

The Use of First Language in the Second-Language Classroom: A Support for Second Language Acquisition¹

El Uso de la Lengua Materna en el Salón de la Clase de Inglés: Un Apoyo para la Adquisición de una Segunda Lengua

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Abstract

This action research project was carried out in order to identify the role of first language in the second-language classroom. This study was conducted in a Colombian international school with an English immersion program for kindergarten students attending their first year of school. The purpose of this study was to identify if the use of the mother tongue in the classroom increases comprehension and facilitates the second language acquisition process. Two lesson plans were designed: the first one using only English as the language of instruction, and the second one using both languages, Spanish and English. The results demonstrate that students do benefit from the use of the first language in the classroom, transferring concepts from their mother tongue to the new language.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, language transfer, first language acquisition, language of instruction

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Resumen

Esta investigación acción fue desarrollada con el fin de identificar el rol de la primera lengua en el salón de clase con un programa de inmersión a la segunda lengua. Este estudio se llevó a cabo en un colegio internacional colombiano

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caracterizado por su programa bilingüe de inmersión al inglés. El objetivo de esta investigación era identificar si el uso de la lengua materna en el salón de clase aumenta la comprensión y facilita así el proceso de adquisición de la segunda lengua. Para desarrollar esta investigación, se desarrollaron dos planeadores de clase: el primero usando inglés únicamente durante la instrucción y el desarrollo de la actividad, y el segundo alternando entre español e inglés durante la instrucción y el desarrollo de la actividad. Los resultados demuestran que los estudiantes sí se benefician del uso de la primera lengua puesto que pueden transferir conceptos de su lengua materna al nuevo idioma.

Palabras clave: Adquisición de una segunda lengua, transferencia lingüística, adquisición de lengua materna, lengua de instrucción

Resumo

Esta pesquisa ação foi desenvolvida com a finalidade de identificar o papel da primeira língua na sala de aula, com um programa de imersão à segunda língua. Este estudo foi realizado em um colégio internacional colombiano, caracterizado pelo seu programa bilingue de imersão ao inglês. O objetivo desta pesquisa era identificar se o uso da língua materna na sala de aula aumenta a compreensão e facilita, assim, o processo de aquisição da segunda língua. Para desenvolver esta pesquisa desenvolveram-se dois planejadores de aula: o primeiro, usando inglês somente durante a instrução e o desenvolvimento da atividade; e o segundo, reverendo entre espanhol e inglês durante a instrução e o desenvolvimento da atividade. Os resultados demonstram que os estudantes sim, se beneficiam do uso da primeira língua, já que podem transferir conceitos da sua língua materna ao novo idioma.

Palavras chave: Aquisição de uma segunda língua, transferência lingüística, aquisição de língua materna, língua de instrução

Introduction

As globalization and population movements are increasing, different cultures come into greater contact with each other, resulting in the need for communication between societies (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). Thus, being bilingual has become a vital aspect for becoming a successful professional, making bilingualism the main component in education. In fact, a bilingual person has more opportunities to obtain a better job and to have more achievements than a monolingual person. Therefore, elementary schools, high schools, and universities have to face the need for bilingualism by educating students who are able to work in these multicultural societies. If students receive bilingual education from their first years of school, the level of proficiency in the second language should increase. In fact, the more

students are exposed to a new language, the easier they learn the target language due to brain development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

That is why today, teachers in bilingual schools and language teachers are challenged to teach children to help them reach the level of proficiency required for learning demanding academic content and ensuring complete cognitive development. Cognitive development is understood in this study as the construction of thought processes, including problem-solving, decision-making, reasoning, and language development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

This research was conducted at a private international school in Bogotá. This large urban institution is an example of a bilingual school with an English immersion program where students are exposed to English from their first year of school. From kindergarten to 12th grade, students receive all classes in English, except Spanish and extracurricular activities. During the first years in immersion schools, students face academic content in a language they have never been exposed to before, making the learning process a challenge. In fact, if children use a language which is not well developed during writing, speaking, reading or listening activities, the cognitive system will not function at its best (Cummins, 2000). According to the curriculum for kindergarten at this school, the number of hours in English (second language) and Spanish (first language) are not equivalent. As students are learning a second language, most of the classes are in English. Even though the school has changed the curriculum during the past two years, due to the importance of developing the mother tongue from the first year at school, the amount of hours in Spanish and English are not the same. In fact, kindergarten students (the first year of school) only receive three hours of Spanish per week and the rest of their classes in English.

The subjects in this study were kindergarten students between four and six years old. They were all Colombians and most of them received a little exposure to English at their nursery school in order to prepare them for elementary school. Moreover, it is mandatory that at least one of the parents speaks English in order to apply to this school. However, students only know a few words in English, as for example to count up to five or to name the colors. During the first year of school, students are supposed to learn the alphabet, both in English and Spanish. The common underlying proficiency model proposed by Cummins suggests that the languages in a bilingual or multilingual person do not work independently; they work through the same processing system (Cummins, 2000). In fact, a student who knows how to multiply in

Spanish does not need to be taught how to do it in English because the processing system is the same. However, if the student does not have a well-developed language of instruction, he will not perform effectively, and therefore due to the lack of understanding, cognitive development will not be as good as it could be.

Furthermore, as we are talking about kindergarten students starting their literacy process, it is important to take into account the stages of language development. In fact, during the first stages of language acquisition it is important to constantly refer to the mother tongue in order to make connections (Cummins, 2001). Previous knowledge in kindergarten students is a starting point for acquiring a new language, leading to language transfer (Baker, 2001). Language transfer is understood as the use of the first language during the second language acquisition, which represents the first stage of language acquisition (Krashen, 2003).

Moreover, during the first year of school it is vital that the first language is developed in students. In fact, first language development is required in order to have good strategies to transfer to the new language. If students do not have good strategies in their mother tongue, they will not have good strategies to transfer to the new language, and therefore the cognitive development will be reduced (Friedlander, 1997). Due to the importance of first language development, the school in this study has now increased the number of Spanish hours in kindergarten.

In the second language acquisition process, it may be useful for teachers to teach the new language using the mother tongue as support in order to develop not only the target language but also the cognitive development required to be academically and professionally successful. It is a very important aspect in education because second language teachers in bilingual schools need to ensure that their students acquire a level of proficiency that will allow them to deal with academic content during the school year. It has been found that the use of first language in the second-language classroom helps students make connections with their existing knowledge of the mother tongue, facilitating the process of understanding. Research suggests that the first language should not be banned in the second-language classroom but that neither should its use be constantly encouraged, otherwise the mother tongue may replace the target language rather than support it. The present study seeks to address the following question: *Does the use of the first language as support in a second-language classroom increase understanding in kindergarten students during their first year of school?*

Literature Review

As bilingualism is nowadays a key factor in society and in education, it is important for schools to understand the process by which a second language should be taught. Bilingualism in schools has become one of the most important aspects of education; in fact, schools not only look for the cognitive and social development of their students but also for developing bilingual professionals. There are many theories about bilingualism; some are opposed and some complement each other. This paper focuses on bilingual theories that suggest how a second language should be taught. First, bilingualism is described, then bilingual theories are contrasted, and finally, language acquisition theories are described and integrated with bilingualism.

Bilingualism and Bilingual Theories

Bilingualism is defined as the alternate use of two languages by the same individual when the process is not accompanied by loss of the native language (Bloomfield, 1935; Mackey, as cited in Beardsmore, 1986). A bilingual person is then someone who can speak, read, listen and write in two languages at different levels of proficiency. Second language acquisition is a process that has different stages that teachers should be familiar with in order to ensure students' learning. Since students in bilingual schools may have little or no exposure to the second language outside the classroom, it is important for teachers to understand the process by which a second language (L2) should be taught, using the first language (L1) as support in order to ensure understanding and learning (Dixon et al., 2012).

There are many theories about bilingualism and, therefore, different opinions. On the one hand, the Balance Theory suggests that the two languages exist in balance. In fact, the theory is better explained by the analogy of two balloons inside the head, each one representing a language. A monolingual person has only one filled balloon while a bilingual person has two less-filled or half-filled balloons. It is called the Balance Theory because it states that as one language balloon increases, the other decreases (Baker, 2001). Cummins refers to this theory as the Separate Underlying Proficiency model of bilingualism (Cummins, 2000). In fact, this model describes the two languages as operating independently, without transferring from one language to the other. However, when there is interference during the process of acquiring a second language, it is considered an indicator of L2 acquisition. Interference is the use of the first language in the process of second language acquisition, which represents the first stage of the language

acquisition, known as the silent period (Krashen, 2003).

On the other hand, the iceberg analogy promoted by Cummins opposes the Balance Theory. The iceberg analogy represents the Common Underlying Proficiency model of bilingualism, where the first and the second language are represented by two icebergs separated above the surface of the water but fused underneath. That means that the two languages are visually different but operate through the same processing system (Cummins, 2000). Furthermore, since the two languages operate through the same system, previous knowledge is a starting point for acquiring a new language in all learning situations, and therefore language transfer will occur. In fact, transfer occurs consciously when there is a gap in the learner's second language knowledge, and unconsciously either because the correct form is not known or because it has not been completely automatized (Benson, 2002).

Moreover, first language development has a direct impact on the writing process in English as a second language. Research has shown that writers will transfer their writing abilities and strategies, whether good or deficient, from their first language to the second (Friedlander, 1997). Hence, if students do not have effective writing strategies in their mother tongue, they will not have efficient strategies to transfer to the new language (Eldesky, in Friedlander, 1997). That is because the process used for specific skills is the same no matter what language is used. For example, a student who learned how to multiply in Spanish does not need to be taught how to do it in English because the thinking process is the same (Baker, 2001).

In addition, writing, speaking, reading or listening in the first or the second language helps the entire cognitive system to develop. However, if children use a language that is not well developed, the cognitive system will not function effectively. That is why it is important to constantly refer to the first language to ensure students' complete cognitive development (Baker, 2001).

Stages of Language Development

It is important for teachers to understand and take into account the second language acquisition stages. The first stage, called Pre-Production, is a silent period where language learners may have up to 500 words in their receptive vocabulary, but they are not yet speaking. Teachers might use visual aids and constant repetition in order to help the students understand. During this first stage, it is very important

for teachers to use the environment – such as visual aids – and body language to help students understand. In fact, if students only have limited receptive language, teachers need to ensure their understanding based on the use of the environment. Students acquire second language by repetition, thus it is vital for teachers to use constant repetition in order for students to understand it and, therefore, use it. When students are ready they move on to the next stage, called Early Production Stage, where they are expected to produce basic sentences using simple vocabulary. And finally, in the final stages (Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency and Advanced Fluency) they are able to communicate using more complex vocabulary, and they are able to understand more complex conversations, becoming fluent (Krashen, 2003).

There is substantial research that addresses the role of the first language in second language learning and instruction. Some studies point to the positive effect of the first language on the learning environment. Scheweers (1999) found that first language use in the classroom creates a comfortable environment, and therefore an environment that enhances learning. In fact, in a study where teachers and students were interviewed about the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, most of the teachers reported the use of Spanish (mother tongue) in the classroom to build relationships with students. Students reported that they would like Spanish to be used to explain difficult concepts, which would help them feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom. Furthermore, Burchinal, Fiel, López, Howees & Pianta (2012) demonstrated the importance of the use of the first language in the second language classroom. The study indicates that teachers who speak Spanish in the classroom may create a more culturally sensitive environment that enhances learning and communication for children.

Consequently, the use of the first language is more useful at certain stages of development. The mother tongue is most useful at beginning and low levels, where L1 can be used to introduce the major differences between L1 and L2. As students acquire more English, the use of the first language may be reduced, and the use of visual aids and body language as well. It is important that beginning learners of English are exposed to situations that require the use of the second language to develop their acquisition. However, some argue that teachers should avoid situations where students are forced to operate entirely in English (Friedlander, 1997). In fact, Vygotsky's theory stipulates that the development and learning of a child depends on the presence of mediating agents in the child's interaction with the environment. This interaction develops the zone of proximal development, which is the difference between what

a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. In the language learning context, Vygotsky suggests that interaction with pairs in the first language increases the zone of proximal development (Kozulin, 2003). Studies have demonstrated that the use of the first language is seen as a natural psychological process in language development (Stern, as cited in Ghorbani, 2011). In fact, Ghorbani's (2011) findings are related to Vygotsky's theory because he suggested that during group activities, the first language is used to extend learners' zone of proximal development.

Language Transfer from L1 to L2

Furthermore, teachers need to take into account students' levels of development in their first language in order to ensure not only the second language acquisition, but also full cognitive development. Research has shown that in order to read and write fluently, a child needs to understand the spoken language and understand how this spoken language is represented in written form through the use of symbols (Juel & Prefetti, as cited in Durgunoglu & Öney, 2000). In fact, the literacy development process, previous knowledge and personal background are used as tools to help students move from the first stage of literacy to the next one. If children already understand the symbolic role of characters or are familiar with letters, they can easily start reading and writing. However, since we are talking about students that have never been exposed to the second language before, they have no previous knowledge or background, so the literacy development in the new language becomes more complicated. It is through students' experiences that children become familiar with characteristics of their language and develop an understanding of the functions of literacy (Juel & Prefetti, as cited in Durgunoglu & Öney, 2000). Therefore, it is in the classroom that the second language background is built, using the first language as a bridge between previous and new knowledge.

The second language will always activate first language associations, no matter what level of proficiency the person has (Spivey & Marian, as cited in Horst, White & Bell, 2010). Even if teachers avoid and forbid the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, the connection and links between both languages will always exist in the learners' minds (Cohen, as cited in Horst et. al, 2010). In the early stages of second language acquisition, learners process the new language, making connections with their mother tongue. The links between both languages can make learning contexts even richer (Horst et al. 2010).

Although certain language skills can be positively transferred and may assist in the development of corresponding skills in another language, the first language must be sufficiently developed before exposure to the new language (Cummins, as cited in Gebauer, Zaunbauer & Möller, 2012). Studies indicate that students who begin school in kindergarten with higher levels of their first language acquire the new language more easily. The study suggests a relationship between first language skills and second language acquisition. In fact, students who had stronger reading skills in Spanish (first language) performed better reading in English at the end of the year than the students who had lower reading skills in their mother tongue at the beginning of the year (Cárdenas-Hagán & Carlson, 2007).

Methodology

Research Design

This study emerged at an international school with an English immersion program where students are exposed to English even more than they are exposed to their mother tongue. Due to this difference in the language development, this study looks to demonstrate the importance of developing both the native language and the second language simultaneously in this specific context. Therefore, the study followed an action research approach based on a specific situation that occurs actually at the school. Moreover, qualitative data collection techniques were used.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at an international bilingual school in Bogotá. This is a large urban institution with an English immersion program through which students are exposed to English starting in their first year of school. The participants in this study were kindergarten students between four and five years old attending their first year of school. Since the participants were all Colombian, they had little or no exposure to English beforehand.

Data Collection Instruments

To address this study, qualitative data collection techniques were used. As the research question of the study was to determine if the use of first language as a support in a second language classroom increases understanding among kindergarten students during their first year of school, two lesson plans were designed, one using only English as

the language of instruction, and the other one using both Spanish and English. At the end of the reading activity, students were asked to make a written production to evaluate their understanding. Both lesson plans were observed through non-participant observation. The teacher and students were observed during the development of the activities, and the observations were recorded in a chart.

During the lesson plan an observation chart was used, reporting students' involvement in the activity by taking note of the number of interruptions during reading aloud, the level of participation of the students in answering and asking questions, and their engagement with the activity. Additionally, the kindergarten teachers were interviewed about the impact of the development of the first language on the second language acquisition process. Teachers answered the following questions: *What's the impact of developing the first language in kindergarten students on a second language acquisition process? Does increasing the amount of Spanish hours per week show any progress among your students' level of proficiency?*

Data Analysis and Interpretation

To gather all the information, triangulation was used, where the non-participant observations during the lesson plan and the written production of the students were contrasted. First of all, during the two lessons, students' engagement in the activity was evaluated through their participation and the number of interruptions during the activities. We understand "participation" to refer to the interaction between students and teachers, such as following the story and asking and answering questions. "Interruptions" are understood in this study as a behavior that disrupts the reading activity, such as playing with classmates or talking with others about a topic not related to the story. Students' participation was contrasted with the non-participant observations. In fact, the teacher was observed during the read aloud activity, taking into account the strategies that she used in both activities; reading strategies as well as the classroom management techniques that she used.

On the other hand, students' written production was contrasted with the non-participant observations during the read aloud activities. Moreover, the teachers' interviews were also contrasted with the balance of the read aloud activities and the students' written production.

Results

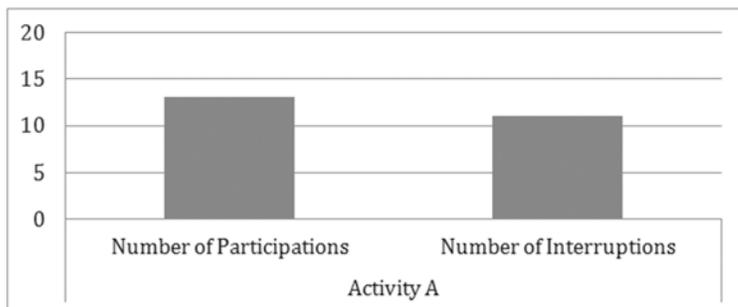
From analysis of the interviews, observations of the activities during the lesson plan, and the students' written production, three main themes emerged.

The Use of First Language in the Second Language Classroom

First of all, students were more engaged during the activity that used code switching. Their level of participation was higher, which made room for teachers to connect with other activities and deepen understanding. When students are engaged, the lesson runs in a smoother and positive way, and therefore the teacher and students can make the most of every activity, thus enriching learning.

The first lesson observed was a read-aloud activity where the teacher read *Who will be my mother?* using only English during both instruction and reading time. This will be called Activity A. The second lesson observed was a read-aloud of *A Button for Corduroy*, but this time the teacher used code switching between English and Spanish (Activity B).

Figure 1 illustrates data collected from Activity A. As it is clear on the graph, students participated 13 times during this read-aloud activity, but they also interrupted almost as many times as they participated (11 times). However, Figure 2 illustrates students' behavior during Activity B. It is evident through the chart that during this activity, students participated more than they interrupted (20 and 5 times respectively).



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Figure 1. Students' participation and interruptions during Activity A

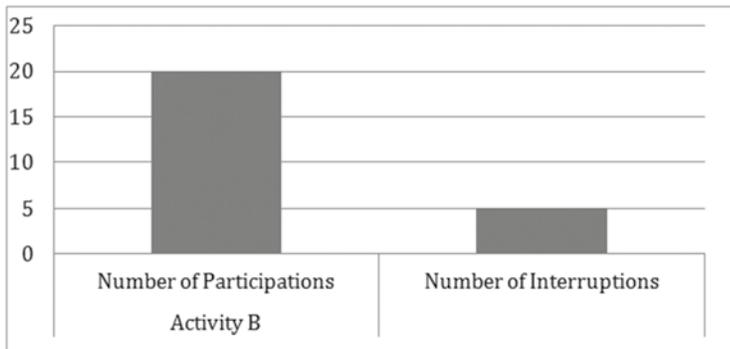


Figure 2. Students' participation and interruptions during Activity B

Comparing the results of both activities, it is evident through the graphs that students were more engaged in the second activity. In fact, not only was the number of interruptions lower, but the amount of participation was also higher than in the first activity. The use of the first language in the activity was related to students' behavior during class time.

These results might illustrate that students were more engaged during the reading-aloud activity that included both languages than the reading that used only English. According to Krashen's theory of the stages of second language acquisition, during the Pre-production stage language learners are not yet speaking and only have up to 500 words in their receptive vocabulary (Krashen, 2003). In kindergarten, as it is the students' first year of immersion in English, they are in the Pre-production stage. As they only have a limited receptive vocabulary, their attention and understanding might be lower when the teacher uses only English during the activity.

However, as we are talking about children, it is important to take into account other factors such as the interest in the book in every activity; this might have influenced students' participation and motivation. Even if students were more engaged during the activity that used both languages, that does not necessarily mean that their understanding was higher.

Students' Understanding of the Story

Even though the lesson using English as the language of instruction had a lower level of participation, and a higher level of

interruptions, students were able to perform the task correctly. In fact, in both activities students were able to retell their favorite part of the story through a drawing. A rubric was designed to evaluate their drawings, taking into account students' own descriptions of the image and the correspondence of their description to the drawing. There were no main differences found between Activity A and Activity B. In fact, all students were able to draw their favorite part of the story using elements from the book, such as characters or settings. Even though students were more engaged during Activity A, in both activities students were able to describe their favorite part of the story, describing a specific part of the story recreating the characters, the setting and the situation. Therefore, the level of participation and the number of interruptions did not interfere with students' understanding.

There were no main differences found between the two exercises, and therefore the language of instruction was not a key factor in determining understanding during reading activities. In fact, even though students were more distracted during the English only activity, their performance during the written production was similar to their performance during Activity B. Thus, it is important to add that the activities were conducted by the same teacher, and therefore using the same reading strategies. However, due to the number of interruptions during the English activity, the lesson was more difficult to accomplish. In fact, the pace of the class was not the same because the teacher needed to interrupt the reading in order to control the group of students. Nevertheless, the importance of using visual and kinesthetic aids when working with children in a second language classroom is evident, because it is the key factor in ensuring understanding.

In the light of Krashen's theory, in this first stage of second language acquisition it is very important to use repetition, as well as visual and kinesthetic aids to help students understand. In the two activities developed in this study, the same teacher taught both lessons, using the same visual aids in both activities. That might explain why students' understanding was similar in both activities. Nevertheless, even if they were able to retell the story, the lesson in English was more interrupted, students' participation was lower, and therefore the outcome of the lesson was not what it could have been.

Language Transfer between Spanish and English

Even if there were no differences in the written exercise between the two lessons, there are some differences evident throughout the school year. Kindergarten teachers were interviewed about the impact of the

development of the first language on the second language acquisition process. Teachers agreed on the importance of developing the first language in a second language classroom; for example, when students are learning prepositions of place it seems to be easier for them to learn the concepts of up and down, below and beside in Spanish and then use them in English. In fact, teachers believe that increasing Spanish hours during the first year of school is a key factor in the second language acquisition process. It is evident for kindergarten English teachers that increasing the amount of Spanish is beneficial for acquiring a new language. Spanish and English teachers work in parallel ways, so students can understand difficult concepts first in their mother tongue, which is easier, and then transfer their knowledge to English, making learning easier and richer. Teaching students who are able to transfer knowledge from their mother tongue to the second language enriches learning.

That means that in all learning situations, previous knowledge, in this case first language experience, is a starting point for acquiring the new language (Cummins, 2000). It would be interesting to go further with this study, applying a code-switching lesson in order to teach some difficult concepts.

Conclusions

This study focused on the importance that the first language has during the second language acquisition process. Nowadays, bilingualism is a key factor in becoming a successful professional, and thus, bilingualism has become the main component in education. Many theories debate the way in which a second language should be taught. This study was conducted at an immersion international school in Bogotá, and the results demonstrated and supported Cummins' theory: the development of the first language during the first year of immersion school benefits the second language acquisition process. In fact, the theory suggests that even if the two languages are visually different, they do operate through the same processing system. In all learning situations, previous knowledge is a starting point for acquiring a new language (Cummins, 2000). However, even if there were no main differences in students' understanding between the two activities, it was demonstrated by teachers' opinions that students with a more developed mother tongue and with more concrete concepts seem to transfer their experiences to the new language, making the second language acquisition process easier.

Moreover, throughout this study, Krashen's theory about the stages of second language acquisition was also supported. In fact, it was evident in the study that students had limited receptive vocabulary during the first stage of language acquisition (Krashen, 2003). However, despite the limitations of vocabulary, students were able to understand and follow a story during a read-aloud activity. These results demonstrate the importance of teaching techniques such as visual aids, the pace of the reading, and the use of body language. In fact, the teacher used the same strategies during both activities, which facilitated and ensured students' understanding.

This study demonstrates the importance of developing the mother tongue during the first year of immersion school. Students who have strong first language skills are able to acquire the second language more easily due to language transfer. Having Spanish and English teachers work in parallel ways is a key factor in ensuring complete second language acquisition and, thus, cognitive development. However, to collect data for this study, two lesson plans were applied with a reading activity. It would be interesting to continue this study with a lesson where concepts are taught. In fact, it would be interesting to see if language transfer is evident in this lesson, comparing a lesson in English without the Spanish background.

Furthermore, this study was conducted in a short period of time; the data was collected in less than six months, which can interfere with the results of the study. It would be interesting to deepen these findings with a longitudinal study, in which students are observed during more than one year of school in order to be able to reach more conclusive results. Moreover, it would be interesting to compare students that were exposed to the new curriculum with more Spanish hours per week in kindergarten, and those who had received fewer hours of Spanish during their first year of school.

This paper demonstrated the importance of developing the first language in the second language classroom. The mother tongue could be used as support for the second language acquisition process, which makes the learning process easier for students and teachers.

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