

“The teachers, they’re there to help you. They say ‘If you need us, we are here for you no matter what.’ It’s almost like we’re a family. We say: ‘*Somos una familia.*’ We can go to our teachers with academic or personal problems.” (NES, 12th grader)

Social Interaction and SLA

➤ Student mutual support and friendship:

“The kids in the program are awesome. I mean legit. It’d be really difficult to get through this, like I would have quit last year.” (10th grader, NES)

"It's like a support network during class. Like if you forget a word when you're talking, somebody will come in with it or they'll help you to pronounce something." (12th grader, NES)

Social Interaction and SLA

➤ Non-judgmental environment:

“One of my fears of Spanish before was standing up before a class and having everybody say: ‘Oh, wow, she’s a terrible speaker of this!’ Here, if you have an idea, you just speak and get it out. Get[ing] it wrong, it doesn't stop you from saying something.” (12th Grade, NES)

Social Interaction and Language Status

➤ Prior Language Status Research:

- language status issues for minority language students in two-way immersion elementary school programs (de Jong & Howard, 2009)
- unequal educational opportunities for minority language students on the high school level (Bearsse & de Jong, 2008)

Social Interaction and Language Status

- **The status of native Spanish speakers was enhanced through the challenging curriculum of honors and AP level course work.**

“I’m not one to do extremely hard classes. Like AP Spanish Literature. WOW! I can actually do this! Confidence in my Spanish-speaking abilities is one of the biggest things you get from this program. I can take everything I've learned in the future and it's going to better my future.” s (12th Grader, NSS)

Course of Study

NINTH GRADE	TENTH GRADE	ELEVENTH GRADE	TWELFTH GRADE
<p>Immersion I (Spanish II)</p> <p>Immersion Math</p> <p>Immersion P.E.</p>	<p>Immersion II (Spanish III)</p> <p>Immersion Math</p> <p>Immersion World History</p>	<p>Immersion III (AP Spanish Language)</p> <p>Immersion Service Learning</p> <p>Immersion Humanities I or II</p>	<p>Immersion IV (AP Spanish Literature)</p> <p>Immersion Cinema/or</p> <p>Immersion Media (Spanish through the Media)/ or (Immersion through the Web)</p> <p>Humanities I or II</p>

Academic Language for Native Spanish-Speakers

➤ Empirical Evidence of Written Language

“Things that were difficult [were] reading and writing. You need to write about [a story]. In your head, it sounds more specific, but in [written] Spanish it doesn’t come out the same.” (10th grader, NSS)

“My mom has told me that my Spanish has gotten much better. I am able to write a nice essay in Spanish, which I couldn’t do before.” (10th grader- NSS)

Academic Language and Equal Educational Opportunities

➤ Conclusion:

Native Spanish speakers, heritage Spanish speakers, and native English speakers had **equal** educational opportunities to develop their **academic language** in their L1 and their L2.

The Findings: Culture Learning

- **Culture learning was mediated by language and social interaction.**
- **Conditions:**
 - Culturally and ethnically diverse students
 - Extensive knowledge of cultures developed over time
 - Frequent cross-cultural comparisons

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

➤ **The culture-learning progression:
from knowledge to experience**

Knowledge about the countries and the people of the Spanish-speaking world

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

➤ 10th-graders:

“They have a lot of festivals for their patron saints. Like La Festival de San Fermín. And it’s really important to them, along with [people in] many other countries. They stop work and celebrate a lot.” (NES)

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

➤ 11th -12th-graders:

“**[In Government]**, we're learning about the amendments. The first amendment is like freedom of speech, religion and all that. In the Spanish Civil War, they had to be like Catholic, Catholic, Catholic, which has to do with our freedom of religion. We can be whatever religion we really want.”
(11th-grader, NES)

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

- **Experience in the school setting: social interaction between students**
 - Sharing of different perspectives, in which students often challenge each other
 - Reflecting on one's home culture vis-à-vis the second culture
 - Respecting cultural differences and breaking down cultural stereotypes

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

A 10th-grade interaction (between NES and NJ-NSS): Different levels of cross-cultural understanding and a limit to the NES students' open-mindedness

JP: I believe that they have a simpler life-style

NJ: It's difficult

JP: Of course, of course. They have less roads, which means more people will be forced to walk.

NJ: That's not simple.

JP: It's more relaxed, I'd say.

JS: No gas money, no insurance

NJ: You can't really go many places.

JS: That's why it's simple

NJ: Walk. You're limited in what you can do

ES: That's what buses and trains and taxis are for.

AG: I wish I could walk everywhere.

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

➤ 11th and 12th graders

“In my AP Spanish Lit class, we are learning about how different countries do religion. We’re talking about how different people view different things [like] beliefs. All of us are very strong-minded and we like giving our opinions and we like talking about it and that makes you change.”

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

➤ Cultural Stereotypes: 10th graders:

“Some people here think that everyone’s just Mexican.”
(NSS)

➤ Evidence of cross-cultural sensitivity:

“I never even thought about it, but now, when someone says that, it offends me! It’s an insult to their family.” (NES)

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

➤ Evidence of open-mindedness: 12th graders

“We’re all different, but we’re all put in this one room for four years. You’re more interested in what you can learn from them and what they can teach you.” (NES)

➤ Developing empathy

“As Immersion kids, we don't have that ignorance we did before. We understand why Hispanic people come here as immigrants : [They] are here to help their families back home. There are no jobs there. Like you gotta understand and I guess we do.” (HSS)

Social Interaction and Culture Learning

- For the 11th and 12th graders, the *Cine* class provides both knowledge and vicarious experience, combining affective and curricular aspects:

“There’s a scene in *La Historia Oficial* where there’s two friends. They’re more than just friends. There’s some people that are not used to that and would be ‘Aw, they’re lesbians.’ [NOTE- they were not] I wasn’t used to that at first, but I guess you get used to it.” (11th Grader, NES)

Social Interaction and Culture Learning in the Community

- **Students actively sought out opportunities to speak Spanish with:**
 - neighbors and family friends
 - service personnel in restaurants and stores
 - co-workers
 - Spanish speakers encountered in volunteer work in the community
 - Spanish-speakers in the school community for whom they served as translators

Social Interaction and Culture Learning in the Community

➤ Evidence of Engagement:

“I usually work in jewelry and cashier and [speak Spanish] at least twice a shift. I kinda love it! Like I’m ‘Oh, I hope this lady speaks Spanish every time I see them [sic] come in.’ [The customers are] like ‘Wow, which country are you from?’ And I’m like ‘No, I’m not Spanish. I’m in Spanish immersion in school.’ ” (11th grader, NES)

Social Interaction and Culture Learning Abroad

➤ Experiences abroad: the preparation

“I guess you just have to gradually do it. I had to start out with the food. At first, I would not try any weird food ever. I would stick to French fries and a hamburger. I had never liked *flan*, but in respect for the person who made it, I ate it and it was actually good, compared to what I had eaten [previously]. It’s intimidating, but you have to fight your fear. You just take it one step, one little obstacle.... Our dinners with the Immersion Family prepared me for Spain.”
(NES senior)

Beyond High School Spanish Immersion

- **Future plans involved Spanish: 18 of 26 students**
- **Careers:** Medicine : Nurse, Physician
Law: Immigration lawyer
Engineering: Structural or Electrical Engineer
Education: Spanish Teacher
Religion: Pastor, Missionary
- **Work abroad: 13 of 18 NES students**

Future Directions for Research

One-way immersion programs—more studies on secondary level with different student demographics

One-way immersion programs—outcomes: Document level of L2 proficiency in 9-12th grade programs (OPI, AP exam data)

Outcomes of K-8 vs. 9-12 immersion programs—study of 12th graders, comparing outcomes from each type of program

Longitudinal study tracing students' experiences over 4 years, including those who complete the program and those who do not

Post-high school trajectories that students choose (short-term and longitudinal)

High school Immersion teachers' perspectives on culture and language learning.

Implications

- This one-way/foreign language immersion program
 - Viable, feasible model for foreign language education in high school for reaching higher levels of comfort in the target language and greater cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

- Fully serves the needs of native and heritage Spanish speakers.

- Supported by their families, teachers, and peers,
 - Setting abounded in social interaction,
 - Students in this study reached goals that many initially felt were beyond their ability and comfort level
 - Took giant strides in achieving their full potential.

Further Reading

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