

¿Por Que Están Desapareciendo Los Libros? On the Hunt for Spanish Books in Schools

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Abstract

This paper describes part of an ecological study of the Spanish print environment in one community in central Los Angeles. I conducted a “community study” in order to examine the impact of Proposition 227, California’s restrictive educational linguistic legislation on the students in the community. Here I report findings from teacher surveys, classroom observations, and an interview with one biliterate first grade student. I examine access and availability of Spanish reading materials and explore the implications for the literacy development of Spanish speaking emergent bilinguals.

Keywords: Biliteracy, bilingual education, Spanish print

Introduction

“My teacher tells us we cannot get Spanish books because we’re not in a Spanish class. We’re in an English class so our teacher tells us only to get, um, English books. And if you make a mistake and you got a Spanish book, you get to change it because our teacher has a little library.” (Susana, 6 years old, biliterate).

Research indicates that children benefit when they are encouraged to develop a reading habit and interest in reading from an early age (Allington, 2011; Krashen, 2004, Smith 1998). For those students who come to school speaking a language other than English it is further argued that reading ability is best developed in the native language and can be readily transferred to a second language (Baker, 2011; Cummins 2000). This suggests that reading interest should be encouraged in the primary language. If this is true, second language learners need to have access to books as well as other print materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines) in their primary language.

Despite the historic debate over language of choice for initial literacy instruction (Baker, 1992, Rossell, 1992) proponents of bilingual education agree that learning to read and write in one’s native language is an efficient path to English proficiency (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2000, Krashen, 1994, Krashen and Biber, 1988, Collier, 1992, Ulanoff, 1995, Willig, 1985). Seminal studies in California (Krashen, 1999, Krashen and Biber, 1988, Ramírez, 1992) clearly demonstrated successful academic achievement for English learners who have had the benefit of properly implemented bilingual programs. A comprehensive national, longitudinal study (Thomas & Collier, 2002) came to strong conclusions regarding the role of first language (L1) instruction on achievement in the second language (L2) stating that “the strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is amount of formal L1 schooling. The more L1 grade level schooling, the higher the L2 achievement” (p. 7).

Notwithstanding the various cycles of the “reading wars” nationwide (Allington, 2002, Allington and Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Coles, 2000, 2003; Foorman, Fletcher, Francis, and Schatschneider, 2000; Garan, 2002) and a political move toward an English only ideology in the US (see Gandara & Hopkins, 2010 for a review of restrictive US educational language policies, and Ulanoff and Vega-Castaneda, 2003 and Wentworth et al. 2010 for a discussion of the impact of such a policy in California) there is a substantial body of research that recognizes the importance of biliteracy development that includes reading in the primary language (Cummins, 2003, Krashen, 2003) and access to a wide variety of multicultural literature (George, Raphael and Florio-Ruane, 2003). García (2003) argues that English Language learners (ELLs) need “...opportunities to read and use narrative and informational texts that are academically challenging in the native language” (p. 47).

While it has long been argued that students become better readers by reading (Smith, 1988), it makes sense that students should have access to a great number of books in order to feed a healthy reading habit. Krashen (1987) makes the case that children get the majority of their books from libraries (p. 4) but it has been found that there is often limited access to books in languages other than English in most school and public libraries.

Pucci (1994) and Pucci and Ulanoff (1996) explored the library collections of several schools in Los Angeles that had large percentages of Spanish speakers and found that there was limited availability of Spanish books. Pucci (2000) examined the maintenance of Spanish literacy by Salvadorans in Los Angeles and found a direct relationship between access to print and primary language literacy practices.

This notion of access to primary language print has been severely challenged in several states where the restrictive language policies mentioned above have impacted both instruction and the greater issue of access to reading materials. This paper explores the availability of Spanish print materials more than ten years after the passage of such legislation in California, Proposition 227, which calls for classroom instruction to be conducted "...overwhelmingly in English." It is commonly accepted that Proposition 227 has had widespread effects on classroom instruction (Gándara and Hopkins, 2010; García and Curry-Rodriguez, 2000; Rumberger and Gándara 2000; Ulanoff and Vega-Castaneda, 2003), including the elimination of the use of books in Spanish in many elementary classrooms and, therefore, libraries. This paper explores classrooms, teachers and students in terms of access and availability to reading materials in Spanish and the implications for literacy development for Spanish speaking children.

Buscando los libros/Looking for the Books

I began this exploration as part of an ecological study of the print environment of one neighborhood in central Los Angeles. We conducted a "community study" in order to examine the impact of Proposition 227 on the residents of the community and here we report on the findings from teacher surveys, classroom observations, and an interview with one biliterate first grade student. The community in Los Angeles that I examined has a large Latino presence. Salvadorans hold a slight majority in this area, but other Central American groups are represented as well. Guatemalans have a notable presence, and there are also Panamanians, Nicaraguans, and Hondurans residing in the area. There is also a significant population of people from México, as well as a group of Koreans. There are extremely few Anglos, African-Americans or non-Korean Asians living in the immediate area.

Despite the high concentration of Spanish speakers in this area of Los Angeles, instruction in public schools is largely delivered through the medium of English. In fact, although Los Angeles County has the highest proportion of ELs in the state, 355,639 or approximately 23% of the total California number, only 6% receive bilingual instruction there (CDE, 2013a). The data set consisted of teacher surveys, semi-structured and informal teacher interviews and classroom and school library observations. Data were also collected from one biliterate first grade student who was videotaped reading in both Spanish and English and also interviewed regarding the books and her access to Spanish reading materials at school.

I surveyed forty bilingual teachers who work in this area in central Los Angeles regarding the availability of Spanish print materials in their schools and classrooms. The surveys were intended to be anonymous and included both open and close-ended questions regarding the numbers of books as well as changes in the school library collection since the implementation of Proposition 227. Most of the bilingual teachers were working on emergency permits, and although bilingual, were instructing in English. Teacher experience varied from 2 months teaching experience to six years. I asked the teachers to request information from their school librarians regarding the numbers of books in the school collection as part of the survey.

I then conducted semi-structured interviews in classrooms and libraries at four schools and also met with one group of twenty-three bilingual teachers to discuss access to Spanish print materials in their schools and classrooms. Field notes were gathered during informal interviews of community members as well as during classroom and library observations and the group teacher interviews. When permitted, I audio taped the interviews and took photographs of classroom and school libraries. I gathered field notes during all observations. Data were also collected from district websites and included library collection maps as well as information about school demographics and number of books in school library collections.

I examined the data to look for themes related to access to reading materials in Spanish. We looked for responses that were reflected across contexts and for matches and gaps between the survey responses and what we observed at the schools. Themes that emerged from this analysis included a decreased availability of Spanish print materials even in schools with a high concentration of Spanish speakers, as well as an attitude among school librarians and some teachers that there was no longer a need for Spanish materials or for native Spanish speakers to read them. I also found a small cadre of bilingual teachers who were somewhat resisting these patterns and affording their students access to Spanish books, sometimes covertly.

¿Dónde Están los libros?/Where are the Books?

Two major themes emerged from the examination of the survey, observation and interview data: limited availability of Spanish books and print and shifting attitudes toward the use of Spanish books and print with restricted access to those books and print that were found. There was, of course, some overlap between themes. I found that while there were some Spanish print materials available in classrooms and school libraries, there was a notable decline in the availability and access to these materials in recent years. Furthermore, there has been a not-so-subtle shift in the past five years in the attitudes toward the use of Spanish print materials as classroom resources. This shift was observed to varying degree in all schools that we visited and appears to have affected students' (and teachers') access to Spanish print materials.

Availability of Spanish books

Thirty-five surveys from bilingual teachers in thirty-three schools were returned. The overwhelming majority of the teachers (n=31) were teaching in English-only environments, although some gave primary language support to their students who were mostly native Spanish speakers. The percentage of Spanish speaking students at each school ranged from 60% to 99% with a mean of 87%. All schools but one new private school awaiting funding had an on site library.

Of the thirty-two schools libraries, all had collections of Spanish books, but only twenty reported on the size of the collection, which varied from 10 books to 4,000 books. The number of Spanish books ranged from 100 to 4000, but there was such high variance in the number that the mean is not reported here as it would not adequately represent the number of books per school. Data were unavailable for six schools and the remaining surveys either reported numbers in percentages without the total number of books in the schools or gave vague answers such as few. According to the survey responses, twenty-two schools have books in Spanish at all grade levels.

I visited four schools from one large urban school district (Hollyland, Eureka, Violetta and DePaola, all pseudonyms) during the course of this study and our observations in those schools served to both support and, at times, contradict the survey responses. We observed both classrooms and school libraries during three of the school visits. At the fourth school, only the school library was observed and number of Spanish books is unavailable because no librarian or teacher was there at the time (see table one).

Table 1: School and Library Data from Observations Sites

School	Number of Students	Percent ELs	Estimated Number of Library Books^a	Estimated Number Spanish Library Books^b	Approx. Percent Spanish Library Books^c	Spanish Print in Library?
Eureka	2372	95%	7,500-9,999	800	09%	No
Hollyland	1323	66%	12,500-14,999	4,000	29%	Yes
Violetta	1688	86%	12,500-14,999	1,500	11%	Yes
DePaola	1207	96%	7,500-9,999	Not available	Not available	Yes

^a. California Department of Education (2013b).

^b. Based on teacher survey responses.

^c. Based on midpoint of range.

There were Spanish books in the four school libraries that we observed. Spanish books were mixed in with the English collection and identified with an orange dot. Librarians at three of the sites told us that this was district policy. Hollyland School also had Korean books mixed in with the rest and these had a different colored dot on them for identification. The libraries at Eureka, Violetta and DePaola had print in Spanish, but it was very limited at Eureka and DePaola.

The library at Violetta School, which has about 1500 Spanish books, had the most visible Spanish print. Signs around the library were both in English and Spanish and directed students, teachers and parents to the different sections of the library. This library was very student and family centered. It has a door that opens to the street for parents to come and use the library throughout the school day. While we observed the library, we noticed that several parents entered, browsed the shelves and checked out books, mostly in Spanish.

Teachers from twenty schools reported that there are now fewer books in Spanish as a result of Proposition 227. Elena, a teacher who had been at her school for four years stated,

“[There are] incredibly less amounts than before. The textbooks/library books were quietly disposed of in the school trash bins.”

Teachers were also asked why they thought this was true. Steve, another teacher who has been at his school for four years commented,

“Since Prop 227 passed, most of the materials purchased at school have been done for English [speaking] students only. I was talking to a colleague who teaches a bilingual class and he said that this year his class is lacking a lot of instructional materials in Spanish. He is thinking of teaching [in] English next year.”

María, who had been at her school for fourteen years, the first twelve as a paraprofessional lamented,

“Yes, it has changed. There are less books in Spanish available. For example, before you could find a social studies book in both languages. Now you find the English version only. Most Spanish books were given away to students. Very few books are available in our school library now.”

Ana complained,

“The books disappeared. A lot of material was thrown away or given to students.”

This particular teacher told us how the librarian, a native Spanish speaker herself, had approached her regarding the Spanish books that were to be discarded. She covertly gave them to the teacher so she could either use them or give them to students to read. The underlying message was that she should tell no one about the event.

There was some good news. Two teachers indicated that the number of books has stayed the same and eight teachers indicated that there are more books in Spanish now, including a private school teacher who indicated that there were ten Spanish books in the school library. No information was available from the remaining schools as the teachers have not been at the school long enough to judge. One bilingual teacher even said,

“The amount of bilingual books has begun to increase. More books are needed in our individual classrooms.”

Another teacher told us,

“Right now we seem to have many resources in Spanish.”

Also of interest, surveys from teachers at all thirty-two schools with libraries indicated that students visit the library and are allowed to check out books. Teachers reported that students checked out between one (individual student) and 160 books per month (class total); the majority of the respondents indicated that students either checked out one book per month or one book per visit from the library. Two of those schools prohibit Kindergartners and Pre-K from checking out books. More than half the teachers (n=19) reported taking their students to the library at least once a month but one teacher indicated that she was prohibited from taking her students to the library because of past overdue books:

“...my past students had not turned in their books so I had no access until they returned them.”

Another teacher complained that sometimes she was unable to keep her weekly appointment at the library because

“...sometimes you are so busy with Open Court [district-mandated reading series] that you might forget to go.”

Shifting attitudes and denied access

Twenty-eight teachers told us that there are Spanish books in their classrooms, but none were seen in any of the four classrooms visited.

“Many class libraries have Spanish books and students are allowed to read them. During independent reading, students are allowed to read any books of their choice.”

This is not always the case. José, a first grade teacher, complained

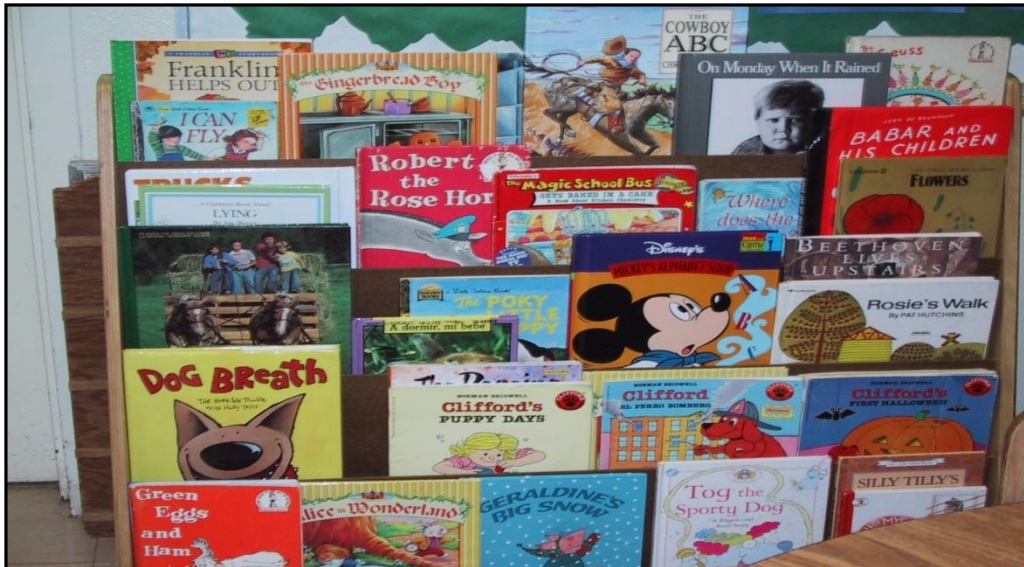
“I am not allowed to read to them in Spanish but students can read in Spanish during free reading time.”

Roberta, a second grade teacher, lamented,

“My students read in English. The passing of 227 has not given students a choice. Reading of Spanish text has been gradually withering away since the passage of 227.”

There was no Spanish print in any of the three classrooms we visited. And despite one of the teachers responding that there were Spanish books in his classroom, none were observed during our visit (see figure one).

Figure 1: Classroom Library



Several other teachers attached classroom photos to their surveys demonstrating the presence of Spanish books in their classrooms. These teachers indicated that some of their students, those who feel more comfortable reading in Spanish, do choose to read Spanish books during independent reading time. One teacher told us, apart from the survey that she had turned in, that the librarian covertly gave her most of the library's Spanish book collection, thus making it unavailable to other students at the school.

The librarians at each school site told us that less Spanish books were being ordered to replace old ones that were discarded. The librarian at the large public library told us a similar story, stating that since there was now limited teacher demand for Spanish books, she was no longer ordering many. The librarian at Hollyland, who is actually a second grade teacher responsible for the library as well, told us that since Proposition 227 she has mostly stopped buying Spanish books, except for class libraries for the bilingual classrooms. We asked if students in structured English immersion ever checked out Spanish books and she told us that it was *not permitted* because it might confuse the students. This was mirrored in the survey responses. One teacher told us:

“Many teachers do not allow their students to check out Spanish books.”

Only nine teachers, including the only two who are currently teaching in bilingual settings, indicated that they have Spanish print in their classrooms, and again, none was seen in the four classrooms that we observed. Comments regarding the lack of Spanish classroom print stress the fact that the district and individual schools discouraged, and in some cases do not allow, the use of Spanish print.

“I was told by teachers who had been at the school for some years. They said they had to take down Spanish charts, words, even books because the administration did not approve of it.”

For the teachers who reported the presence of Spanish print, most indicated that it was used for labels, bulletin boards and flyers that go home to parents. The notable exceptions, of course, were the two bilingual classrooms where Spanish print was used throughout the classroom.

Seventeen respondents said that there is Spanish print at the school site, and this was seen in three of the four schools during our observations. This print was mostly on signs for parents, flyers that go home to parents and announcements. Twenty-five responses indicated that there is less Spanish print at the school since the passage of Proposition 227. Of note is the fact that teachers at the private school indicated that there is now more print due to the implementation of a Spanish as a second language class, a class for native English speakers. During our observations we found environmental print in Spanish in the halls on bulletin boards and announcements for parents at all four schools we visited, echoing the survey responses.

A student's perspective

In the course of our exploration we interviewed one first grade biliterate student, Susana, who was six years old and in the first grade in a school in central Los Angeles neighborhood. We interviewed Susana about the books she reads in school, and her responses mirrored the teacher survey and interview responses regarding shifting attitudes and restricted access to Spanish books. Before her interview she read us a story in Spanish (*Buenas Noches Luna*, Brown, 1995) and a story in English (a considerably more difficult story). After reading both stories she proceeded to ask comprehension questions in English about *Buenas Noches Luna*. Susana entered kindergarten after the passage of Proposition 227 and was taught to read in English. She is completely bilingual as are both her parents. Her father is a native English speaker and her mother is a native Spanish speaker.

Susana has access at home to books in both Spanish and English and her facility with reading in both languages is clear. But when asked whether she reads Spanish books in school, she emphatically states that she is not allowed to check out Spanish books.

“My teacher tells us we cannot get Spanish books because we’re not in a Spanish class. We’re in an English class so our teacher tells us only to get, um, English books. And if you make a mistake and you got a Spanish book, you get to change it because our teacher has a little library.”

We noted with great concern that Susana perceives it to be a “mistake” to check out a Spanish book, despite the fact that she has experience reading books in Spanish at home. Many of the teachers in both survey responses and during interviews indicated that teachers in their schools were restricting access to Spanish books and some indicated that they were doing so as well. As we previously stated, this was accepted as fact by one of the librarians we interviewed.

Conclusion: Implications for Second Language Literacy

The purpose of this paper was to explore the Spanish print environment in schools in central Los Angeles in the aftermath of Proposition 227, which limits the use of primary language instruction in public schools in California. According to the teachers I surveyed and interviewed, as well as my own observations, there is a notable lack in the availability of Spanish print materials in both classrooms and school libraries, but this was most notable in the classrooms. Teachers and school librarians in schools that no longer offer Spanish instruction consistently told me that they had their Spanish books “taken away” or that they were told to throw them out or destroy them. Survey responses and our own observations indicated that there are few Spanish books and little Spanish print in classrooms and throughout schools, with the exception of bilingual classrooms.

Since proponents of bilingual education have long supported the use of the primary language to support literacy development (Cummins, 1994), it is important to examine the availability of print materials in languages other than English as a means of supporting literacy development, both in the primary language and in English. Proposition 227 and the anti-immigrant wave on which it rides have already changed classroom instruction for many English language learners, limiting and/or eliminating bilingual education programs in the schools. The findings of this study show that this change has also spread to the access to reading materials in the native language. If the second language learners in our schools are to become literate participants in the community, it is critical that we reverse this trend, providing access to print materials and finding ways to make such materials available to the students who need and want them.

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