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The Impact of Systematic Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Instruction in a Spanish Immersion First-Grade Classroom

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The Impact of Systematic Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Instruction in a Spanish
Immersion First-Grade Classroom
by

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A capstone project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Research suggests that students who are not fluent readers by the end of third grade will continue to face great academic challenges throughout their educational career (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019, p. 78). Therefore, helping primary learners master early literacy skills is crucial. This is true not only in monolingual literacy programs but in bilingual programs as well. However, while many schools across the United States are beginning to implement best practices, such curriculums have not been introduced as frequently in Spanish immersion programs. This could result in lower achievement for dual language learners, as environments that do not foster early literacy skills in *both* languages create a deficit that is difficult to reverse (Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, & Miranda, 2020). There is no doubt that Spanish immersion programs increase student achievement, academic growth, cognitive benefits, and cross-cultural communication (Li, Steele, Slater, Bacon, & Miller, 2016). Based on these many benefits of bilingual learning, there is an urgency for schools to rely upon best practices when deciding upon a literacy curriculum (Li et. al, 2016).

This capstone addresses the question: *How does systematic literacy instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics in Spanish Immersion impact student mastery of early literacy skills in first-grade?* This chapter discusses best practices for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics, as they are the foundation every young reader needs for success. It examines the current Spanish Immersion curriculum and considers what the proper sequence of an early literacy curriculum should be to best reflect the linguistic elements of the Spanish language. I provide the current context from this project and frustrations

with the inadequate curriculum for young bilingual learners that drive my passion for this research and outline the importance of structured literacy instruction and immersion based on current research.

Spanish Immersion

As a first-grade teacher, early literacy skills are at the heart of what I do each day. While there are many styles of immersion education, the district where I teach is unique in that the majority of students primarily speak English at home. The program is elective, meaning parents choose this track for their children. Unlike dual-immersion programs where students learn Spanish and English simultaneously, all academic content is taught in Spanish kindergarten through fifth-grade, resulting in bilingualism. Students in this program do not receive formal reading instruction in their first language until third-grade, meaning they must master literacy skills such as decoding in Spanish, to decode well in English.

Studies show that phonological awareness in immersion students' first language (L1) plays a significant role in students' second language (L2) (Erler & Mccaro, 2011). Although it is evident these skills are essential for bilingual learners to have success in both languages, the current curriculum has significant gaps in teaching such skills. This has been a source of frustration for me. While I watch my English colleagues trial new literacy programs based on best practices, there have not been changes to the required Spanish curriculum for several years. I have felt ill-equipped to help students achieve mastery of phonics and phonemic awareness. Although I teach in a Spanish Immersion program, I am also a non-native Spanish speaker and must work to authentically represent the language. Experimentation with other programs, techniques, and strategies

has improved my instruction and allowed students to acquire the skills they need.

However, some students with learning difficulties have regretfully fallen behind in Spanish reading due to current curriculums that lack a systematic approach.

Structured Literacy

This leads to the question: What is a systematic approach in literacy, and why is it best? The National Reading Panel has identified that effective reading instruction must include the following five components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). Without each of these skills taught sequentially, students will lack the necessary foundation they need to be strategic and proficient readers. Sadly, many students who have not mastered foundational language skills fail to advance to higher levels and are sometimes unidentified for learning disabilities. To ensure students have all the necessary components of a successful reader, teachers must use a structured literacy approach, meaning “the explicit, systematic teaching that focuses on phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics, and decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph level” (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019). Not only is this approach effective for the majority of young learners, but it is especially powerful for struggling readers and students with dyslexia (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2021). As all students in a structured literacy program are taught skills sequentially, teachers can accommodate student progress by supporting and guiding them according to their individual needs. This type of structured literacy program avoids the assumption that students can and will learn how to read naturally, and conversely, it explicitly instructs all learners in the most important, foundational language skills they need (Lorimor-Easley & Reed 2019).

Structured Literacy in Spanish

Since research clearly identified structured literacy as the best practice for teaching reading, it is also essential in Spanish immersion classrooms. However, the differences between English and Spanish must be taken into account. While English programs begin with phonemic awareness, letter names, consonants, and the use of onset-rime structure, effective Spanish literacy instruction introduces letter sounds, vowels, and the use of the syllable unit (Myer, 2010). In fact, one study conducted in Spain emphasized the importance of the syllable unit by reporting that 64% of teachers in Spain use this “syllable method,” meaning introducing syllables first, in early literacy instruction (Suarez, Rodriguez, O’Shanahan, & Jimenez, 2014).

Effective Spanish literacy instruction was built on syllable units and blending strategies to help students decode more complex words (Myer, 2010). Structured literacy programs were also essential for non-native Spanish speakers (often in a one-way immersion program) in order for them to gain proficiency, fluency, and accuracy in Spanish pronunciation. Although some language skills could be naturally acquired, Correa (2011) found that explicit, systematic instruction benefited non-native Spanish speakers, as it helped them overcome difficulties with certain sounds patterns of the target language and that learning systematically better equipped students to recognize pronunciation errors (Correa, 2011). When deciding upon an early literacy curriculum for immersion programs, Myer (2010) noted that educational companies needed to account for the above factors by developing curriculums that are authentic to the Spanish language and not a direct translation from English (p. 10). Anything other than this was a

“recipe for disaster” and insufficient in helping students gain proficiency in Spanish (Myer, 2010, p. 10).

Critical Reflection

Critical analysis of best practices in literacy and evaluation of the elements of effective literacy programs have made the deficit in early literacy curriculums in Spanish more evident. Immersion programs must adopt a curriculum that is systematic, authentic, attentive to students with reading difficulties, and well-implemented. The complexities of Spanish and English must be accounted for in order to ensure optimal success for bilingual learners. Programs that rely on the linguistic structure of English, fail to teach skills explicitly, depend upon translations, or are poorly implemented may deny dual-language learners crucial literacy skills. Furthermore, students with language or reading difficulties may go unidentified or fall further behind because of the lack of explicit instruction they need.

Literacy is essential not only because it teaches students to read and write but also because “communication and connection are the basis of who we are and how we live together and interact with the world” (International Literacy Association, 2020). The ability to read, write, and communicate effectively opens doors for students to build bridges and break barriers in their communities. This is especially true of bilingual students, who can accomplish this in two languages. Therefore, it is even more essential to develop a literacy program that gives students the proper set of skills they need to be truly literate. As I study the impact of systematic literacy instruction on immersion students in this capstone, I will strive to answer the question: *How does systematic literacy instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics in Spanish Immersion impact*

student mastery of early literacy skills in first grade? I hope to develop a literacy program that can promote the mastery of literacy skills in both Spanish and English to ensure student success as bilingual learners. The rest of this capstone examines best practices for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics in an immersion setting. Chapter Two is a review of research literature that discusses the most effective methods of instruction for early literacy skills, as well as the differences and similarities between Spanish that are central to the development of Spanish Immersion curriculum. Chapter Three provides an overview of the intended curriculum designed in this project and explains the key components and methods used throughout. Finally, Chapter Four presents other reflections and findings identified throughout this project and will also share recommendations for how to further this topic of study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review creates the foundation necessary in order to understand the question: *How does systematic literacy instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics in Spanish Immersion impact student mastery of early literacy skills in first grade?* This study is intended to help Spanish Immersion educators have the tools they need to provide bilingual learners with a solid foundation of early literacy skills.

As research has developed, many schools across the country have adopted new reading curriculum based upon current best practices. Recent research showed that structured literacy - the explicit instruction of phonological awareness, phonics, and the structure of language - is effective in helping elementary students achieve mastery of early literacy skills. However, as systematic literacy has evolved in English programs, few programs have implemented any kind of systematic literacy in Spanish Immersion programs. Lack of research and misunderstandings about the idiosyncrasies of the Spanish language stalled progress in this area (Clinton et al., 2013). Immersion programs needed a curriculum that prioritizes structured literacy and best practices in teaching reading while being true to the linguistic nuances of the Spanish language. This review evaluated best literacy practices for teaching reading, the implications for Spanish Immersion programs, and how to best reach struggling readers in order to determine appropriate components of an effective Spanish early literacy curriculum that will best equip Spanish immersion students.

Systematic Literacy: Best Practices in Reading

There is no question that a child's ability to read is one of the key components to their overall academic success. Helping students master literacy skills is among one of the highest callings of an educator. The term literacy refers to "the requisite skills, strategies, and experiences that readers and writers bring to bear when interacting with the world" (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019, p. 27). Such skills are crucial for a student's ability to communicate and interact with the world around them. While there is little debate about the importance of literacy, educators disagreed about which practices are most effective for literacy education. There are many instructional programs to help students learn to read. However evidence-based practices are those that have been effective and successful in improving reading achievement among students (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019).

Throughout the decades, educators have piloted many curriculums and programs, some based largely upon phonics alone and others based upon comprehension. New evidence has suggested that instead of an "either-or" method, a balanced approach is much more effective because it integrates multiple methodologies (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019, p. 32). In order for students to attain higher-order goals like comprehension and composition, lower-level processes such as phonemic awareness and phonics serve as a sturdy foundation (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). It seems, therefore, that excellent and evidence-based instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics may be a necessity in a child's journey to literacy.

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

In order to select an effective instructional program for early literacy skills, it is important to understand and define the key components of literacy instruction. The National Reading Panel identified that effective reading instruction must also include the following five components: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). While all five skills are crucial parts of the reading process, phonemic awareness and phonics were significant in that they provide the foundation for reading success. For this reason, teachers have needed to ensure that their students begin their academic careers by mastering pillar number one, phonological awareness. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to hear and manipulate units of sound within spoken language (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). Bear (2017) agreed that this was an important skill that should be acquired before phonics instruction (p. 3). Unlike phonics, which is the ability to associate letters with sounds (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019), phonological awareness did not introduce letters or teach letter-sound correspondence. On the contrary, phonological awareness is completely auditory and not connected to letters or the written language (Dougherty et al., 2020). Phonemic awareness is under the umbrella of phonological awareness and refers to the ability to identify and manipulate phonemes, which are the smallest unit of sound (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). Whereas phonological awareness describes a child's ability to hear sound "chunks," phonemic awareness refers to the individual sounds in words. According to Reading Rockets (2021), the brain is not hardwired to hear the individual sounds within words, implying that students must be taught this skill explicitly. For that reason, direct instruction of phonemic awareness skills is imperative. In fact, evidence

suggests that students' spelling and phonics abilities are the result of strong phonemic awareness skills, as learning letters without knowing sounds would be virtually impossible (Dougherty et al., 2020).

In the classroom, students can learn phonological and phonemic awareness by engaging in various activities to help them identify and manipulate sounds. Simple phonological and phonemic awareness include counting words in a sentence, counting, segmenting and blending syllables, identifying position of syllables, and manipulating syllables (Reading Rockets, 2021). More complex tasks include blending, rhyming, isolation and substituting sounds, and blending syllables (Reading Rockets, 2021). In order to best promote student mastery, these skills should be taught systematically and according to students' needs. Once children have successfully mastered phonemic awareness skills, teachers can begin introducing letters (Dougherty et al., 2020). This is where the second pillar of reading, phonics, will begin.

Phonics

While phonemic awareness and phonics share similarities, phonics adds another layer of complexity by connecting phonemes to letters. It is often defined as the relationship between sounds and letters and is an important component of reading in primary grades (Bear, 2017). In order to excel in phonics, students must first master prerequisite skills beginning with letter recognition (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). Letter recognition, often referred to as alphabetic knowledge, is the ability to identify the letters in print (Dougherty et al., 2020). While it is possible to recognize words in print by memory with no alphabetic skills, this strategy alone puts students at a huge disadvantage, as they will lack skills to decode complex words (Dougherty et. al, 2020).

Therefore, phonics instruction must begin with explicit teaching of the alphabet. Once students have mastered letter recognition, they can begin connecting sounds to the letters and eventually move on to more complex sound patterns and skills. Students use the alphabetic code to build syllables, words, and sentences (Bear, 2017). When students have mastered phonics skills and can read automatically, they may be better equipped to make meaning of what they read. Since comprehension is the ultimate goal of literacy instruction, teachers should prioritize effective phonics instruction in order to help students move towards this goal.

Like all elements of reading instruction, there are varying schools of thoughts as to what defines effective phonics instruction. Because the English language is complex and multi-layered, primary students may have to master the fundamentals of letter-to-sound correspondence and consonant-vowel patterns in order to excel in more advanced layers of English (Bear, 2017).

While most approaches agree that a systematic approach leads to the best outcomes (Bear, 2017), there are subtle differences between instructional methods and sequences. Understanding each method is important in order to select a program that will best promote student mastery. The first method is termed the “grapheme-phoneme” approach. In this method, children are taught to decode words using the sounds for letters (graphemes) and the letter patterns (Spear-Swerling, Louise (2017). Students blend each individual sound in order to read a word.

A second method for teaching phonics is referred to as the “onset-rime” approach. Instead of teaching to read words according to individual graphemes, students learn larger units of sound (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). Words are broken down into onsets of a

syllable, the initial unit, and rimes, the ending unit. Students put these two chunks together to decode words. Thirdly, some programs follow the “analogy phonics” or “word families” approach, which focuses on whole words and comparing them to words in a similar “family” (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017, p. 5).

Research has shown that all of these methods may produce better results than phonics instruction that is not sequential or explicit or taught at all (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). This points to the fact that phonics instruction should be under the umbrella of structured literacy instruction.

Components of structured literacy instruction

Structured Literacy is an “approach to reading instruction where teachers carefully structure important literacy skills, concepts and the sequence of instruction to facilitate children’s literacy learning” (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017, p. 6). Systematic literacy instruction has several key components, but on a basic level, it is characterized by explicit instruction that emphasizes the structure of language, while also integrating listening, speaking, and reading (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017).

There are varying opinions regarding this method among educators. Certain groups are in favor of a whole-language approach, meaning that phonics instruction should be taught within a broader context that does not necessarily include explicit or systematic methods (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019). While it is important to have a balanced approach, the problem with a literacy program that relies solely on whole-language is that there is often too little emphasis on decoding skills which in turn leaves some students vulnerable to deficiencies in their success as readers (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). This approach may also forgo important prerequisite

skills by teaching skills out of order or introducing activities that are not in context or relevant to promoting growth (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). On the contrary, structured literacy provides sequential, explicit instruction with a strong emphasis on phonics for primary students. Whether it is structured literacy or balanced literacy, early literacy skills set the stage for advanced literacy skills that students need in their later years (Gambrell & Morrow, 2019).

There are several different programs and techniques that are under the umbrella of structured literacy. While there are differences between some of the programs, they all share certain elements that are important. The first and arguably most important element is that structured literacy programs are sequential (Bear, 2017). Because English orthography is complex, it is often broken down into three layers, the alphabetic layer, the pattern layer, and the morphological layer (Bear, 2017). Without these skills taught sequentially, students may lack the necessary foundation they need to be strategic and proficient readers. Sadly, many students who have not mastered foundational language skills fail to advance to higher levels and are sometimes unidentified for learning disabilities (Borman et al., 2019). Lorimor-Easley & Reed (2019) argue that “the explicit, systematic teaching that focuses on phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics, and decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph level” (n.p.).

As all students in a structured literacy program are taught skills sequentially, teachers can accommodate student progress by supporting or enriching them according to their individual needs. Vygotsky’s term, “zone of proximal development,” asserted that each child has a unique level of abilities and that teachers must modify their support to help students achieve the next level (Vygotsky as cited in, McLeod, 2018). A structured

literacy program avoids the assumption that students can and will learn how to read naturally, and conversely, it explicitly instructs all learners in foundational language skills (Lorimor-Easley & Reed 2019).

In addition to being sequential, structured literacy programs are direct and explicit. Teachers must never assume that students will naturally acquire the skills they need to become successful readers simply from exposure to reading (Moat, 2019). Instruction should be explicit and provide multiple opportunities for students to practice each skill (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). It is also important for teachers to use a variety of instructional methods. For example, teachers can instruct students to tap out sounds in a word or complete fluency drills, while at the same time giving them purposeful feedback (Moat, 2019). Once the teacher has explicitly and repeatedly modeled a given skill, students engage in hands-on activities, like using tiles to manipulate sounds, and kinesthetic movement, like tapping syllables and hand gestures (Moat, 2019). With such explicit and direct instruction, students know exactly what is expected of them and are able to work toward mastery.

When students have received such instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness and thus have a basis of early literacy skills, they can transition to advanced layers of language such as morphology, prefixes and suffixes, syntax, understanding parts of speech, grammar, and words in a sentence, and finally semantics, meaning and comprehension of words (Moat, 2019).

Teachers can mistakenly assume that students who can decode well and read fluently are advanced readers, and therefore may fail to teach strategic comprehension skills. To avoid this problem, teachers must provide their students with frequent

opportunities to engage with relevant texts and practice comprehension strategies. Emergent literacy theory asserts that children develop literacy skills concurrently and interrelatedly (Emergent literacy: Literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities, 2020). Therefore, teachers must teach meaningful and strategic comprehension strategies *alongside* phonics and decoding because such comprehension strategies are the means to an end versus the means themselves (Gambrell & Marrow, 2019). Additionally, it is important for teachers to spend time modeling and engaging students in their usage. Read-alouds, choral reading, text instruction, think-aloud, text discussion, and graphic organizers all provide students with authentic learning opportunities to apply reading skills.

While there is undoubtedly no perfect literacy curriculum, it is clear that structured literacy is truly necessary to provide many students with a foundation in reading that eventually will lead to their academic success.

Structured Literacy In Spanish Immersion

Because structured literacy has proven to be a successful reading program for some readers in their mastery of literacy skills, there is no doubt that the systematic instruction of phonics and phonemic awareness skills should also have a positive impact on students in Spanish Immersion programs. While the majority of research about the process of learning to read focuses on the English language, educators must prioritize the process of reading in Spanish, especially with the rise of Spanish Immersion programs around the country (Clinton et al., 2013). There is hope that it will help students learn in a way that is true to the uniqueness of Spanish, and therefore, have the tools they need to become fully bi-literate. In order to develop an effective early literacy program that will

help children attain this goal, it is important to understand the intricacies of Spanish and English and how the two languages impact one another.

The Complexities Between Spanish and English

To begin, teachers and administrators must consider the similarities and differences between Spanish and English while selecting an appropriate Spanish immersion curriculum (Myer, 2010). In the United States, Spanish literacy instruction has been largely impacted by the trends of research and study in English (Goldenberg et al., 2014). While the linguistic structures of Spanish and English do have some similarities, they differ significantly in their orthographic systems (Arteagoitia et al., 2010). For example, Spanish and English are both alphabetic languages, but Spanish contains 27 letters and English 26 (Lambert, 2022). The two languages share 19 of the same sounds, however, there are differences in how these sounds are expressed (Lambert, 2022). English has more sounds than it does letters (ex. 15 vowel sounds), and Spanish has more letters than sounds (only five vowel sounds) (Lambert, 2022).

The orthography of English is complex and “opaque,” meaning that the same sound can be represented by multiple letter groups (Goldenberg et al, 2014, p. 606). For this reason, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness is critical in English and is predictive for reading success (Clinton et al., 2013). In contrast, Spanish is referred to as a “transparent” language, meaning there is a more consistent relationship between letters and sounds (Goldenberg et al, 2014, p. 607). In fact, letters in Spanish are always represented by the same sound, meaning that students acquire phonemic awareness more naturally and such explicit instruction may not always be necessary (Goldenberg et al., 2014). One study comparing students learning Spanish in Mexico with students learning

to read in English in the U.S. supports this assertion and found that students learning to read in Spanish, generally performed below their American counterparts in phonemic awareness, but within two years, caught up and even surpassed them in reading (Goldenberg et al., 2014). This suggests that instead of using phonemic awareness as a precursor to reading, Spanish can be taught concurrently along with reading comprehension and writing (Myer, 2010).

Wackerle-Hollman, Durán, and Miranda (2020) explained that while both languages required the manipulation of sound structure, instructional tasks and areas of focus differ. It would appear that direct instruction on letter sounds, recognition, and blending syllables to form meaningful words is a more effective starting point for learning to read in Spanish (Goldenberg et al., 2014). These findings have major effects on the sequence of instruction as well as the instructional methods chosen to teach the two languages. In order to create a rich learning environment in Spanish immersion classrooms, the trajectory of systematic literacy instruction must not rely upon the orthography of English, but rather must rely upon the intricacies of Spanish.

While English programs began with phonemic awareness, letter names, consonants, and the use of onset-rime structure, effective Spanish literacy instruction introduced letter sounds, vowels, and the use of the syllable unit (Myer, 2010). However, like in every academic discussion, there are multiple theories and schools of thought regarding the sequence and nature of instruction for such skills.

One method called the synthetic method begins with the smallest unit of sound and builds up to more complex patterns (Suarez et al.). In this approach, students begin by learning vowel sounds and letters and slowly add consonants and letter combinations

(Suarez et al., 2014). Instruction based on this method focuses on segmenting, recognizing, and isolating letter sounds (Suarez et al., 2014). Many other instructional methods in Spanish tend to rely less on explicit instruction of letter sounds and recognition, but focus more on teaching reading and writing in a more communicative approach (Goldenberg et al., 2014). While both of these approaches have their advantages, most studies assert that the most appropriate method for teaching reading in Spanish is the syllabic method. This method is similar to the synthetic method in that it begins with smaller units of sound, however, instead of focusing on letters, it emphasizes the use of syllables (Wackerle-Hollman et al.). In fact, one study conducted in Spain concluded that over half of all educators teach according to the syllabic method (Suarez et al., 2014).

When deciding upon an early literacy curriculum for immersion programs, Myer (2010) noted that educational companies needed to account for the above factors by developing curriculums that are authentic to the Spanish language. Otherwise, the curriculum will be insufficient in meeting the needs of bilingual students (Myer, 2010).

The Cross-linguistic transfer of Language in Bilingual Education

Educators must consider the linguistic elements of the Spanish language when selecting a curriculum for early literacy skills. However, in the context of immersion, educators must also rely on research about bilingual learning and the uniqueness of immersion programs. According to Comeau et al. (1999), “the purpose of immersion is to allow children who speak the language of the majority in the home to achieve proficiency in another language” (Comeau et al., 1999). There are many different immersion programs that vary in structure and instructional methods. However, the common

similarity between all programs is that the children learn to read not in their first language (L1) but rather in a second language (L2), and therefore gain early acquisition of that language (Comeau et al., 1999). For this reason, instruction of early Spanish literacy skills in this context differs from methods used in predominantly Spanish-speaking countries. For example, one study analyzing student achievement of early literacy skills in Mexico, found that instruction in phonemic awareness was not always necessary since students were able to absorb this skill naturally (Goldenberg et al., 2014). This is not true of non-native Spanish speakers in the United States, who are not exposed on a daily basis to L2. For this reason, systematic phonological awareness and phonics instruction may be essential for non-native Spanish students in immersion programs in order for them to gain proficiency, fluency, and accuracy in Spanish pronunciation (Correa, 2011). Correa found that while some language skills could be naturally acquired, explicit, systematic instruction benefited non-native Spanish speakers and helped them overcome difficulties with certain sound patterns (Correa, 2011). Bear asserted that English learners benefit from explicit phonics instruction that helps them solidify their understanding of unfamiliar sounds and letter-sound correspondences (2017). The same is true for immersion students, who like English language learners, are unfamiliar with L2. These facts imply that structured literacy as a means of teaching early literacy skills is not only necessary in English programs, but in immersion programs as well.

Another important aspect of immersion education that must be taken into account is the cross-linguistic transfer of L1 and L2. According to Cardenas-Hagen et al. (2007), “cross-linguistic transfer occurs when students learning another language have access to and use linguistic resources from their L1” (p. 250). Because language and literacy skills

are transferable, research shows that children learning to read in a second language benefit from the knowledge of their native language (Cardenas-Hagen et al., 2007). Furthermore, strong evidence indicates that phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge in Spanish contribute to later reading success in English (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020). One study on the role of phonological awareness in Spanish found that students in the United States who received reading instruction in English had stronger phonological awareness scores in *Spanish* than students learning to read in Mexico (Goldenberg et al, 2014). These students had no direct instruction in phonological awareness in Spanish, however, their strong phonological awareness skills in English enabled them to succeed in both languages (Goldenberg et al., 2014). Furthermore, similar research studying the transfer of early literacy skills in Spanish and English found that phonological awareness and word recognition in Spanish was correlated directly to word recognition in English (Comeau et al., 1999). Therefore, it is evident that there is a strong transfer of early literacy skills between students' L1 and L2. These findings have major implications for Spanish Immersion programs. If there is such a powerful connection between L1 and L2, it could be said that explicit, excellent early literacy instruction is critical in a child's mastery of both languages.

Another important aspect for educators to consider is the developmental rate of phonological acquisition. According to Dr. Desiree Pallais-Downing (2022), a child's phonological system is developed very early in life. She explained that children are born with the ability to hear all sounds in all languages. However, they acclimate to the sounds they hear the most frequently, and most children's phonological system is established by the age of five (Lambert, 2022). This provides evidence of how crucial it is for

immersion early literacy programs to provide students with explicit instruction of the phonological system in their L2. With indirect instruction and a lack of exposure to the sounds of Spanish, bilingual students may struggle to acquire it.

Since bilingual education leads to the acquisition of two reading systems and new skills emerge simultaneously in both languages, educators in immersion programs should strive to provide students with a strong foundation of literacy skills in order to help students achieve mastery in *both* languages (Comeau et al., 1999). As Cardenas-Hagen et al. (2007) explained, the understanding of the cross-linguistic transfer of early literacy skills and a student's language proficiency can "assist instructors to make informed decisions regarding language and literacy instruction," (p. 250). While recognition of the cross-linguistic transfer will positively impact all students, it also is essential to understanding how it can support students with learning disabilities in Spanish Immersion programs.

Supporting Bilingual Students with Dyslexia

Central to an effective bilingual literacy program was also a consideration of students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia. The International Dyslexia Association found the structured literacy approach may impact learners, especially those with dyslexia (2021). Unfortunately, little research existed on Spanish-speaking children at risk for reading disabilities (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020). While schools often told families of students with dyslexia that it was too difficult to learn two languages, it was found that "exposure to two languages does not increase the risk for disability" and that "children with language difficulties are capable of learning two languages" (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020 p. 26). However, because bilingual programs emphasized

the impact of bilingual education on English first and Spanish second, most formal assessments and screenings showed a “partial picture of the knowledge that bilingual children possess” (Arteagoitia et al., 2010, p. 541). Therefore, in order to effectively determine a student’s risk of dyslexia in a Spanish Immersion program educators must come to understand and recognize signs of early dyslexia in students, identify and support bilingual students with dyslexia, and effectively implement best practices.

Understanding and Recognizing Dyslexia

In order to successfully meet the needs of students with dyslexia, educators must be equipped with the ability to understand and recognize signs of dyslexia in students. Sadly, dyslexia is not typically diagnosed until second grade or above, when a child has failed to meet grade-level expectations (Ozernov-Palchick & Gaab, 2016). Because interventions are usually most effective if they happen in kindergarten or first grade, this continued failure into upper-grade levels can have damaging effects on a child’s self-esteem (Ozernov-Palchick & Gaab, 2016). Therefore, there is an urgency to identify students with dyslexia as soon as possible.

Dyslexia is a disability that originates with language processing weaknesses (Moats, 2019). While there are many varying definitions of dyslexia that describe common behaviors of students with dyslexia, one definition from the Danish Diagnostic Test defined dyslexia in the cognitive sense and describes it as, “the difficulty connecting letters and letter sequences to their normal sounds” (Ottosen et al., 2021, p. 148). Ottosen et al. went on to explain that dyslexia is characterized by difficulty in learning to use the fundamental phonemic principle and leads to reading words slowly and inaccurately. Therefore, students with dyslexia often have significant problems with the ability to

manipulate and identify specific sounds in language and also with other phonological awareness skills in general (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). According to Eden, reading disabilities are often multifaceted, and therefore diagnosing them is complex (2016). However, there are certain behaviors that educators can look for when attempting to understand reading difficulties in students. These include difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition, poor spelling and poor decoding abilities (Ottosen et al., 2021).

Because students with dyslexia struggle to identify and manipulate individual sounds of language and to decode written text, structured literacy instruction that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness and phonics skills in an organized fashion is most effective for students with dyslexia (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017). Additionally, teachers should incorporate vocabulary into their phonics programs in order to support gaps due to a lack of exposure to the target language (Spear-Swerling, Louise, 2017).

Identifying and Supporting Bilingual Students with Dyslexia

While identifying dyslexia in students is undoubtedly complex and difficult in any circumstance, it is particularly challenging to identify bilingual learners with reading difficulties. One of the main challenges is that such little research exists on the subject (Clinton et al., 2013). Consequently, it is difficult to define or measure how bilingual students may be struggling. Often when students are assessed for dyslexia in English, they are measured against the benchmarks of their English-speaking peers which allows educators to see to what degree they are behind the state learning Standards for English (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020). There are fewer studies, however, comparing Spanish-speaking students with low reading performance to their Spanish-speaking peers. This makes it difficult to target how much or with what a Spanish-learning student is

struggling with (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020). According to Wackerle-Hollman et al., this can cause misinformation among teachers and professionals who work with children with disabilities. If teachers lack the understanding or the tools to identify at-risk bilingual students, the results could be detrimental and put them at a disadvantage for the rest of their academic careers.

Additionally, dyslexia and learning disabilities for students learning Spanish do not always present the same way as they do for students learning English. In fact, many of the assessments that are crucial in identifying dyslexia in students learning to read in English are not as reflective in Spanish (Clinton et al., 2013). Because dyslexia hinders one's ability to process language, the response for educators is explicit instruction of the patterns, syllables, sounds, conventions of writing, and all other aspects of a language's orthography (Moats, 2019). It is important that explicit instruction must correlate with the orthography of the language being taught. For example, because of English's complex orthography with multiple sounds attached to one letter symbol, students with dyslexia may be identified by their struggle to decode print and make sound-symbol connections (Moats, 2019). Because Spanish has a consistent orthography, students can generally decode words more quickly and easily than in English (Clinton et al., 2013). Therefore, reading difficulties like dyslexia in Spanish are not characterized by accuracy (decoding words) but rather by fluency (Clinton et al., 2013). Researchers must use such cross-linguistic studies to identify which components of reading instruction are universal and which are relevant only to certain orthographies (Clinton et al., 2013).

One study by Clinton, Christo, and Shriberg (2013) studied different assessment methods for students learning to read in Spanish and used several different assessments to

determine which would best identify struggling readers. They administered various tasks in rapid automatized naming (RAN), the ability to quickly recognize phonological awareness. They hypothesized that (RAN) may actually be a more reliable predictor of language disabilities in Spanish than other phonemic awareness (PA) tasks that are so crucial in English. What they found has implications for educators supporting early Spanish learners. Instead of one assessment or task being the strongest indicator of student success, they all had similar success rates, meaning that a variety of tasks is needed to identify at-risk readers in Spanish.

While phonological awareness may often be the most common indicator of reading difficulties in English, the same is not true in Spanish. As Clinton, Christo, and Shriberg put it, “a combination of measures taken together-PA, orthographic coding, and rapid naming-provide better indications of normative versus disabled reading in young readers” (2013, p. 44). Effective Spanish Immersion programs for early literacy should include multiple assessments to best reach all learners.

Another aspect to consider when effectively identifying students with dyslexia in Spanish is the cross-linguistic transfer. Because there is such a strong relationship between L1 skills and L2, bilingual educators should acknowledge both Spanish and English when screening for reading disabilities in both languages (Arteagoitia et al., 2010). One study by Wackele-Hollman et al. found the importance of screening at-risk bilingual learners in both Spanish and English (2020). In this study, researchers developed targeted interventions for at-risk Spanish language learners. Students were assessed and instructed in beginning sound recognition in both English *and* Spanish. Researchers analyzed the rate of growth for students and found that they made significant

improvements. Their findings point to the fact that phonological awareness and alphabetic skills need to be measured in both English and Spanish to allow for a better understanding of bilingual children's (particularly those at-risk) growth and to capture their performance across both languages. Assessments in both languages are also important because they help educators identify where the area of struggle actually may be. Effective assessment and instruction in both English and Spanish are essential to potentially close the achievement gap and ensure success for early literacy skills in English and Spanish.

When bilingual students with dyslexia are identified, studies have uncovered specific elements that intervention programs should include. One particular study sought to study this matter further by asking, "How do policymakers and practitioners advance the literacy skills of struggling Spanish-language learners?" (Borman, et al., 2019, p. 2). In an attempt to answer this question, researchers piloted an approach called *Descubriendo La Lectura* (DLL) which is an intensive literacy program that uses one-to-one intervention to target struggling first-grade Spanish language learners (Borman et al., 2019). This program is essentially one-to-one tutoring for students where teachers follow an extremely structured and prescribed set of activities that emphasize phonics instruction (Borman, et al., 2019). Students who received this intervention made significant growth and in some cases even exceeded an entire year's worth of first-grade achievement growth (Borman, et al., 2019).

Some of the key causes of student success were based on explicit, attentive progress monitoring and early intervention. The authors of this study noted several important factors that a successful reading intervention like DLL must include. First,

intervention programs must rely upon the cross-linguistic transfer of Spanish and English because strong literacy skills in one language can significantly boost academic achievement in another (Borman, et al., 2019). In some cases, bilingual students even outperformed their English-only counterparts, therefore, a strong foundation and understanding of the Spanish language are key to success (Borman, et al., 2019). Another important aspect of intervention programs is early intervention. Students who do not receive timely reading interventions at a young age are at risk for enduring challenges throughout their academic careers (Borman, et al., 2019). Therefore, intervention programs for struggling readers in Spanish start as early as possible in order to ensure student success. Lastly, in order for educators to best implement programs and instructional methods to support bilingual students with dyslexia, teachers must be equipped with the tools they need to support students.

Effective implementation of best practices

Behind an effective Spanish immersion program are well-trained and competent teachers committed to best practices. Unfortunately, according to Gunderson and Siegel (as cited by Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2000), “many bilingual school systems are not well-equipped to meet the learning needs of Spanish-speaking children in the area of reading instruction” (p. 24). Li, Steele, Slater, Bacon, and Miller (2016) cautioned that while there were many benefits of dual language programs, students did not have optimal success unless the program was well-implemented. Proper implementation first required adherence, “the degree to which program components were delivered as prescribed” and secondly depended on the quality of delivery, how the “implementer delivers the program using the techniques, processes, or methods prescribed” (Li, Steele et al., 2016 p. 33).

Research suggests that bilingual educators must acquire the necessary skills and evidence-based strategies to ensure student success (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020). Developing a strong understanding of the Spanish linguistic system and increasing their own language skills prepared dual language teachers to teach language systematically and effectively (Correa, 2011). In order to foster excellence among bilingual educators, districts should provide intensive professional development that includes coaching in best practices (Borman, et al., 2019). Without such training, even the best interventions could fail in their effectiveness and thus hinder student achievement (Borman, et al., 2019).

Conclusion

As evidenced in this research, immersion programs that are explicit and attentive to the linguistic elements of Spanish and the cross-linguistic transfer are proactive in identifying students with dyslexia and are well-positioned to help students in the Spanish Immersion thrive as readers. Spanish immersion is essential not only in the sense that it teaches students to read and write but also because “communication and connection are the basis of who we are and how we live together and interact with the world” (International Literacy Association, 202, n. p.). Such communication and connection lead to opportunities to break barriers between cultures and therefore lead to change.

Educators long to impact the lives of our students and instill them with such joy.

Offering students an effective literacy education provides them with the tools they need to unlock doors for their future. Literacy skills give students a way to express themselves, advance in society, and connect with their communities. Not only will they themselves be transformed, but they will transform the world around them. Therefore, it

is even more essential to develop a literacy program that gives students the proper set of skills they need to be truly literate.

A successful literacy program must also rely upon theories and best practices of instructional design. The next chapter provides an overview of evidence-based elements for language learning and curriculum development that will lead to the effective implementation of an early literacy program for Spanish Immersion.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Overview

Introduction

According to Wackele-Hollman et al. (2020), “When the academic environment does not adequately foster early literacy skills in Spanish and English, bilingual children can fall behind their monolingual peers in reading. As a result, these limited early literacy skills contribute to a deficit that is not easily resolved” (p. 24). Insufficient instruction of early literacy skills will lead to insufficient knowledge and later achievement for primary students. It is essential that educators do not miss the opportunity to ensure student success by effectively teaching phonics and phonological awareness to young Spanish immersion students. This capstone seeks to address the deficit mentioned above by examining the question, *How does systematic literacy instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics in Spanish Immersion impact student mastery of early literacy skills in first grade?* Chapter One called attention to this problem, and Chapter Two provided research-based evidence for the necessity to take action. This chapter will provide an overview of the project including its description, timeline, curriculum framework, and assessment.

Project Description

The purpose of this project is to provide first-grade students in a Spanish immersion program with a solid foundation in early literacy skills by creating a systematic phonemic awareness and phonics curriculum. It is intended to be used for whole-group instruction, ensuring that each child has access to quality literacy instruction. This curriculum provides a trajectory for teachers to follow to ensure that

students in a Spanish Immersion program receive direct, explicit instruction in early literacy skills. In many Spanish Immersion language arts programs, teachers are required to teach curriculums that spend insufficient time on phonics instruction or are not presented explicitly. This curriculum intends to remedy that problem by providing teachers with lessons that can be used in addition to the district curriculum. As a structured literacy program, the curriculum has a very specific sequence. Its trajectory is based upon the Spanish language, rather than the English progression of literacy skills.

Students begin with letter sounds and names, vowel sounds and names and from there they will begin reading syllables. Once students read open syllables, they move into more complex sound patterns such as blends and diphthongs, plurals, and suffixes. While most structured literacy programs eventually progress into morphology, syntax, and semantics, this curriculum will focus on phonological awareness and phonics, as it is intended for first grade.

The program is broken into week-long units with each unit focusing on target phonics and phonemic awareness skills. It is unique because it will combine multiple resources to create a scope and sequence for teachers that is straightforward and applicable and requires little time or outside preparation. Within each weekly unit, there are a variety of research-based phonemic awareness and phonics skills to help students master each skill. These activities and skills will be presented in the form of a learning guide that will outline weekly instructional routines, modeling techniques, and other teaching methods to ensure that students receive the explicit instruction they need. It is intended to be repetitive and direct in order to help students master each skill. While the

learning guide will assign certain learning activities to each day of the week, there is flexibility based on a varying classroom schedule and student needs.

As a structured literacy program, the skills are on a continuum from simple to complex. They are meant to be taught in order and build upon one another. Weekly assessments will help teachers know if their students have mastered the weekly skills. This curriculum, named *Fundaciones Fonéticas* (Foundations of Phonics), intentionally has only 19 weeks so that teachers are able to scaffold according to student needs and either move on to more advanced skills or spend longer on mastery of basic skills. As a first-grade program, this curriculum also seeks to provide ideas for classroom activities that are developmentally appropriate and engaging.

Because of the uniqueness of the Spanish Immersion programs where the majority of students are non-native speakers, *Fundaciones Fonéticas* encourages an emphasis on vocabulary by including picture cards that correlate with the spelling lists and throughout other independent center routines. This curriculum is comprehensive in regards to phonological awareness and phonics instruction. While it does provide some resources to teach vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, it is recommended that teachers also use outside resources to teach these skills.

Curriculum Framework

The phonological awareness and phonics skills taught in this curriculum are not intended to be taught in isolation, however, they are anchored to “essential learnings” found in state standards that are based upon the Understanding By Design (UbD) framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). According to this framework, the curriculum is “backward,” meaning it begins with established goals, followed by meaningful

assessments to gauge student needs, and ends with intentional learning activities (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008, p. 22). Learning targets should be addressed within the context of essential learning outcomes that target specific learning objectives (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). Once these outcomes have been established, teachers can then select meaningful assessments that will best measure student needs and later achievement (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). Educators use this information to identify student needs and plan instruction accordingly. This curriculum follows this model and draws upon essential learnings to guide units of instruction. Understanding by Design also outlines several elements to ensure that curriculums are developmentally appropriate and engaging using the acronym “WHEREOTO” which is outlined below.

W-Ensure that students understand WHERE the unit is headed.

H- HOOK students from the beginning and HOLD their attention throughout.

E-EQUIP students with the necessary experiences, tools, knowledge, and know-how to meet performance goals.

R- Provide students with opportunities to RETHINK, REFLECT, and REVISE their work.

E- Build-in opportunities for students to EVALUATE progress and self-assess.

T-be TAILORED to reflect individual talents and students

O-Be ORGANIZED to optimize deep understanding (pp. 197-198).

This curriculum draws upon these elements to ensure that students have meaningful and rich learning experiences.

State Standards

Minnesota State Standards

Central to the Understanding by Design framework are the academic standards (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). The essential learnings for this curriculum are aligned with the following Minnesota state standards for phonemic awareness and phonics in kindergarten and first grade (see Appendix A).

Puerto Rico Literacy Standards

Because of the nature of a Spanish Immersion program, this curriculum also relies heavily upon Kindergarten and First Grade Spanish standards in Puerto Rico. These academic standards are pertinent to the linguistic elements of Spanish and therefore provide a rich foundation for early literacy development (see Appendix B).

Setting and participants

This curriculum is intended for a one-way Spanish Immersion Program, meaning that the majority of students are non-native Spanish speakers. While it is not specific to one school, the setting for its initial implementation is Clear Springs Elementary School, a school with 863 students located in Minnetonka, Minnesota on the border of several other suburbs. While Minnetonka is a large, suburban district with 6 elementary schools, Clear Springs draws the most diverse learners. Even so, Clear Springs has a majority of 84% white students. This school has two tracks, including an English program and a Spanish Immersion program. Parents can choose which track is the best fit for their child upon enrolling, which generally means parent participation is high, and they are committed to student achievement.

The student participants of this curriculum are early elementary students in first-grade (generally 6-7 years old) or older depending on student needs. Structured literacy instruction is best for all students. Therefore, this curriculum will benefit all students in a general education classroom. While large group instruction can be an effective and necessary method of delivering instruction, this curriculum gives educators the option to teach it in a small group setting as well. This ensures that each student receives the support they need for their area of growth. Additionally, because there are very few resources for students in Spanish immersion programs to receive dyslexia services *in Spanish*, this program could be used as an intervention for students with dyslexia or other learning challenges. The framework of this curriculum will include guides on how to tailor the program to fit students' needs.

This curriculum is not only meant to meet the needs of students but it is also designed to help teachers feel equipped and prepared to provide students with best practices in a way that is understandable and applicable. With the current demands of being an educator, teachers need a program that is relatively easy to implement and clearly presented. This project seeks to provide both of those aspects to empower educators to provide the best instruction possible for their students.

Timeline and Assessment

As mentioned above, this curriculum provides 20 units that are meant to be used in the course of a 35-week school year. There is flexibility for teachers to use the unit in a way that best suits students, as well as several weeks built in for assessments. Each unit focuses on one skill and provides engaging lesson plans and content based on state standards. The curriculum begins with meaningful assessments that target specific skills

from simple to complex in order to determine where teachers need to begin instruction. For example, students are assessed in the following areas: letter recognition, letter sounds, words per minute, high-frequency words, decodable words, and a diagnostic assessment called “iStation” which measures various aspects of reading in Spanish. Formative assessments will be given throughout each unit in the form of phonological awareness evaluations, weekly spelling tests, fluency checks, student work samples, and other teacher observations. Semester (winter and spring) assessments will ensure that students have mastered the cumulative skills in each semester. Resources for this curriculum will be linked electronically throughout each unit and include student activities, intervention materials, and instructional materials for teachers. All items can be downloaded electronically.

Summary

This curriculum is designed for educators in a Spanish Immersion program. It is a structured literacy program, emphasizing phonological awareness and phonics in Spanish. Chapter One outlined the importance of this curriculum due to the current gaps in research and early literacy structured literacy in Spanish. Chapter Two explored current research supporting the importance of a systematic program for primary learners in a bilingual program. While this curriculum offers a solution to the current gap in immersion education, there is still more to explore. These recommendations will be outlined in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

Throughout my career as a first-grade Spanish Immersion teacher, I have often felt frustrated by a lack of a systematic, explicit curriculum. While it seems that English early literacy programs develop and change based on best practices of literacy, the Spanish immersion curriculum has remained stagnant. As a result of this, I have witnessed students with learning difficulties fall behind, parents of such students grow frustrated and anxious about their child's struggle, and teachers express feeling ill-equipped to meet the needs of these students. This problem led me to ask the question, *How does systematic literacy instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics in Spanish Immersion impact student mastery of early literacy skills in first grade?*

The focus of this project was to analyze best practices of early literacy instruction and to apply best practices of reading to a Spanish immersion setting. Chapter One outlined my personal context and rationale for pursuing this topic. Chapter Two provided a detailed review of the literature that highlighted key research supporting the importance of structured literacy in an immersion setting. In Chapter Three, I outlined the project description and discussed the components of its implementation. Chapter Four begins with a reflection on lessons learned about effective early literacy instruction in Spanish immersion, followed by a review of the important literature that shaped this project. I will then offer recommendations, considerations for future study, and limitations of this project. Chapter Four ends with a call to action by expounding on the benefits of this study and explaining how to effectively communicate the results to future educators.

Critical Reflection

When I began this project, I already had a general knowledge of the subject due to my years of experience in Spanish immersion and my personal study. However, the process of developing this project has not only deepened my understanding of early literacy instruction in Spanish but also equipped me with the tools I need to effectively educate young learners. Through the critical analysis of the current literature, research on best practices, and existing early literacy curriculums, several new understandings about balanced literacy, phonological awareness in Spanish, and teacher training emerged.

Balanced Literacy

Though current research for early literacy skills makes it clear that structured literacy is an effective approach for student achievement in early literacy skills, there are other methods and curriculums that are also effective for students. My project was motivated by a desire to ensure student success with explicit phonological awareness and phonics instruction. Due to the sequential nature of structured literacy, curriculums that follow this model are more likely to identify students with learning challenges. The concrete nature of structured literacy is beneficial for all students, but especially for those with dyslexia and other learning challenges (*International Dyslexia Association, 2021*). However, since there are many types of learners in a general education classroom with a variety of needs, it is possible that other methods of instruction could be more beneficial. While it is crucial to support students with learning difficulties in order to ensure their success, students who are reading at or above grade level may not need as much explicit instruction. This led me to the conclusion that meaningful assessment that precedes instruction is crucial in helping teachers effectively prepare to meet the needs of their

specific students. There are hundreds of methodologies and resources to choose from when developing any literacy curriculum. Therefore, a teacher has the responsibility not only to choose methods based on best practices but also based on the uniqueness of each child in the classroom.

Phonological Awareness in Spanish

Another key understanding gleaned from this project was the role of phonological awareness (PA) in a Spanish immersion classroom. As a first-grade teacher, PA and phonics instruction are central to everything I do in the classroom. Having seen the benefits of direct instruction in these skills for my students, I was compelled to study and develop meaningful ways of teaching PA and phonics in the Spanish immersion setting. This project reiterated the importance of explicit instruction in these skills. However, I also learned how the nature of instruction of early literacy skills in Spanish may look different than it does in English. For example, it is clear that PA is a precursor to student success in English reading, but it is not necessarily as important in Spanish due to the differences in their orthographies (Goldenberg et al., 2014). This finding did not change my desire to explicitly teach PA to young learners, however, it challenged me to critically analyze what kind of PA activities are most effective and how much time to dedicate to it in a Spanish immersion setting.

Teacher education

Finally, the process of this project revealed to me the urgent need for effective teaching training. Years of feeling under-prepared to teach early literacy skills in Spanish immersion drove me to study literacy instruction, language learning, and effective curriculum in depth through the completion of this project. As a result, I feel equipped

with tools to confidently teach what I believe to be an effective methodology from early literacy instruction. However, this is only after hours of study, countless conversations, and weeks of experimentation. Many recent graduates of immersion enter into the profession with a lack of understanding of the Spanish language and best practices in teaching reading. According to Cardenas-Hagen et al. (2007), the most effective bilingual instruction is the result of quality professional development (PD) for teachers, and without such PD, bilingual programs are more likely to fail. This led me to a greater awareness of the acute need for teacher training.

Impact of Literature

The literature that guided the creation of this project plays a significant role in solidifying my beliefs of the need for structured literacy in Spanish, clarifying my understanding of the orthography of Spanish and the impact of the cross-linguistic transfer, and motivating me to further pursue structured literacy in Spanish in order to support students with dyslexia and other learning needs.

Phonics Study

Through my research of PA and phonics instruction in Spanish, I learned as mentioned above that while PA is important for success in reading in English, it may not be as important in Spanish. However, according to Goldenberg et al, Spanish-speaking children in the United States have superior phonics skills to students in Mexico (2014). This implies that the emphasis on PA in the United States in either language leads to benefits for students in both languages, due to the cross-linguistic transfer between Spanish and English (Goldenberg et al., 2014). Furthermore, while there are many different theories for teaching phonics across all languages, Louise Spear-Swerling

suggested that teaching phonics in any form is more effective than not explicitly teaching phonics at all 2017). This solidified my belief that direct, sequential exposure to phonics skills leads to success for all students and should also be emphasized in a Spanish immersion program.

The Cross-linguistic Transfer

While phonics is important for any Spanish immersion student, the literature reviewed for this project clarified my understanding of how the cross-linguistic transfer, referring to the impact that one's first language (L1) has on one's second language (L2), is central to bilingual learning. Research on this important transfer between languages showed that student mastery of early literacy skills in Spanish correlated directly to mastery of early literacy skills in English (Comeau et al., 1999). This powerful connection between L1 and L2 is confirmed by the belief that quality instruction in Spanish early literacy skills in an immersion classroom will positively impact students' performance in early literacy skills in English. This realization confirmed my assumption about the cross-linguistic transfer and motivated me as I developed a curriculum for first graders in a Spanish immersion program.

Supporting Bilingual Students with Dyslexia

Lastly, literature pertaining to bilingual students with dyslexia motivated me to develop a structured literacy program that addresses the specific challenges that such students encounter in reading. Because there is little research on the subject, it is difficult to target or measure how behind a student may be (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2020). Even if students are identified with dyslexia in a bilingual program, teachers often lack the tools to support them. More studies on this topic revealed that learning difficulties in

Spanish-speaking students present differently than they may in English (Clinton et al., 2013). This indicates that screeners for dyslexia in English could be ineffective for students in a Spanish immersion program for children with disabilities. These factors revealed to me the need for educators to pursue answers on how to support bilingual students with dyslexia.

Limitations

The above findings in the literature highlight many positive implications that this research has on the future of early literacy curriculum in Spanish. However, there are also limitations that must also be addressed. As mentioned above, there is still no real solution for addressing the needs of students with dyslexia in Spanish immersion programs. If this problem is not remedied, it could have damaging effects on students with dyslexia in bilingual programs.

Another possible limitation could be the lack of research comparing native Spanish speakers to immersion students who learn Spanish as a second language. This would provide educators with an even clearer picture of what is needed in an immersion curriculum for non-native language learners. Additionally, while this first-grade curriculum will most likely lead to student success in PA, phonics in Spanish, and fluency, it does not emphasize as strongly vocabulary and comprehension. This could cause a potential problem for teachers as they will have to identify other sources to fill this gap. Lastly, this curriculum is written in English. Because many immersion programs have a combination of native and non-native teachers, I chose to use English. However, there may be native Spanish speakers who find the curriculum in Spanish to be more accessible. Ideally, this curriculum would be in both languages to support teachers.

Future implications, projects, and recommendations

The implications of this study point to a need for careful consideration while identifying a curriculum for early literacy in Spanish. While many districts may choose curriculums that are outdated or based upon translations of English curriculum, the findings in this project reveal that the approach is not only ineffective but could present risks for students. Based on these ideas and insight gained throughout this project, there are several recommendations I propose that I believe will positively impact students in Spanish immersion programs.

First, teachers need formal, explicit training in early literacy skills in Spanish. Just like students need systematic and direct instruction, teachers also need such guidance in order to effectively teach students. Second, it is imperative that districts develop dyslexia screeners in Spanish, as well as provide support for teachers in how to best use and implement them. This is a necessary next step in meeting the needs of bilingual students.

Communicating the benefits

The purpose of this project was to help elementary students solidify phonemic awareness and phonics skills in Spanish. In order for this goal to be fully realized, effective communication among educators is needed. There are several ways I have identified to communicate the results of this project to colleagues and peers. First, it is important to clearly explain this curriculum in a concise, applicable way. I have designed the project in a way that is organized and straightforward in order to make it accessible to others. Providing brief videos explaining each section could be a way to do this.

Next, I plan to introduce this curriculum in small groups of teachers in my school and eventually, in other schools as well. Oftentimes, district training and meetings can

present teachers with a myriad of ideas that can overwhelm them instead of equip them. Meeting with grade levels of small groups of teachers increases the chances that teachers will understand and apply the strategies of this project. Lastly, I plan to meet with district administrators in charge of student learning, assessment, and curriculum. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators can sometimes find themselves in opposition to one another, instead of partnering together for student success. By meeting with those in charge of important departments, I hope to build bridges in order to bring about change.

Conclusion

Overall, providing students in Spanish immersion programs with excellent early literacy skills will lead them to succeed not only in Spanish but in English as well. While there are still areas left to be explored around the topic of structured literacy in Spanish, the findings of this project will begin the process of transformation of the curriculum in phonological awareness and phonics and lead students to become proficient readers in both Spanish and English. My hope is that through a solid foundation in early literacy skills provided by this project, students will be equipped to thrive as bilingual learners. Mastering phonological awareness and phonics skills in Spanish will also help students master the conventions of English, therefore, helping them become fully bi-literate. This project seeks to help children find the joy of reading and language learning and to prepare them for the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Minnesota State Standards

0.3.0.2 Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).

- a. Recognize and produce rhyming words.
- b. Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.
- c. Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.
- d. Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words.* (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /r/, or /x/.)
- e. Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.

1.3.0.2 Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).

- a. Distinguish long from short vowel sounds in spoken single-syllable words.
- b. Orally produce single-syllable words by blending sounds (phonemes), including consonant blends.
- c. Isolate and pronounce initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in spoken single-syllable words.
- d. Segment spoken

single-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds (phonemes).

Appendix B

Puerto Rico State Standards

K.LF.CTI.1.d Recognize and name upper- and lowercase letters

K.LF.CTI.1.d Recognize and name upper- and lowercase letters.

K.LF.CTI.1.e Recognize that the written accent (acento ortográfico) is a mark called the tilde and is placed over a vowel indicating where the emphasis of a word pronunciation is.

K.LF.CF.2.a Recognize and pronounce rhythmic words

K.LF.CF.2.b Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.

K.LF.CF.2.c Combine and segment the consonant and vowels sounds (fonemas) in a syllable.

K.LF.CF.2.d Separate and pronounce the initial, medial, and final sounds (fonemas) in monosyllabic words of three-phoneme (consonant vowel-consonant, or CVC words).

This includes words that end with /l/ or /r/ (e.g., sal, sol, mar, por).

K.LF.CF.2.e With teacher's support, substitute individual sounds (fonemas) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words (e.g., mar-par; sal-sol; por-pon).

K.LF.CF.2.f With teacher's support, add a sound or phoneme in monosyllabic words to form new words (e.g., sol-solo; la-ala; col-cola).

K.LF.CF.2.g With teacher's support, combine two syllables to form familiar bisyllabic words (e.g., ma + no = mano; ma + ma = mamá; ma + pa = mapa).

K.LF.CF.2.h Separate and orally count the syllables of a word.

K.LF.FRP.3.a Demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondence by producing the initial sound or many of the most frequent sounds for each consonant.

K.LF.FRP.3.b Associate the sounds (fonemas) with the common spellings (grafemas) for the five vowels.

K.LF.FRP.3.c Read words at a glance (e.g., papá, mamá, casa, mesa, silla).

K.LF.FRP.3.d Distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying the sounds of the letters that differ (e.g., con/son; niño/niña; masa/mesa).

K.LF.FRP.3.e Recognize the two CV syllables that form high-frequency words in everyday language (e.g., ma, ma, pa, pa, casa, si, lla, me, sa, ga, to).

K.LF.FRP.3.f Identify the letters that represent the vowels sounds (Aa, Ee, Ii, Oo, Uu).

K.LF.FRP.3.g Recognize the use of the orthographic accent to distinguish pronunciation between words that are written the same way (e.g., papa-papá, paso-pasó).

K.LF.FRP.3.h Recognize that the written accent (acento ortográfico) is a mark placed on a vowel, indicating the pronunciation of the word according to the syllable that receives the emphasis in the pronunciation.

K.L.NE.2.c Write the letters that correspond to the vowels and consonants sounds (fonemas).

K.L.NE.2.d Spell simple (CVCV) words phonetically, drawing on knowledge of sound-letter relationships.

K.L.NE.2.d Spell simple (CVCV) words phonetically, drawing on knowledge of sound-letter relationships.

K.L.NE.2.e Recognize accents in high-frequency words (e.g., mamá, papá, José).

1.LF.CF.2.a Distinguish the different sounds that make different combinations of direct syllables.

1.LF.CF.2.b Orally pronounce single-syllable words by blending sounds (fonemas) including three consonant blends (e.g., tres, gris, las, mar, sal).

1.LF.CF.2.c Isolate and pronounce vowel sounds and consonants at initial, medial, and final (fonemas) positions in spoken single-syllable words.

1.LF.CF.2.d Segment spoken single-syllable words in its complete sequence of individual sounds (fonemas).

1.LF.CF.2.e Divide CVCV bisyllabic words into the syllables that compose them (e.g., mesa, ca-ma, ca-sa, pe-ro, ga-to).

1.LF.CF.2.f Distinguish and express the sounds of vowels forming diphthongs in a single syllable (e.g., auto, lluvia, agua, aire, ciudad).

1.LF.CF.2.g Recognize that a syllable can consist of single vowel (e.g., a-mo; mí-o; dí-a; vi-ví-a; a-brí-a; o-jo; u-ña; e-so).

1.LF.FRP.3.a Know the graphophonic correlation for the three consonant digraphs: ch, ll, rr (e.g., chile, lluvia, perro).

1.LF.FRP.3.b Distinguish between open vowels (terminadas en vocal) and closed-syllables (terminadas en consonante)

1.LF.FRP.3.c Distinguish between strong vowels (a, e, o) and weak vowels (i, u) that are combined in in a syllable to form a diphthong.

1.LF.FRP.3.d Use knowledge that every syllable must have at least a vowel sound to determine the number of syllables in a written word (e.g., sílabas con una sola vocal, diptongos o triptongos).

1.LF.FRP.3.e Decode two- and three-syllable words following basic patterns when dividing words into syllables.

1.LF.FRP.3.e Decode two- and three-syllable words following basic patterns when dividing words into syllables.

1.LF.FRP.3.f Read words with inflectional endings (e.g., género -o/-a; número -os/-as; aumentativos -ote/-ota y diminutivos -ito)

1.LF.FRP.3.g Recognize and read, at grade-level, irregularly spelled words (e.g., b-v; c-s-z-x; c-k-qu; g-j; y-ll; r-rr; m-n).

1.LF.FRP.3.h Recognize consonant blends in already known words that contain consonant groups (blanco, planta, grande, tronco, traspaso, claro, trabajo, otra, cuatro).

1.LF.FRP.3.i Distinguish between vowels and consonants and recognize that only the vowels have a written accent.

1.LF.FRP.3.j Recognize that the written accent (acento ortográfico) is a mark placed on a vowel indicating the syllable with the greatest emphasis in the word and that it follows the spelling rules.

1.LF.F.4.c Use context to confirm and self-correct word recognition and understanding of words and rereading, as necessary.

1.L.NE.2.d Spell phonetically untaught words, based on knowledge of phonemes and spelling conventions.

1.L.V.4.a Decode and correctly use reading strategies to recognize words.