



Teachers' Perspectives on the Impact of English Immersion on Spanish Language Development in Primary Education

Jorge Andrés Giraldo-Gómez¹ 

Marinessa Pabón García² 

Paola Andrea Escobar Puerta³ 

Edison F. Castrillón-Ángel⁴ 

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Abstract

This study analyzed the effects of constant exposure to English as a foreign language on developing Spanish as the first language among elementary school students. This research study was oriented from a historical hermeneutical paradigm, using a qualitative approach and a narrative inquiry. The study involved English language, Spanish language, and pedagogical support from teachers who examined students' bilingual learning experiences. The researchers applied four data collection techniques: an observation guide, an open-ended survey, a semi-structured interview, and a questionnaire, all of which sought to highlight the importance of a balanced approach to language education that values and supports the development of first and foreign languages. This integrated perspective was vital for ensuring students can effectively navigate the complex landscape of learning languages while preserving their personal, linguistic, and cultural identities. The study highlights the importance of balancing learners' native language with English proficiency, emphasizing cultural preservation and linguistic identity for thriving in a globalized world.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, Spanish as a first language, language exposure, language impact, communicative competence

1 Graduate in Foreign Languages with an Emphasis in English. Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Medellín, Colombia. Email: jorge.giraldogo@amigo.edu.co

2 Graduate in Foreign Languages with an Emphasis in English. Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Medellín, Colombia. Email: marinessa.pabonga@amigo.edu.co

3 Graduate in Foreign Languages with an Emphasis in English. Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Medellín, Colombia. Email: paola.escobarpu@amigo.edu.co

4 Master in Second Language Learning and Teaching Processes. Coordinator of the Research Field of the Bachelor's Degree in Foreign Languages with Emphasis in English, Universidad Católica Luis Amigó, Medellín, Colombia. Email: edison.castrillonan@amigo.edu.co



Perspectivas docentes sobre el impacto de la inmersión en inglés en el desarrollo del español en la educación primaria

Resumen

Este estudio analizó los efectos de la exposición constante al inglés como lengua extranjera en el desarrollo del español como primera lengua en estudiantes de primaria. Esta investigación se inscribe dentro de un paradigma hermenéutico histórico, utilizando como método un enfoque cualitativo y una investigación narrativa. El estudio involucró a profesores de inglés y español, así como de apoyo pedagógico quienes examinaron las experiencias de aprendizaje bilingüe de los estudiantes. Los investigadores aplicaron cuatro técnicas de recopilación de datos: una guía de observación, una encuesta abierta, una entrevista semiestructurada y un cuestionario, con el fin de resaltar la importancia de un enfoque equilibrado de la educación de idiomas que valore y apoye el desarrollo de la lengua materna y extranjera. Esta perspectiva integrada fue vital para garantizar que los estudiantes puedan navegar eficazmente el complejo panorama del aprendizaje de idiomas, preservando, al mismo tiempo, sus identidades personales, lingüísticas y culturales. La investigación destaca la importancia de equilibrar el idioma nativo de los estudiantes con la competencia en inglés, enfatizando la preservación cultural y la identidad lingüística como herramientas necesarias para prosperar en un mundo globalizado.

Palabras clave: inglés como lengua extranjera, español como primera lengua, exposición lingüística, impacto lingüístico, competencia comunicativa

Introduction

Language is considered a unique and universal system of human communication, enabling personal expression and communal interaction (Rabiah, 2018). Being able to communicate in more than one language is an educational and social need. Multilingual individuals often gain broader access to academic, cultural, and professional opportunities. Thus, acquiring additional languages expands the possibilities for interaction and expression in the world, a need that has become increasingly urgent in the twenty-first century.

In response to this demand, English teaching-learning processes have been implemented worldwide to develop and improve different communicative skills among native and non-native speakers of the language. Nevertheless, the way in which these processes are designed and implemented remains controversial, particularly because of their potential impact on students' linguistic development. In Colombia, for example, developing communicative skills in at least one foreign language is mandated by the General Law of Education (Law 115 of 1995, Article 21). Consequently, many private schools have adopted bilingual programs that prioritize English acquisition. Yet, these programs may inadvertently disrupt the development of communicative skills in students' mother tongue (Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012). For this reason, teaching-learning procedures in every context need to be carefully evaluated to identify the strengths and potential weaknesses in what is supposed to be a balanced educational process.

Therefore, this study focused on elementary school students in first, second, and third grade at a private institution where the transition to bilingual education appeared to be creating gaps in the development of Spanish as a first language. The researchers observed that the growing emphasis on English exposure may be unintentionally weakening students' linguistic foundations in their mother tongue at a stage when they are still consolidating core language skills.

This research study makes a significant contribution to the field of education by presenting an in-depth analysis of the effects of bilingual educational programs on learners' first language development, particularly when English is emphasized in school settings. The findings revealed possible implications of an almost bilingual environment in first language development when learners are still consolidating their mother tongue.

To address the guiding question—*How does constant exposure to English as a foreign language influence the development of Spanish as a first language in elementary school students?*—it was necessary to establish clear and specific objectives that guided the data collection and analysis.

This research provides empirical evidence from a local context and contributes to ongoing academic discussions related to bilingual education, first language development, and early language acquisition. Moreover, the study addresses a crucial concern in the Colombian educational system, where the promotion of English as a foreign language is often prioritized without a full understanding of its consequences for students' mother tongue. In this sense, the investigation is justified in both educational and linguistic terms, as it aims to reflect on teaching practices and institutional policies that may unintentionally compromise students' linguistic foundations.

Furthermore, the study highlights the need for balanced and context-sensitive bilingual programs that foster multilingual competencies while safeguarding the cognitive and communicative development of the first language. Since the primary source consists of teachers' accounts—reflecting on their learners' attitudes and behaviors—it is important to clarify that the students themselves were not direct participants in the data collection process. This methodological decision was made from the beginning and is aligned with ethical considerations and the scope of the study.

Three specific objectives were defined. Firstly, to identify how Spanish and English are positioned and used in students' academic and communicative practices within the school context. Secondly, to compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of constant exposure to English as a foreign language in students' development of Spanish as their first language. Finally, to establish the implications of constant exposure to English as a foreign language in developing Spanish as the first language. These objectives allowed the researchers to follow a clear path to accomplish the purposes of the study.

Literature review

Following [Sinha et al. \(2009\)](#), the first language (L1) is acquired during early childhood, beginning around the age of three. It is also referred to as “native language, primary language, and mother tongue” (p. 117). Despite the terminological variation, these refer to the same idea: the first language that a child learns ([Cook, 2014](#)). The L1 is shaped by the context in which the child is born and raised; therefore, whether Persian, Spanish, or another language, the sociocultural environment defines what becomes the mother tongue ([Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014](#)).

Understanding the first language in this way highlights its close relationship to the user’s environment, culture, and identity. In the classroom, its use can foster a supportive learning environment where students share linguistic and cultural resources with teachers and peers, thereby enhancing the learning process ([Alshehri, 2017](#)).

In Colombia, [Fandiño-Parra et al. \(2016\)](#) advocate for revising teacher training programs to prioritize proficiency in students’ mother tongues. They argue that this approach facilitates the application of language skills across contexts without hindering linguistic development. Educational institutions are likewise urged to reconsider pedagogical practices to better integrate native languages with foreign language acquisition.

[Mahmutoğlu and Kicir \(2013\)](#) stress that the first language should be viewed as a tool rather than an obstacle in foreign language education. Their research focuses on English as a Foreign Language (EFL), examining its features and impacts on language learning. Colombia, where Spanish is the main language of instruction constitutes a relevant case study ([Cadavid-Múnera, 2022](#), p.1).

In today’s globalized world, English is a crucial language for communication ([Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014](#)). [Beltrán \(2017\)](#), among a plethora of authors, considers it the most useful global language. Consequently, many Colombian institutions include English in their curricula, and national language policies promote it as the principal foreign language. Many educational institutions—including the one examined in this research—promote bilingual environments to foster the acquisition of English through increased exposure, following the idea that “the more time students spend speaking English, the better” ([Harmer, 2007](#), p. 134).

This context raises the need to reflect on how L1 and L2 coexist in the classroom. [Mohebbi and Alavi \(2014\)](#) recommend strategic use of the learners’ L1 to make input more comprehensible and facilitate productive engagement. The L1 can be useful for teaching new vocabulary, explaining grammar, and providing feedback. Similarly, [Harbord \(1992\)](#) identified three main reasons for using L1 in foreign language classrooms: to facilitate communication, to foster positive teacher-student relationships, and to support L2 acquisition.

On the other hand, prohibiting the use of L1 in the classroom may not be beneficial to language teaching and can negatively impact learners’ emotional state ([Quintero, 2021](#)). Emotional discomfort may hinder effective language learning ([Beltrán, 2017](#)). In contrast, allowing the use of the L1 in EFL classrooms may promote emotional security, motivation, and self-confidence ([Acero & López, 2014](#)). while fostering comprehension and reducing prejudice ([Díaz, 2017](#)).

While these studies suggest advantages to integrating the L1, a balanced approach that leverages both the mother tongue and the foreign language is increasingly seen as essential for multilingual competence. [García and Lin \(2017\)](#) propose the concept of *translanguaging pedagogies*, which encourage dynamic and flexible use of all linguistic resources available to learners. Their research supports the idea that L1 and L2 should not be seen as competing, but rather as complementary in promoting both language development and cultural identity.

As the previously mentioned perspectives suggest, using the L1 can support foreign language learning when integrated purposefully. However, many institutions remain cautious, believing that overusing L1 might hinder students’ engagement with English. The amount of L2 exposure, especially in early stages of schooling, may influence the ongoing development of the first language. As noted by [Lindsey et al. \(2003\)](#), “Children in bilingual and immersion programs face the challenge of learning to read in a language different from the one spoken at home” (2003, p. 482).

It is important to recognize that implementing an English-dominant environment in elementary school may influence L1 development, especially when not supported by balanced pedagogical strategies. As [Anderson \(2012\)](#) points out, “The end result is a shift from the use of one language to the use of another, with a loss of skill—both expressive and receptive—in the native language” (p. 194). Yet, this outcome is not inevitable; when programs adopt intentional strategies to integrate and protect L1 while promoting L2, students can thrive linguistically and culturally ([García & Lin, 2017](#); [Montrul, 2005](#)).

Methodology

Paradigm, method, context, sample, and participants.

This qualitative study adopted an interpretive approach, grounded in the principles of the qualitative tradition that seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning from their experiences in specific social contexts ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2012](#)). From this perspective, reality is seen as socially constructed, and that knowledge is understood to emerge from the interpretations of those who live and reflect on their experiences. Within this study, the interpretive approach guided the researchers in examining teachers' perspectives about the roles of Spanish and English in their classrooms, the challenges and advantages they perceive, and the implications of increased exposure to English in the development of students' first language.

Additionally, the research incorporated narrative elements to recover and organize participants' testimonies in relation to their lived experiences with language instruction ([Baughan, 2017](#)). Although not a fully narrative inquiry, the study drew upon this method to construct meaning from teachers' accounts and reflections on their day to day teaching practice and student interactions.

The study was conducted in a recognized private school located in the municipality of El Retiro, Antioquia, Colombia. This institution was selected because it implements an almost bilingual learning environment, where 65% of primary school students' classes are taught in English. To collect and analyze the data, five elementary school teachers from this institution were invited to participate in the study ([Table 1](#)).

Table 1. *Sample and participants of the research.*

Participant's name	Participant's role	Participant's population
Participant 1	English teacher	Second-grade
Participant 2	English teacher	Third-grade
Participant 3	English teacher	First-grade
Participant 4	Pedagogical support teacher	Elementary school
Participant 5	Spanish teacher	First, second, and third grade

Note. This table presents detailed information about the five participants involved in the research, including their teaching roles and the specific grade levels or student populations they work with. This data was gathered directly from the participants through initial interviews and institutional records.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Four instruments were designed, each one aligned with a specific objective and carefully constructed to respond to the methodological demands of qualitative inquiry.

To address the first objective, a non-participant observation guide was created. This guide included structured categories focused on classroom dynamics, teachers' strategies, student interactions, and the specific moments in which English as a foreign language emerged as an influence on the development of Spanish as a first language (L1). It allowed researchers to document behaviors such as code-switching, language transfer, comprehension difficulties, and spontaneous language use. As noted by [Lyons et al. \(2016\)](#), observation tools are particularly valuable for examining behaviors and attitudes that reveal the causes and consequences of specific educational phenomena, especially when analyzed from a critical standpoint.

For the second objective, an open-ended survey was applied to explore the perceptions of five elementary school teachers directly involved in early L1 development. The survey consisted of ten broad, reflective questions designed to capture teachers' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of students' continuous English exposure in relation to Spanish learning. Sample prompts included: "*In your experience, how does English instruction affect students' oral communication in Spanish?*" and "*What are the challenges and benefits of early English instruction in your classroom?*". According to [Roberts et al. \(2014\)](#), open-ended surveys enable researchers to access complex perspectives grounded in real-life experiences. In this study, they provided participants with the opportunity to express nuanced opinions about language interaction and its perceived consequences without the researchers' direct influence.

The third objective was addressed through semi-structured interviews with the same group of teachers. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and followed a protocol consisting of five central themes: (1) observed changes in students' Spanish language abilities, (2) teaching strategies for balancing both languages, (3) personal beliefs about bilingualism, (4) institutional policies on language teaching, and (5) concerns or recommendations. Semi-structured interviews, as described by [Ruslin et al. \(2022\)](#), offer a balance between consistency and flexibility, allowing for the collection of deep, meaningful responses while remaining aligned with the study's goals. In this study, they were particularly useful in revealing how teachers interpret the implications of sustained exposure to English on their students' ability to develop communicative competence in their native language.

Lastly, a standardized questionnaire was administered to two types of professionals: Spanish language teachers and pedagogical support staff involved in L1 instruction. The questionnaire included multiple-choice and short-answer questions aligned with the Colombian Ministry of Education's basic learning standards for Spanish. Core areas of communicative competence were examined, such as vocabulary use, oral fluency, syntactic accuracy, and reading comprehension. Respondents were asked to assess whether students met the expected benchmarks and to identify any difficulties potentially related to their simultaneous instruction in English. The answers were analyzed in relation to the data collected through the previous techniques to ensure consistency and strengthen the overall validity of the study.

Data analysis

To analyze the data collected from the participants, we transcribed, organized, and categorized the information using a coding system. A total of 151 statements were initially extracted from the data provided by nine respondents: five primary school teachers, who completed the open-ended surveys and participated in interviews, and four pedagogical support teachers, who answered the complementary questionnaire. These statements were then sorted and assigned to the corresponding research objectives, ensuring consistency with the overarching goal of the study.

In the initial stage, all qualitative data—collected via handwriting, observation notes, and voice recordings—were transcribed into digital format. For the interviews, we used Descript software, transcribing the audio recordings while omitting only hesitation markers. Once transcribed, a preliminary coding process was carried out, resulting in thirty-three open codes. These codes were generated inductively, based on the repeated patterns and key ideas identified in the participants' narratives. For instance, some of the preliminary codes included: "code-switching during classroom activities," "perceived L1 interference," "student identity negotiation," and "teaching strategies to reinforce Spanish."

Each statement was labeled using three analytical dimensions: (1) the thematic focus of the response, (2) the emotional or attitudinal tone (e.g., concern, optimism, confusion), and (3) the contextual element (e.g., classroom

situation, pedagogical strategy). This triple-layered coding allowed us to “identify segments of meaning and label them with a code,” in line with the description by [Linneberg and Korsgaard \(2019, p. 260\)](#).

Following this initial phase, the research team engaged in a collective refinement process, reducing the total number of codes to nineteen and confirming the relevance of each statement to a specific research objective. As a result, 143 statements were ultimately retained and categorized, as summarized in [Table 2](#). This refinement process was conducted by two researchers independently, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved in consensus sessions.

Table 2. Number of participants' responses labeled with a code grouped by research objectives.

Objective	Code	Uses	Code	Uses	Total
First specific objective: identify the role of Spanish as a first language...	Advantages L1	7	Interaction	4	59 responses
	Disadvantages L1	4	Preferences	14	
	English use	12	Spanish use	4	
	Identity	10	Translation	4	
Second specific objective: contrasting the perceived advantages and disadvantages of constant...	Advantages L2	16	Disadvantages L2	18	49 responses
	Bilingualism	2	Opportunities	8	
	Communicative competence	5			
Third specific objective: establish the broader implications of constant exposure to English in the process...	Comprehension	4	Feelings	4	35 responses
	Confusion	7	Exposure	4	
	First language development	14	Influence	2	

Note. This table illustrates the codes selected to classify participants' statements, showing their frequency and how they were grouped by specific research objectives. The codes were discussed in the paragraphs above as part of the coding strategy and refinement.

Building on the initial coding process, six axial codes and three categories were established based on the codes used to guide research results. The axial codes were derived from patterns in general codes, resulting in two axial codes per specific objective. These codes, in combination with a comprehensive analysis of participant statements, formed the basis for the categories designed to meet each specific objective. For the first specific objective—identifying the roles of Spanish as a first language and English as a foreign language in students' linguistic reality—the relevant codes included *identity*, *language preference*, *use of English*, *use of Spanish*, and *translation*. These were synthesized into the axial codes of linguistic identity and language usage, which highlighted how students perceive the coexistence of both languages in their academic and personal experiences.

For the second specific objective—contrasting the perceived advantages and disadvantages of constant exposure to English in relation to Spanish development as a first language—the codes examined included *advantages and disadvantages of L2*, *bilingualism*, *communicative competence*, and *opportunities*. From these, the axial codes linguistic enrichment and linguistic interference were derived, enabling researchers to interpret how exposure to English can both support and hinder Spanish development depending on contextual conditions.

For the **third specific objective**—establishing the broader implications of sustained exposure to English for first language development—the relevant codes included *first language development*, *confusion*, *feelings*, *comprehension*, and *exposure*. These were grouped into the axial codes **emotional-linguistic experience** and **developmental influence**, which offered insights into how students process their multilingual experience emotionally and how it shapes their ongoing progression in Spanish.

By structuring the findings in direct alignment with these three specific objectives, the research ensured conceptual clarity and methodological rigor. This organization allowed the team to trace participants' voices across the data and articulate how each objective contributed to addressing the central research question on the influence of English as a Foreign Language on students' development of Spanish as their first language.

Findings and discussion

The participants' accounts revealed important implications of the English-dominant environment promoted by the institution for students at an early age. Their perspectives allowed the researchers to analyze how constant exposure to EFL influences the development of Spanish as the first language of elementary school students. Moreover, it permitted the researchers to have insight into the linguistic reality of the students and the advantages and disadvantages of the phenomenon described above.

The role of Spanish as a first language and English as a foreign language in students' reality.

Through class observations and interviews, the researchers examined the role of Spanish as a first language (L1) and English as a foreign language (EFL) in the students' everyday realities. Although the school promotes the constant use of the target language in the classroom, it became evident that Spanish remains predominant across most aspects of students' daily experiences. This predominance is largely explained by the fact that Spanish is the language to which they are first exposed in their homes, families, and broader communities.

El español es un elemento que hace parte de la cotidianidad de los estudiantes, de su entorno familiar. A lo que ellos están expuestos por primera vez es a su hogar donde se habla español, en su ciudad se habla español, en el colegio se habla inglés en las clases, pero por fuera de esas, en los descansos, en el restaurante, en la enfermería y en su día a día en el colegio, se habla español (Semi-structured Interview, Participant 5).

Spanish is an element that is part of the students' daily life in their family environment. What they are exposed to for the first time is their home where Spanish is spoken; in their city, Spanish is spoken; at school, English is spoken in class, but outside of class, during breaks, in the restaurant, in the infirmary and their daily life at school, Spanish is spoken (Semi-structured Interview, Participant 5).

Through the previous testimony, it was remarkable that students used Spanish and English simultaneously to explore learning; however, the predominance of using the first language was prominent, showing that students feel closer to their mother tongue than the target language. These elements could not be felt and lived in the same way as an obligation to express them in a second language. In this way, learning a second language cannot be a barrier to prevent the child from feeling and experiencing elements that can only be experienced through their native language. This is a premise that Participant 4 supports by stating that:

La mayoría [de los estudiantes] son de origen latino . . . Ellos desarrollan toda esa complejidad de lo que es el amor materno y los conceptos básicos como el amor, el odio, o el instinto de supervivencia desde el lenguaje que hablan sus papás, y ese lenguaje es el español (Semi-structured interview).

The majority [of the students] are of Latino origin They develop all the complexity of maternal love and basic concepts such as love, hate, or survival instinct from the language their parents speak. That language is Spanish (Semi-structured interview).

These findings suggest that L1 plays an essential role in students' academic and social development, particularly when expressing feelings, managing interpersonal situations, or asking for help. As Participant 2 explains:

Cuando los estudiantes van a hacer una queja, lo hacen en español; si están tristes, expresan sus sentimientos en español; si necesitan algo en el restaurante o están enfermos, recurren al español, porque es el idioma en el que saben cómo ser escuchados y entendidos (Semi-structured Interview, Participant 2).

When students need to make a complaint, they do it in Spanish; if they are sad, they express their feelings in Spanish; if they need something in the cafeteria or are feeling sick, they rely on Spanish because it is the language through which they know they will be heard and understood (Semi-structured Interview, Participant 2).

This demonstrates that certain emotions and experiences are deeply connected to students' L1 and may not be equally accessible through EFL. From this perspective, second language learning should not act as a barrier to the development of a child's full expressive capacity. As Participant 3 observed:

Si los niños solo han tenido contacto con el inglés en la escuela, su identidad será en español, que es el idioma con el que se sienten cómodos para expresarse. Si desde casa han tenido contacto con ambos idiomas, pueden sentirse igualmente identificados con los dos (Semi-structured Interview, Participant 3).

If children have only been exposed to English at school, their identity will align with Spanish, the language they feel comfortable expressing themselves in. If they have been in contact with both languages at home, they may feel equally identified with both (Semi-structured Interview, Participant 3).

These reflections lead to a broader conclusion: both L1 and L2 play a crucial role in shaping children's communicative competence. However, it is necessary to maintain a pedagogical balance that values both languages, particularly during early childhood education. A critical stance is needed toward practices that impose English at the expense of children's emotional and cultural development.

Therefore, this study does not seek to diminish the importance of EFL, but rather to advocate for balanced linguistic practices. By recognizing the emotional, cognitive, and social functions of the mother tongue, educators can better support the holistic development of students. In this sense, the study becomes an invitation to educational communities to reflect on the implications of promoting English uncritically and to ensure that students' native language remains a valid, respected, and integral part of their learning journey.

Contrasting the advantages and disadvantages of constant exposure to English as a foreign language in students' development of Spanish as their first language

As the process of learning a foreign language necessarily involves sustained specific exposure to the target language, the amount of time dedicated to it and the conditions under which it is taught produce outcomes that may be more or less beneficial, depending on their age, particular context, and level of development of a base language.

Regarding to this study's main inquiry, participants pointed out that learners' individual exposure to EFL promotes interculturality and adaptability to new environments, self-confidence, self-esteem, and satisfaction of being understood in another language. Furthermore, they noted that constant exposure allows students to acquire new vocabulary, enrich their language, learn commands, and improve their communication skills. As Participant 2 mentioned:

Como en toda actividad o aprendizaje nuevo, entre más práctica haya más probabilidad habrá de desarrollar competencias. La práctica constante en clase con compañeros ayuda a la disminución del filtro afectivo haciendo que los estudiantes pierdan la timidez al momento de expresarse. (Open-ended survey).

As in any new activity or learning, the more practice there is, the greater the probability of developing competencies. Constant practice in class with peers helps to reduce the affective filter, making students lose their shyness when expressing themselves (Open-ended survey).

In that sense, the researchers observed that the practice of a second language in the classroom in the classroom was reflected in the acquisition of new skills and the strengthening of existing ones among the students. Similarly, it was possible to see how the constant participation of students in class supports the learning process, allowing the creation of a safer environment for the teacher and classmates, where students feel at ease to work in a collaborative environment and secure in their process, where making mistakes in a foreign language is expected.

While these positive implications highlight the benefits of EFL learning in the studied context, participants also identified four main drawbacks that emerge from this process.

First, students often experience confusion when acquiring topical knowledge in English. This difficulty arose from the challenge of understanding subject-specific content (such as science or math) taught in a language they have not

yet mastered. Participants observed that this confusion can hinder cognitive processing, as students were required to decode the language while simultaneously comprehending academic content. Such a cognitive load can negatively affect their academic performance and lead to frustration and disengagement.

Second, participants emphasized deficiencies in students' communicative competence in English. Although learners were frequently exposed to English, this exposure did not always translate into effective communicative ability. Participants noted that many learners struggle to construct coherent and contextually appropriate messages in English, which limits their ability to engage meaningfully in academic and social interactions. These deficiencies were identified through classroom observations and the participants' reports of learners' performance during communicative tasks.

Third, a noticeable decrease in classroom interactions was reported due to linguistic barriers. Feeling insecure about their English proficiency, students often refrained from participating in discussions or collaborative activities. This reduced interaction impairs peer-to-peer learning and can foster an isolating learning environment. According to participants, diminished interaction not only slows the development of communicative skills but also affects students' motivation and willingness to learn.

Finally, participants expressed concern about the negative impact of intensive English immersion on students' first language (Spanish). They reported difficulties in students' writing and reading difficulties in their mother tongue, attributing them to the reduced exposure to Spanish in academic settings. Confusion in spelling, limited vocabulary, as well as poor reading comprehension were some of the symptoms identified. These issues were attributed to the unbalanced language use in the classroom, which undermines the development and preservation of the students' L1. As a consequence, some students more exposed to a foreign language often feel frustrated for not adequately expressing their ideas, thoughts, and opinions in their mother tongue due to the linguistic confusion they are having at that moment. This concern was summarized by Participant 1, who stated that

Una de las desventajas que he podido observar es la poca comunicación y entendimiento de los chicos que tienen una mayor influencia del idioma extranjero sobre la lengua materna, ya que al momento de expresar sus ideas, pensamientos y opiniones, en muchas ocasiones se frustran por no poder expresarse de la manera que ellos conocen o desean. (Open-ended survey).

One of the disadvantages that I have been able to observe is the poor communication and understanding of the children who have a more significant influence of the foreign language over the mother tongue, since at the moment of expressing their ideas, thoughts, and opinions, they are often frustrated by not being able to express themselves in the way they know or want (Open-ended survey).

This kind of foreign language education can cause frustration and confusion among students when trying to express themselves, not just in English but also in Spanish. Constantly surrounded by unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical structures that differ across both languages, students struggle to articulate ideas clearly and to communicate their thoughts and emotions effectively with others. This issue is reflected in the following response from Participant 3:

[El English environment que promueve la institución] al no ser bien enfocado genera que el estudiante se confunda y no logre entender o escribir bien ni la L1 ni la L2 (Open-ended survey).

[The English environment promoted by the institution] when not well focused causes the student to become confused and unable to understand or write well either the L1 or the L2 (Open-ended survey).

As previously discussed, the creation of safe spaces within the classroom is negatively affected by students' anxiety and insecurity when using the foreign language, as well as by the linguistic interference they experience in their first language. Specifically, students feel uncertain about how to express themselves clearly and correctly in Spanish as a result of the intensive English immersion promoted by the institution. In linguistic terms, Participant 1 explained that, under this immersive English environment, students displayed several difficulties in their mother tongue, such as:

“Confusión en su escritura”, “poco acercamiento a la lectura”, “la comprensión lectora deficiente debido a la poca exposición que se tiene a la lectura”. (Open-ended survey, Participant 1).

“Confusion in their writing,” “poor approach to reading”, and “poor reading comprehension due to little exposure to reading.” (Open-ended survey, Participant 1).

As a result, the English environment promoted by the institution raises the concern that “bilingual children control a smaller vocabulary than their monolingual peers” (Bialystok, 2009, p.3). This observation aligns with the findings of this study, where several participants reported experiencing challenges in expressing themselves fluently and with a rich vocabulary, both in English and their mother tongue. Therefore, it is essential to strike a balance between the global communication demands that require English proficiency and the preservation of students’ primary language skills. While learning a foreign language is important, it is equally crucial to maintain and strengthen students’ mother tongue to ensure a well-rounded linguistic development.

In line with this idea, Participant 4 emphasized the importance of supporting the first language to enable effective learning in both languages:

Hoy en día estamos con el boom de que hay que enseñarles a hablar en varios idiomas en ese primer momento de la vida y que es muy importante entonces los papás les hablan en inglés y en español. Desde el hablar puede que sea importante hacerlo pero al momento de enseñar, yo no lo veo tan bueno. Porque a nivel de ampliación del campo semántico, los niños no tienen un campo semántico amplio para yo poderles explicar conceptos complejos, ellos siempre van a requerir por su etapa evolutiva de material concreto para poder acceder, pero ese material concreto siempre va a tener que ir acompañado de algo que les explique eso que tienen en las manos. Entonces, cuando yo voy a trabajarlo en segunda lengua, para ellos es un poco desmotivado, se enredan, se pierden. Ahí la primera lengua juega un papel muy importante si yo puedo hacerlo en español (Semi-structured interview).

Nowadays, there is a boom in the need to teach them to speak in several languages in the first moments of their lives, and parents address them in English and Spanish. From the perspective of speaking, it may be essential to do so, but at the moment of teaching, it is not so good. Because at the level of expanding the semantic field, children do not have a wide semantic field for me to be able to explain complex concepts, they will always require concrete material to be able to access. Still, that concrete material will always have to be accompanied by something that explains what they have in their hands. When I go to work on it in the second language, for them, it is a bit demotivating; they get tangled up, they get lost. In that case, the first language plays a vital role if I can do it in Spanish (Open-ended survey)

The need to balance the promotion and use of English as a second language with the preservation of the native language is paramount. While there are both advantages and drawbacks to this approach, achieving a middle ground is essential for various reasons. This includes enhancing students’ cognitive development, fostering creative, critical, and problem-solving skills, as well as preserving their cultural identity by maintaining their mother tongue. Additionally, it enables learners to engage with other cultures, histories, and traditions, facilitating mutual understanding and sharing of their own cultural heritage. The ultimate goal is for both languages, English and Spanish, to contribute to the creation of learning environments and educational experiences that benefit students in the long term, while mitigating any negative consequences in other aspects of their lives.

Implications of constant exposure to English as a foreign language in developing Spanish as the first language

The constant exposure to English in the context of the present research resulted in several consequences for students’ linguistic reality. In this section, the focus is on the findings related to the development of students’ first language, in order to address the guiding question of the study.

Classroom observations revealed that students’ productive skills in Spanish—specifically speaking and writing—were negatively affected. While not formally measured, this was a consistent qualitative observation drawn from classroom interactions and teacher input. These skills appeared underdeveloped when contrasted with the expectations established in the Spanish Basic Learning Rights (SBLR) proposed by the Colombian government

(Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2015). Spanish and pedagogical support teachers, who work directly with students' L1 development, also expressed concern about this issue. They reported that students' communicative competence in their first language does not align with what is expected at their academic level, as illustrated in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. *Percentage of accomplishment of the linguistic level expected of students' Spanish abilities.*

Spanish ability	Accomplishment of the linguistic level expected
Listening ⁵	75%
Reading ⁶	63%
Writing ⁷	38%
Speaking ⁸	63%

Note. The level expected is provided by the Spanish Basic Learning Rights (SBLR) and the level of accomplishment by the Participants in the Questionnaire.

Seeing the above, it is understandable that there are observable effects on learners' first language skills, especially considering the findings reported by [Hoff et al. \(2012\)](#), according to which bilinguals' total vocabulary is comparable to that of monolinguals but distributed across both languages. As students are increasingly exposed to English input through the immersion model, a reduction in Spanish input may naturally lead to lower performance in their mother tongue. Although this study did not include a direct measurement of the students' English vocabulary to assess whether the changes in Spanish are proportionate, the impact on Spanish is evident in their academic performance. Specifically, students are not achieving the Spanish development objectives established by the Colombian government. Their communicative competence in Spanish appears to be hindered due to a lack of institutional emphasis on its development, particularly in the area of productive skills.

For instance, Participant 4 noted in the questionnaire that students show low levels of oral performance, emphasizing that in activities requiring speaking, their delivery reveals significant difficulties:

Es evidenciable la preparación previa [de los estudiantes] antes de exponer un tema visto en clase y, aunque lo logran, su producción oral no es amplia.

The previous preparation [of students] before presenting a topic seen in class is evident and, although they achieve it, their oral production could be more extensive.

Likewise, Participant 5 pointed out in the questionnaire that students struggle to communicate their ideas in written form:

Los estudiantes si escriben palabras, pero . . . no justifican su respuesta de manera escrita con coherencia y cohesión (Participant 5).

Students do write words, but . . . do not justify their response in a coherent and cohesive written form (Participant 5).

As shown in [Table 3](#), the researchers concluded that constant exposure to a foreign language while students are still consolidating their mother tongue has a direct impact on the strengthening of learners' linguistic skills, with writing being the most affected area. Participant 4 explained the long-term consequences of this situation:

[Los estudiantes] comienzan a perder toda la base de lo que es la lengua materna. Entonces vemos que no tienen mucho uso de ortografía y su ampliación de palabras no es tan rica . . . porque no amplían el número de significados para las

5 SBLR - Listening: Students recognize the themes present in the messages they hear, based on the differentiation of the sounds that make up the words.

6 SBLR - Reading: Students interpret literary texts as part of their initiation into text comprehension.

7 SBLR - Writing: Students write words that allow them to communicate their ideas, preferences, and learning.

8 SBLT - Speaking: Students enunciate oral texts of different kinds on topics of their interest or suggested by others.

cosas, sino que amplían los idiomas en los que se le dice a una cosa . . . Ellos empiezan a quedarse muy cortos y eso se evidencia cuando llegan a middle [school].

[Students] begin to lose the whole basis of what the native language is. So we see that they do not have much use of orthography and their expansion of words is not as rich . . . because they do not expand the number of meanings for things, but they expand the languages in which you name a thing . . . They start to fall very short and that is evident when they get to middle [school].

The consequences of immersive English environments are not limited to linguistic aspects but also extend to emotional and social dimensions, given the central role Spanish plays in students' daily lives. As exemplified by Participant 1, the linguistic cost of this situation can cause students to experience feelings of frustration, angst, and insecurity, which negatively affect their self-confidence and self-perception. One illustrative case was that of a student who struggled with both her mother tongue and the foreign language due to persistent difficulties in reading and writing:

Tengo una estudiante que se siente frustrada con el idioma, tanto con lengua materna como con la lengua extranjera, porque se le ha dificultado el proceso de lecto-escritura y los papás me han contado que la han presionado mucho desde que estaba en preescolar . . . para que pueda realizar la lectura, al punto de que la niña dice “yo no sé leer”. En realidad si lo hace, pero ella prefiere decir: “yo no sé leer” para que uno no trate de decirle: “vamos que si puedes” . . . Y con el idioma también dice que no sabe inglés.

I have a student who is frustrated with the language, both with her mother tongue and with the foreign language, because it has been difficult for her to read and write, and her parents have told me that they have put a lot of pressure on her since she was in preschool . . . so that she can read, even to the point that she says: “I don't know how to read”. In reality she does, but she prefers to say: “I don't know how to read” so that you don't try to tell her: “come on, you can read”. . . And with the language she also says she doesn't know English.

Although these consequences can be caused by factors other than linguistic exposure, they are less common among students who are not immersed in bilingual schools (Participant 4, Open-ended survey). This idea is also supported by Participant 5 who considered that the English environment promoted in the institution causes confusion in both Spanish and English. As they explained:

Es confuso para ellos, en algunos casos escriben “con my” en lugar de “conmigo” o por ejemplo palabras que son muy similares como “activity” y “actividad” ellos piensan que yo la escribí mal, pero es porque lo hice en español.

It is confusing for them; in some cases, they write “con my” instead of “with me” or for example, words that are very similar, like “activity” and “actividad” they think I misspelled it, but it is because I did it in Spanish.

Under the above premise, it becomes evident that students are developing translanguaging inside the classroom to explore learning, even though most of them share the same mother tongue. According to [Conteh, \(2018\)](#), although translanguaging is very useful for communication in environments where learners have different linguistic backgrounds; however, it should not emerge as result of gaps in students' mother language among learners who share the same native language and are located in a country where that language is the official one.

This observation reopens the discussion on how first and foreign languages should be related inside the classroom. According to [Ávila \(2015\)](#), students' first language starts the path toward linguistic communication and the future learning of foreign languages. For that reason, students who are still consolidating their primary language experience more difficulties in acquiring the foreign language since they have different gaps in their mother tongue (Participant 3, open-ended survey). Thus, foreign language teaching that focuses almost exclusively on the target language risks harming not just to the student's first language but also to the foreign language development—a situation that runs counter to the goals of foreign language education.

Based on these findings, the researchers concluded that the implementation of immersive English environments in early childhood education must go hand in hand with the systematic strengthening of the mother tongue. The L1 should be leveraged as a resource to support foreign language learning, rather than being marginalized in teaching and learning processes. Otherwise, students risk losing important aspects of their first language while simultaneously weakening their foreign language development.

This perspective is also reinforced by Participant 3, who emphasized in the open-ended survey that strengthening the first language facilitates the acquisition of a foreign language.

La relación que tienen los estudiantes tanto de una lengua como de la otra puede llegar a ser muy beneficiosa siempre y cuando tengan adquirida de forma plena la primera lengua. Cuando se trabaja con estudiantes que, a corta edad, han logrado adquirir y afianzar la primera lengua, la segunda lengua se vuelve mucho más sencillo, pero si por el contrario, los estudiantes hasta ahora están afianzando su lengua materna es mucho más complejo para ellos lograr adquirir la lengua extranjera, ya que tienen muchas faltas o carencias para poder sintetizar la primera lengua de forma correcta (Participant 3, open-ended survey)

The relationship between students of both languages can benefit if they have fully acquired the first language. When we work with students who, at a young age, have acquired and consolidated their first language, the second language becomes much easier for them. However, if, on the contrary, students are still consolidating their mother tongue, it is much more complex for them to acquire the foreign language since they have many shortcomings or deficiencies to be able to synthesize the first language correctly (Participant 3, open-ended survey).

Consequently, teachers and educational institutions are responsible not only for achieving the curricular goals related to subject knowledge, but also for fostering the skills and attitudes that help shape students into responsible citizens. Spanish, as the language through which students will be interacting in their primary context outside the school, plays a crucial role in that part of students' lives, providing a fundamental reason to continue exposing children to the language that makes part of their identity as inhabitants of this country. English will be useful to students' future lives, but Spanish encompasses all the signifiers of their current life.

Conclusions

This research emphasizes the significance of learners' first language as the primary medium of communication in daily life. While foreign languages are often acquired for specific educational, professional, or social purposes. At the same time, the mother tongue remains the most natural and comfortable means of expression for many individuals. This preference reflects students' connection to their identity, their emotional expression, and personal experiences; while foreign languages are required for communication in diverse but specific contexts, the bond between an individual and their mother tongue is deeply rooted and enduring, highlighting its central role in shaping personal, linguistic, and cultural identities.

At the same time, English language learning offers benefits beyond mere linguistic acquisition. One of its most remarkable advantages is the capacity to enhance students' lives, facilitating the assimilation of ideas and fostering a broader global perspective, thereby educating them to be global citizens. Mastery of English equips learners with tools for adapting to diverse cultural settings and instills a sense of self-assurance, which permeates their everyday experiences. However, it is essential to acknowledge that not all outcomes are uniformly positive. Some concerns were expressed regarding potential drawbacks, including miscommunication, subpar written work, and potential erosion of first language skills. These contrasting aspects underline the importance of maintaining an equilibrium in children's linguistic and emotional development. In this increasingly interconnected world, English proficiency is undeniably indispensable; nevertheless, protecting, nurturing, and supporting students' mother tongue is equally necessary.

Additionally, thanks to the different perceptions of the participants, they have revealed a noteworthy discrepancy in students' productive skills in Spanish compared to their expected academic performance for the grade. Specifically, students needed help with speaking and writing, with limited oral production and difficulties constructing coherent and cohesive written responses. These findings have led the participants to advocate for the independent reinforcement of students' mother tongue. They argue that an exclusive focus on the foreign language may have adverse effects on the first language and the development of the foreign language itself.

Therefore, the investigation revealed a delicate balance between caring for students' communicative skills' development in a foreign language and preserving their connection to their first language. This endeavor is

rooted in the belief that students can only thrive in a globalized world when they have strong foundations in both languages, the native one and the additional one. By fostering a balanced approach to language education, it is possible to empower students to explore a complex and interconnected world, all while preserving their cultural heritage and linguistic identity. The outcomes of this research project have the potential to promote schools' teaching-learning language practices, ensuring that learners not only become proficient in English, but also value and embrace their first language as an integral part of their academic and personal lives.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations in developing this research was the scarcity of prior studies on the topic, particularly concerning language loss in foreign language learning environments. Consequently, there is a need for deeper exploration into how immersion in these environments impacts students' mother tongue and linguistic identity. Another limitation concerned the sources of data. The study primarily relied on teachers' perspectives—those involved in the phenomenon, such as the Spanish vocabulary test previously mentioned—as students were still in the process of consolidating their mother tongue and thus offered limited reflections on language loss.

Recommendations

Given that this study was conducted with elementary learners, it is suggested that future research focus on the consequences for middle and high school populations. Continuing to explore this topic will enable the academic community to understand how sustained exposure to foreign languages affects or benefits the mother tongue and students' linguistic identity over time. This knowledge will allow educational institutions to re-evaluate their curricular planning and linguistic aspirations for their learners.

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