Language Development in Latino Immigrant Children in the United States[1]

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Abstract

This article identifies what sociocultural and linguistic factors affect the English-language development of Latino immigrant students in US classrooms. It begins with an exploration of what sociocultural factors are related to the development of the home and additional languages in immigrant students in the United States. The paper analyses more specifically what sociocultural and linguistic factors impact the English language development of Latino immigrant students in American classrooms. Such analysis reveals that sociocultural factors such as socioeconomic status and the cultural experiences that Latino immigrant students bring to the classroom affect their English language development. Additionally the previous learning experiences and the various levels of literacy in the home language relate to the development of the second language as well. Having learned a linguistic system and grammar can positively be transferred and therefore used to facilitate the learning of English. Family values and attitudes toward learning and education have an effect on the development of English in Latino immigrant students. This article concludes reinstating that culture, community, family values, socioeconomic status, and native language play an important role in the development of English as a second or new language in Latino immigrant students in the American classroom.

Resumen

Este manuscrito busca identificar los factores socioculturales y lingüísticos que intervienen en el desarrollo del lenguaje de los estudiantes inmigrantes de origen Latino en las escuelas públicas norteamericanas. El manuscrito comienza con una investigación de los factores socioculturales que afectan el desarrollo de la lengua materna y de otro idioma adicional en los estudiantes inmigrantes en los Estados Unidos. Seguidamente analiza más específicamente los factores socioculturales y lingüísticos que intervienen en el desarrollo del idioma inglés de los estudiantes inmigrantes de origen Latino que asisten a las escuelas públicas en los Estados Unidos. Dicha investigación revela que los factores socioculturales tales como el estatus socioeconómico y las experiencias culturales anteriores intervienen en el desarrollo del inglés en esos estudiantes. Conjuntamente, las experiencias de aprendizaje previas y los múltiples niveles de competencia en la lengua materna intervienen en el desarrollo de la segunda lengua. El aprendizaje de un primer sistema lingüístico y gramatical puede transferirse positivamente y de esa manera facilitar el aprendizaje del inglés. De igual modo los valores familiares y el tipo de actitud hacia el aprendizaje y la educación influyen o intervienen en el desarrollo del idioma inglés en los estudiantes inmigrantes de origen Latino. Este manuscrito concluye reiterando que la cultura, comunidad, valores familiares, estatus socioeconómico y la lengua materna juegan un papel muy importante en el desarrollo del inglés como segunda o como nueva lengua en los estudiantes de origen Latino en las escuelas públicas norteamericanas.

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Introduction

Research conducted in the field of language development and second language acquisition is vast and varied (e.g., Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1996; Gonzalez, 2001; Menyuk & Brisk, 2005; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo & Collazo, 2004; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). For the purposes of this article, we reviewed the research regarding different linguistic and sociocultural factors that affect the development of home and additional languages in Latino immigrant children, conducted in the United States. Culture, socioeconomic status, and issues in bilingualism can be considered the main sociocultural and linguistic factors that affect the language development of Latino immigrant children (Cummins, 1981; Gonzalez, 2001; Menyuk & Brisk, 2005).

The Latino population in the United States has grown rapidly in the last decade; in the year 2000, there were 35.3 million Latinos. However, in 2010, that number almost doubled as this population grew 43 percent (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011). Of a total Hispanic[4] population of nearly 50 million, almost 32 million are from Mexican origin (Lopez & Dockterman, 2011). The highest percent of the Hispanic population is distributed among eight states: California (27.8%), Texas (18.7%), Florida (8.4%), New York (6.8%), Illinois (4.0%), Arizona (3.8%), New Jersey (3.1%), and Colorado (2.1%) (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011).

Research on language development has grown in recent years (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005), and it is especially important in this era of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the U.S. since "how well children acquire language will have a marked effect on their academic performance and their social adjustment" (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005, p. ix). In this article, we have studied and analyzed the work done by a number of researchers in the field of language development and literacy in English language learners[5] (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998; Brice, 2002; Martinez, 2006; Müller, 2009; Weinreich, 1974; and others).

The topic of second language acquisition by Latino immigrant students is intertwined with issues of bilingualism and biliteracy (Wiley, 2005) and—on a deeper level—with language policies regarding the teaching and learning of English (Martinez, 2006; Valdés, 1996, 2001; Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994). Therefore, a discussion on bilingualism is fundamental. Bilingualism is a complex concept to define and a complete discussion regarding this issue is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is essential that some aspects pertaining to bilingualism in Latino immigrant children be mentioned and thus be taken into consideration when discussing their language development.

Immigrant students, upon arriving in the U.S., must attend public school, and, depending on their previous learning experiences in their native countries, they will

[4]*Latinos* include those of Latin American origin, while *Hispanics* include all those with origins in Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain. This article focuses on Latino immigrant students, but some data such as Census data and some other public records classify this population group as *Hispanics* (The Consortium for Latino Immigrant Studies, 2007).

[5]Immigrant children whose first language is other than English and are learning English as a second language in the United States are identified as English-language learners (NCTE, 2008).

face different levels of challenge regarding language and content in the classroom (Cummins, 1981; Zehr, 2009). Factors that will affect immigrant students' English language development and their adaptation and success in U.S. public schools are: culture; socioeconomic status; attitude or motivation towards learning in general and learning English in particular; previous learning experiences; bilingualism; English-language level; and use of home language (Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Gonzalez, 2001; Moll, Amanti, & Gonzalez, 1992; Valdés, 1996, 2001; Vasquez et al., 1994).

The following analysis will look into the aforementioned sociocultural and linguistic factors in order to understand Latino immigrant students' language development. Sociocultural factors, such as socioeconomic status, and the learning and cultural experiences that Latino immigrant students bring to the classroom, or what Moll et al. (1992) term "funds of knowledge", affect the language development of Latino immigrant children. In this area, it is of equal importance to also explore research done in the classroom by teachers of immigrant students, since this research base will provide a more accurate portrait of the emotional and psychological circumstances that immigrant children experience in their journey to become English-language proficient and that also affect their language development. The work, done by Ballenger (1998), Campano (2007) and Igoa (1995), sheds some light on a topic that frequently goes unnoticed—how culture, home language, and previous experiences affect the way children learn. Because the primary goal is to teach vocabulary and content fast enough for students to perform proficiently in school, in the process of teaching and learning, what immigrant students bring to class is dismissed or not valued enough (Moll et al., 1992; Vasquez et al., 1994). The result of devaluing the language and learning experiences that immigrant children bring to U.S. schools may have negative consequences that could place such students at risk of developing a "bicultural ambivalence" that could lead to rejection of their own families, culture, and values or the development of hostility toward the host culture, teachers, and schooling in general (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 101).

This article also highlights how linguistic factors such as bilingualism and learning experiences affect Latino immigrant students' language development. Culture and language are interconnected with knowledge (Vasquez et al., 1994); consequently, we explore the work done by Cummins (1981), Cummins and Swain (1986), Krashen (1996) and other researchers in the area of bilingual education and linguistic issues regarding the importance of home language use and home language instruction in the teaching and learning of English by immigrant students in general and by Latino students in particular. For instance, Krashen (1996) argues that literacy can be transferred; in other words, he claims that skills or literacy and knowledge learned in the home language can easily be transferred to another language, thus providing an advantage to becoming English-language proficient with the help of a home language, which—in the case of Latino children—is Spanish. In his work done on language development and the development of literacy in English language learners, Cummins (1981) proposes the theory of threshold and the theory of linguistic interdependence. He claims that in order to avoid cognitive problems when learning a second language, a certain level of competence must be achieved in the first one, which is called the threshold hypothesis. Adequate

exposure to both languages will highlight common aspects of first and second languages that will assist in the development of a common underlying proficiency, called the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1981).

What surfaces from the literature analysis is that the issues surrounding second language acquisition are highly contended since the topic of educating immigrant students is regarded not only as an educational issue but also as a political and social one (Krashen, 1996). Wiley (2005) contends that biliteracy is highly regarded when attained by an English native speaker, but the sentiment is fairly the opposite when assessing linguistic and culturally diverse individuals who are attempting to become English-language proficient. Valdés (2001) illustrates this issue clearly when she points out the difference between foreign language textbooks and the textbooks used to teach English as a second language in the U.S. She reveals that the foreign language textbooks feature the support of glossaries in English so students can learn the foreign language better; they have better and colorful illustrations, and, moreover, they provide students with a series of language-learning strategies in English. In contrast, English as a second language textbooks feature no support in the students' native language, all information is in English, and they contain no strategies that help students understand the text or how to work on their own (Valdés, 2001). Additionally, in regards to what immigrant students already know, their culture and the information they bring to the classroom are regarded more as hindrances than as assets since they are *lacking* specific skills needed to become English language proficient (Vasquez et al.,1994).

Factors Affecting the English Language Development of Latino Immigrant Children

Latino immigrant children's language development is affected by diverse sociocultural and linguistic factors (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1979; Gonzalez, 2001; Moll et al., 1992; Valdés, 1996). For Latino immigrant children, learning English involves more than learning words and phrases to subsist in the new country; learning English entails demonstrating competence using English in socially and culturally appropriate ways, achieving academically in all content areas, and communicating in social settings (Valdés, 2001, citing TESOL ESL standards for Pre-K-12). The relationship between language and culture is evident in the students' different contexts—school, home, and community (Valdés, 1996; 2001) since becoming competent in the use of English or becoming English-language proficient is intertwined with cultural and academic adaptation. Latino immigrant students must adapt to the new country, to its culture and customs, and more importantly, to its language use in various contexts and social situations inside and outside school. In doing so, numerous social, cultural, and linguistic factors come into play and influence how Latino immigrant students develop their new language (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1979; Gonzalez, 2001; Moll et al., 1992; Valdés, 1996). Valdés (2001) argues that Latino immigrant students:

> *…must learn how individuals use language effectively…how discourse conventions work …and how the language system operates. They must use all of this knowledge together in the process of transmitting and receiving meaningful messages and especially in continuing to learn through the medium of English. (p. 28)*

Sociocultural Factors

Learning a language cannot be isolated from other aspects of the natural development of children (Collier, 1995). Linguistic and sociocultural factors affect the development of the home language (L1) as well as English (L2) (Cummins, 1981, p. 9). In the particular case of Latino students, "belief and value systems, attitudes, acculturation levels, socialization goals…communication styles, language use at home, interpersonal relations and experiences, and problem-solving and stress-coping strategies" are examples of sociocultural factors that influence the individual's adaptation to the new society (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 17) and thus to the learning of English as a second language in the host country. Similarly, socioeconomic status plays an important role in vocabulary acquisition and use of language (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). The socioeconomic status (SES) of Latino immigrant children and the level of literacy achieved by their parents can have a positive or negative influence on their acquisition of English as a second language since SES seems to predict—in certain circumstances—the degree of success in the development of the second language (Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1996).

In the case of Latinos, the development of Spanish (as a home language) and English (as a second language) are influenced by a series of internal and external factors studied by Cummins (1981), Gonzalez (2001), Moll et al. (1992) and Valdés (2001), amongst others. Learning a language and learning in general when the children start formal schooling in the host country is affected by "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), "such as homes, peer groups, and other systems and networks of relationships" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 38). Moll et al. (1992) define "funds of knowledge" as "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). Life and learning experiences accumulated during their time in their home countries or knowledge, values, and customs passed down in their families while living in the new country will influence how Latino immigrant children learn English (Cummins, 1981; Moll et al., 1992).

Besides Latino parents' level of literacy and socioeconomic status motivation and attitude for succeeding in school will affect their children's language development and learning in schools (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005; Olneck, 2004; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Latino parents and children value education and the learning of English as well since they consider English language proficiency of utmost importance to achieve economic and academic success in the new country (Suarez Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Olneck (2004), in his work about immigrants and education in the U.S., states that immigrants value education in a more collective way, since they perceive education as a "strategy for enhancing family status and mobility, and for recompensing adults for their sacrifices on behalf of children" (p. 391). Valdés' (1996) findings corroborate this statement, as she also found that several parents in her study expected their children to continue supporting their parents and helping their siblings as well. Regardless of how motivated the parents and children may be, however, in many cases parents are limited by their own knowledge of the new language and content; at times they will find themselves unable to assist their children with homework or further learning of English (Valdés, 2001). From Valdés' (1996, 2001) studies, it can be inferred that the higher the level of literacy Latino parents possess, the better chances of

success their children will have in school and consequently in society. This relationship between these two factors should not be considered the norm, as there have been cases where the opposite has been observed (Krashen, 1996).

As the process of socialization starts in the family (Giddens, Duneier, & Appelbaum, 2005), it is important to continue exploring the role that parents and other family members play in the language development of Latino immigrant children. In her study of Latino immigrant children in the U.S., Valdés (1996) found that Mexican Americans have a distinctive way of raising their children—each member of the family has a specific role aimed at the common good, which is the family's economic security or happiness. For those parents, the children's education entails more than learning literacy skills; being or becoming educated also means learning to be respectful and obedient of their elders, completing household chores, learning from each other (from older siblings, other adults) and taking care of their aging parents (Valdés, 1996). Mexican American parents or other members of the family do not engage in formal instruction; everything is done through "*consejos"* or "moral lectures" (Valdés, 1996, p. 121), or the child expresses his or her need to learn something and the adult (anyone from the family) decides to teach it (Moll et al., 1992; Valdés, 1996). This "teacher" can be a sibling, a grandmother, an uncle, or someone close to the household that knows the child as a "whole" person and not only as a "student" and provides instruction in a "home-based context of learning" (Moll et al., 1992).

Findings of studies conducted with Mexican and Puerto Rican families show that for some Latino parents, there is a difference between schooling and *educación* or *educar* since "*educar* is a process that incorporates values shared by their own ethnic community members" (Olmedo, 2003, p. 375) rather than just learning content from a book or from a teacher. Latino children's ways of learning in general contrast sharply with the ways they learn English and content in school; households and social networks are "flexible, adaptive, active, and reciprocal" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133), whereas classrooms are more isolated from the community resources and the children's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). Latino children learn in an environment that provides opportunities to participate in activities with people they trust and with whom they relate to at different levels (relative or family friend)—something that does not usually happen in the classroom or at the school (Moll et al., 1992). In the classroom, the text-based instruction becomes repetitive, artificial, and removed from any "meaningful or familiar context" (Vasquez et al., 1994, p. 144). Usually English-language acquisition of vocabulary is granted the greatest attention in schools when dealing with language-minority students because it is believed that in order for them to learn English they must first acquire vocabulary, delaying or watering down the learning of content (Vasquez et al., 1994). This overemphasis, however, could be viewed as counterproductive because language is highly sociocultural and intertwined with knowledge; therefore, in the classroom, teachers of immigrant students need to consider the students' previous learning experiences and cultural backgrounds (Vasquez et al., 1994).

When entering U.S. schools, bilingual Latino children face a very different environment, as the language demands of the classroom differ from the ones required to interact outside school or in the community (Corson, 2001). For instance, when learning English, English-language learner students realize there are

strong differences between the English they learn to carry on a conversation with their peers, family members, or acquaintances and the English they need to learn to successfully perform academically (Valdés, 1996; 2001). They find themselves able to talk socially to relate to their peers or talk to their teachers outside the classroom, but when facing the demands of academic performance they realize that they are lacking something and that the language they hear, read, and need to use or speak is somehow different (Valdés, 1996; 2001). Teachers sometimes believe that this English proficiency is enough for the students to do well in school, as the students learn English rather quickly, and that this learning can then easily be transferred to the academic demands of everyday schooling (Corson, 2001; Valdés, 1996, 2001). Language has more than one dimension and it is certainly hard for a monolingual person to realize that even though "basic interpersonal communicative skills" can, with adequate exposure, be learned readily within a year or so, "cognitively/academic [skills in a second language] take an average of seven to ten years of systematic high-quality training and consistent exposure to achieve" (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008, p. 151). Cummins (1981) concurs by stating that it takes longer (five to seven years) for language minority students to achieve age/grade accepted norms in "context-reduced" (academic) aspects of English proficiency than it takes for them to master "content-embedded" (conversational/face-to-face) aspects (p. 29).

From similar studies (Ballenger, 1998; Campano, 2007; Igoa, 1995) with immigrant children carried out by teachers who worked with them in the classroom, comparable conclusions can be distinguished. Igoa (1995) understood the role of emotional and psychological sentiments in the school adaptation of Asian immigrant children when facing formal schooling in the U.S. for the first time. Language was part of their own cultural identity, and those children faced many conflicting feelings regarding their language because they did not know how to deal with situations when they could not be understood or express their feelings because they could not speak English (Igoa, 1995). Ballenger (1998) found that Haitian immigrant preschool children used their own terms to accomplish the enacted curriculum in the classroom and to become literate in English. For those children, learning the ABCs—alphabet— in English was a process that involved more than just learning letters; it was also a process of coping with moving away from their home countries and learning to speak in a language other than Creole (Ballenger, 1998). Campano (2007), in his work with immigrant students from different cultural backgrounds, analyzes the role of the individuals' previous learning experiences and cultures. What these students bring to the classroom holds value, and the only way to make a connection with them is to allow those values, experiences, and stories to come alive in an alien but common environment for the immigrant students' classroom (Campano, 2007). These studies highlight that language learning and learning in general cannot be separated from the cultural and social environment where immigrant children are being brought up or from the experiences they already acquired or already possess. In order for teachers to successfully teach such diverse groups of learners, they must try to see the students in more than one dimension and teach the whole child as a member of a community and culture different from the teacher's (Moll, et al., 1992).

Linguistic Factors: Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition

Linguistic factors such as bilingualism, level of literacy in the first language, first language instruction, and maintenance will affect the development of Latino immigrant students' language. Bilingualism is a crucial and polemic topic in language education, second language acquisition, and language development of Latino immigrant children because it entails not only educational issues regarding language policies, but it is also a topic related to politics —especially immigration laws (Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Krashen, 1996; Valdés, 2001; Wiley, 2005, amongst others). Therefore, bilingualism has its supporters and its detractors (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Krashen, 1996) when discussing Latino immigrant children's education in the United States.

Major language policies implemented in schools deal to a certain degree with current immigration reforms such as the case of California Proposition 187 that denied public benefits to illegal immigrants, which preceded Proposition 227 that proposed English-only immersion programs instead of bilingual programs in California (Valdés, 2001). In a more recent case, Arizona's SB 1070 seeks to grant police the authority to request documentation of anyone who is "suspected" of being an illegal immigrant and send to jail anyone who is not carrying identification documents (Archibold, 2010). This law is creating as much stir as HB 2281, which bans ethnic studies in Arizona schools (Santa Cruz, 2010).

Numerous researchers (Corson, 2001; Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Krashen, 1996, 1999; Müller, 2009; Weinreich, 1974) have tried to define bilingualism; depending on one's perspective, however, bilingualism is a very complex concept to define (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005) since the manner in which two languages develop—"*simultaneously"* in a "*natural* setting" or "*successively"* in a "*tutored* environment" (Müller, 2009, p.243)—is affected by different internal and external factors (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). For instance, simultaneous bilingualism develops when a child is learning both languages at the same time from birth, usually when the parents speak different languages and talk to their child using both languages (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998). Successive, sequential, or consecutive bilingualism frequently occurs when a child later has contact with another language at the "playgroup, nursery school and school" (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998, p. 36). Müller (2009) would argue that this kind of bilingualism develops when the child enters formal schooling whether the child is a native speaker of the language learning another language in school or a child of immigrants entering school in the new country for the first time. In both cases, simultaneous and successive, bilingualism will unquestionably be affected by the use of home language, the community where the child lives, the school environment, and family customs and culture (Gonzalez, 2001; Menyuk & Brisk, 2005; Moll, et al., 1992; Valdés, 2001). Baker and Prys Jones (1998), however, also argue that distinguishing between the two kinds of bilingualism is artificial, as family and community situations vary with language use. Language is an activity (van Lier, 2004) that involves complex processes of "lexical development" (acquiring vocabulary) and "pragmatics" (uses in language) (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005, p. 1) and that becomes even more complex as the child simultaneously or sequentially learns two languages since the process is affected by a series of factors (linguistic, cultural, and social) (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005).

Whom do we call bilinguals? What makes a person bilingual? Research shows that a clear-cut definition of bilingualism is still too challenging to attempt. For instance, Cummins and Swain (1986) state that the definition of bilingualism varies and depends on different aspects that are taken into consideration when trying to define who is bilingual. A person might be considered bilingual if he/she possesses a certain degree of proficiency in any of the different language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—in a second language (Brice, 2002), whereas others might consider a person bilingual if he/she possesses full command of two different languages (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

Possessing fluency in more than one language does not necessarily indicate equal levels of proficiency in both languages because language has different components (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) (Brice, 2002). In addition, defining bilingualism implies as well taking into account the different circumstances and motivation under which the person became bilingual and the factors that affect the acquisition of two languages, since "language acquisition is a dynamic, fluid process that is highly dependent on both the context in which it is developed and the range of opportunities that one has to use it" (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008, p.151). The opportunities for Latino immigrant children to use English sometimes are limited because even though they are immersed in an English-only world in schools, their access to English is limited, as the majority of the ESL programs group all ELL together and "simplify" the content, and therefore the language, used in class and in the textbooks (Valdés, 2001, p. 13).

When Weinreich (1974) defined bilingualism more than thirty years ago, he argued that bilingualism was "the practice of alternatively using two languages" (p. 1), but at the same time the bilingual person controlled the different language systems; therefore, a bilingual person is the one who knows what language to use, in what situation to use it, and with whom he/she is going to use either language (Martinez, 2006; Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). In a more recent study of the language use of Mexican Americans, Martinez (2006) argues that "to study bilingualism is to study how speakers use different languages in different social situations" (p. 5). In other words, when children are learning to speak a language, they are also learning how to use the language to communicate according to different social purposes, how to change language according to the needs of the listeners or a situation, and how to follow the rules for conversations. Pragmatics will vary across and within cultures and will have specific significance when dealing with bilingual children, since besides learning a language or languages they are also learning about the cultures associated with the languages being acquired (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005).

Language, besides being a natural act that is learned rather easily by normal human beings (Valdés, 2001, p. 20), also conveys aspects of life that influence it as well as aspects that are influenced by it. In the particular case of bilinguals, the process of home and second language development becomes more complex due to the individual's preference in using the languages, the environment and community in which he/she lives, and the family's personal choices regarding language use (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). First language acquisition is an ongoing process that does not end at a specific stage in life, as language continues evolving in the different contexts of an individual's life (Collier, 1995; van Lier, 2004).

Most children, by the age of five, have acquired their home language or mother tongue (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005; van Lier, 2004), but doing so does not signal the end of learning; as the child grows up, he/she continues to acquire more vocabulary and grammatical structures and learns to use language according to the different sociocultural settings or environments he/she encounters throughout his/her whole life (Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). As Collier (1995) would argue, first language acquisition is a lifelong process that does not end at age five, since "children 6 to 12 continue to acquire subtle phonological distinctions, vocabulary, semantics, syntax, formal discourse patterns, and complex aspects of pragmatics in the oral system of their first language" (p. 3). Such assertions prompt the assumption that second language acquisition can be considered a lifelong process as well, whether this process is developed simultaneously or sequentially (Müller, 2009) to the first or home language learning.

Additionally, van Lier (2004) concurs that after the development of the home language the child will have to continue with "more years of instruction…in how to use language in academic subjects, how to appreciate literature, how to interpret a math problem, how to report on a scientific experiment and so on" (p. 36) or what Cummins (1981) termed *academic language*. Language acquisition starts developing at birth (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998) and continues throughout life (Collier, 1995; van Lier, 2004). Second language acquisition, depending on the circumstances, can also develop at birth or later in life (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998; Müller, 2009), and it will also continue developing throughout life depending on the community's use of language or languages and formal education—schooling—(Baker & Prys Jones, 1998).

Literacy Level in the Home Language and First Language Instruction

Research has shown that the level of literacy achieved in the home language presents an advantage in the learning of the second language (Krashen, 1996); consequently, the continuous instruction or teaching of content in the first language will improve the acquisition of the second language or, in this case, the acquisition of English (Cummins & Swain, 1986). The home language "is so instrumental to the emotional and academic well-being of the child, that its development must be seen as a high…priory in the early years of schooling" (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 101). Therefore instruction in Spanish, as the home language of the majority of Latino immigrant children, becomes an important part of the process of acquiring English as a second language, since it will provide a sense of value to whatever learning experiences, values, and customs the children bring to school (Campano, 2007; Carger, 1996; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Valdés, 1996, 2001). Since, for many Latino families, language is tightly intertwined with their culture, families, and community (Vasquez et al., 1994), it is highly important to value and encourage the use of Spanish at home and in school. Spanish, for the majority of Latino immigrant families, is the language used for the *educación* of their children at home; it is also the language of communication with close and distant relatives, and it is also the language of the community (Valdés, 1996, 2001). Thus, they consider it important to maintain their home language when learning English as second language, whether this is done simultaneously or sequentially.

Supporting Cummins' assertions, Krashen (1996) argues that "the process of the development of literacy is similar in different languages" and that "the underlying process of reading in different languages is similar" as well (p. 23). Therefore, literacy in one language may transfer to another. Cummins (1979) proposes two hypotheses to explain the importance of the role of the first language or home language in the development of a second language—the "threshold hypothesis" (p. 50) and the "interdependence hypothesis" (p.37). According to the threshold hypothesis, "there may be a minimum or threshold levels of competence that bilingual children must attain in their first language to avoid cognitive disadvantages" when learning a second language (Corson, 2001, p. 113). The interdependence theory "looks at the relationship between the learner's first and second languages" or to the "aspects of language proficiency that are common to both" languages (Corson, 2001 p. 114). In other words, "experience with either language can promote development of the proficiency underlying both languages given adequate motivation and exposure to both either in school or in the wider environment" (Cummins, 1979, p. 38).

Conclusion

Research that has tried to explain why some children from language minority groups are able to or fail to acquire English proficiently cannot account for just one isolated factor—sociocultural or linguistic—responsible for such success or failure (Cummins, 1981). All factors act upon each other and are interdependent (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Gonzalez, 2001). Research in the field of bilingualism and bilingual education, with immigrant students in general and with Latino immigrant students in particular, seems to yield similar findings and therefore similar conclusions regarding the role of language, culture, and socioeconomic status in the development of home and second languages (English). The home language must be taken seriously in the learning of English (Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1986) because of the fundamental role it plays. The advantage of having learned a linguistic system and grammar can positively be transferred and therefore used to learn English faster (Krashen, 1999). Diaz and Klinger (1991) cite Bialystok (1986), who asserts that bilingualism "positively affects" children's "ability to solve problems involving high levels of control of linguistic processing" (p. 167).

The role of culture, family, and community in the development of English in Latino immigrant children has also been stressed to a great extent in the studies conducted by Gonzalez (2001), Schecter and Bayley (2002), Valdés (1996, 2001), and Vasquez et al. (1994), to name a few, and supported by work done by Moje et al. (2004) and Moll et al. (1992), among others. Family culture, beliefs, values, and socioeconomic status will affect how well Latino immigrant children learn English and consequently adapt to the new society and culture (Collier, 1995; Valdés, 1996, 2001).

Both factors, linguistic and sociocultural, are interdependent in the development of a second language (Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Gonzalez 2001) failing to ascribe value to the immigrant students' first language and culture at school may cause several feelings and negative reactions to develop (Cummins & Swain, 1986). For instance, the children might reject their families or

feel frustration and hostility toward the teachers and school; either can create feelings of "bicultural ambivalence" that will eventually affect the students' learning and thus their English-language development (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 101). Krashen (1996) advocates providing language-minority children with "quality education" in their home language that will give them "knowledge of the world and subject matter…and literacy, which transfer across languages" (p. 3). He also argues that "knowledge gained through the first language makes English input more comprehensible and literacy gained through the first language transfers to the second" (Krashen, 1996, p. 4).

The point is not whether Latino immigrant children can learn English but whether the level of proficiency they can achieve will allow them to perform at the same level as their U.S. peers. School and language policies have stressed too much what these students do not have or lack—the deficit hypothesis (Vasquez et al., 1994)—and have failed to value what they do have and bring to school—cultural and linguistic diversity (Moll et al., 1992). In the U.S., "native language speakers who are biliterate are commonly held in admiration… [however] language minorities who achieve functional literacy in English are…not similarly admired…for their biliteracy" (Wiley, 2005, p. 531). For this reason, foreign language classes and textbooks use "both English and the target language as language of instruction" whereas ESL classes and thus the textbook use only English as the language of instruction without any support in the immigrant students' language (Valdés, 2001, p. 25). Valdés' (2001) study of Latino students in U.S. schools points out that the way ESL classrooms and ELL programs are carried out does not support Krashen's (1996) and Cummins and Swain's (1986) theory of using the immigrant students' first language and culture as a tool to successfully facilitate the teaching of English. Language policies and misguided teaching methods achieve minimally significant results in the teaching of Latino immigrant students (Valdés, 2001). For instance, in the state of Indiana the percentage of English-language learner students who tested limited English proficient (LEP) highly increased instead of decreasing (West, 2006, p. 120, in Levinson, Everitt, & Johnson, 2007). West's (2006) findings demonstrate that maybe the language policies and current teaching methods are not doing enough to increase the level of English proficiency in English-language learners. Concurrently, the media have disseminated the findings of studies that claim that the use of the home language is not an effective way to help immigrant children become English-language proficient (Cummins, 1999; Krashen, 1996). Little has been done, however, to publicize the research that yielded positive findings and support the success that quality bilingual programs are having teaching Latino immigrant students (Cummins, 1999; Krashen, 1996).

The field of second language learning must continue to explore all the sociocultural and linguistic factors that affect the language development of Latino immigrant children. The possibilities and advantages of such studies can be translated into more effective ways to approach their learning, since Latino immigrant students' education will be more integrated as not only language will be part of the process as a useful tool to improve learning and English language learning but also their learning experiences and culture will be incorporated and valued.

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