

The Geography of Children's Primary Language Use in an English Immersion Classroom

Adam Rankin

John Petrovic, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Education

This study investigated the use of Spanish in a fifth-grade English immersion classroom in Alabama. The research examined the places, times, and reasons students engaged in conversation in their native language, as well as the spaces created by the students to do so. The study focused specifically on Spanish language use in terms of non-academic use, academic use, and whispering. Results showed that reasons for non-academic use included everyday conversation, sharing secret information, and telling jokes. Reasons for academic use included translation of subject matter, asking questions about subject matter of one another, and ease of use of Spanish when working in small groups. Lastly, it was found that whispering occurred mainly for reasons of understanding subject matter and lesson material.

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 forced educators from coast-to-coast to rethink teaching strategies to meet new federal standards of excellence. Today, the arrival of students from foreign countries whose first language is not English is an issue forcing principals and teachers to change classroom strategies in order to integrate these students into English immersion schools. While some try to downplay the issue, numerical projections alone should be enough to make educators rethink the way they go about preparing for certain obstacles and challenges that will present themselves with the continuing growth of the Spanish-speaking population. A 2004 report from the United States Census Bureau states that there are more than thirty million (30.52) people living in the United States who speak Spanish. Of those thirty million people, more than fourteen million (14.62) speak English "less than very well."

Special to the situation are the Southeastern states which are experiencing the largest influx of Hispanic residents whose children are enrolling in English-only school systems. The state of Alabama alone has seen a 515% increase in the number of Hispanic residents in the years 1990-2004. In 2005, Shattuck, of the Birmingham Metropolitan Board, noted that during the 1990s the Hispanic population grew 210%, and that Alabama had the seventh largest increase in the country during the decade. The Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce Center for Research projects that by 2009 there will be 121,904 Hispanics in the state of Alabama, compared to 24,628 in 1990 (Shattuck, 2005).

A 2004 University of Southern California study by Wainer, "The New Latino South and Challenge to Public Education," reports that while the Hispanic population in the Southeast is growing the fastest, "educators in Southern school districts are not prepared to address the changes in their student population" (p. 12). Such treatment often results in Hispanic students' poor academic performance on tests and much higher dropout rate when compared to their non-Hispanic peers. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), in 2001 Hispanics had a 27% dropout rate, four times that of whites, and double that of African-Americans.

Wainer and his colleagues interviewed 119 parents and educators and concluded that, while many teachers have good intentions for helping Spanish-speaking students, the overall inclusion of Hispanic Spanish-speaking students in the public education system is "deeply flawed" in the South (2004, p. 9). Principal Shawn McCullough, in Georgia, said some educators think their duty to include Hispanic students stops with a "sombbrero in the front office or taco Tuesdays in the cafeteria" (Wyatt, 2004). Another principal in North Carolina said, "Latino students are in the cycle of permanent remediation classes and have become stuck in a lower-performing cycle because of the lack of services. The district is creating a lower-performing subgroup" (Wainer, 2004, p. 33). It is clear from the Wainer project that educators in the Southeast, in particular, must find ways to understand and meet the needs of their language minority students in order to curb their high dropout rate and poor academic performance. While the Wainer study focused on school districts in Arkansas, North Carolina, and Georgia, during this study similar conditions and attitudes toward Spanish-speaking students were readily apparent in the state of Alabama.

So, what can be done to help the growing Hispanic Spanish-speaking public school population? What can be done to accommodate Spanish speakers transitioning to life in the United States?

The overall purpose of this study was to explore native language use by language minority students in an English-immersion classroom. With the dynamics and cultural make-up of English language elementary school classrooms constantly changing, it is of particular interest to see how students whose primary language is not English (in this study the language, or L1, was Spanish)¹ linguistically navigate their way through any given school day.

Liminality and the Nascent Bilingual Space

In laying the theoretical framework for this study one must look to Turner (1969) in understanding liminality as we will apply it. Turner applied the term liminality to a particular transitional period during rites of passage in premodern groups. He wrote that "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.... Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint.... It is as though they are being fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism" (p. 95). In order for an individual to gain sufficient knowledge to pass through the liminal period, "the neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status" (p. 103).

To illustrate the concept, Trubshaw (1995, n.p.) employs the metaphor of the ritual passage of boys to men among indigenous peoples. The boys are removed from their villages and families and transported to a remote site. Once there, they are subjected to various ordeals of humiliation and training by older men. During this time the boys are considered to be in a "liminal state," for they are neither boys nor men. They are neither here nor there. After these initiations, which may last from days to years, there is a strong ritualistic reunion with the home village and family. The boys are considered "reborn" as men and entitled to the privileges and responsibilities of manhood.

¹For convenience, I use the abbreviation "L1" (meaning one's first, or native, language) throughout as a noun to refer to the Spanish language and as an adjective to refer to native Spanish speakers, e.g., "L1 students."

In this study, I applied the concept of liminality in two ways. First, liminality was understood as the space in time during which an individual passes between two clearly defined states. Thus, a liminal space is the period of transition during which an individual moves from one social state to another. Using Trubshaw's metaphor, I offer the following parallel with Hispanic students in the United States whose parents do not speak English.

On the first day of school, most of these children leave a Spanish-speaking home life and enter English-immersion school settings. Once there, they are subjected to varying degrees of humiliation. They are spoken to in English and expected to have some idea of what is being said. They are placed in classrooms where teachers (usually monolingual in English), English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists, monolingual and bilingual students will aid in their learning of the English language. They will be trained to speak, read, and write a language that is completely new to them. They are introduced to an all-English speaking world where their success will ultimately be dictated by comprehension of the English language and an ability to compete in a very short time with native speakers of the language on a variety of academic tasks.

From day one in school, they are no longer only Spanish (L1) speakers because they are immediately subjected to English (L2) exchanges from those around them. Their minds are now on the constant prowl to pick up this word and understand that word. Their exposure to English and their desire to fit in, combined with the need to rely on their L1, put these students in a different space. They are now and progressively neither monolingual L1 speakers nor fluent L2 speakers. They are in a linguistic liminal space; they are "betwixt and between, neither here nor there" (Trubshaw, 1995, n.p.).

Trubshaw explains that the feelings of powerlessness of the tribal boys are compensated for by a sense of "sacred power" derived from the acquisition of sacred knowledge. The boys are indeed moving from a "ritually liminal state" to a "symbolically higher status." Such a transition occurs in the classroom also. Although frustrated and upset at the beginning of their journey to acquire fluent L2 status, L1-only speakers soon understand the privilege and responsibility that comes with acquiring the L2. For example, perhaps they see older siblings and parents who lack the all-powerful L2 struggle to find steady employment. Tatum (1999, p. 37) expounds on this idea, arguing that "achieving in school (was) considered important by Latino teens because success would allow them to take care of family members." The Spanish-speaker's journey from no knowledge of English to fluency traverses a liminal space.

This is the long-term space that nascent bilinguals occupy. Furthermore, it is arguable that bilingualism is itself a permanent liminal space. But, for now, we leave that for others to debate and turn to the second application of liminality. This second application is a departure from Turner's (1969) original conceptualization since what we are really talking about is a "counter-liminal" space. In the short term and at specific times – for the purposes of this study, the specific times are those when language minority students use the L1 in school – I will argue that liminality is the construction of "spaces" that serve as bases from which to traverse the larger liminal space of nascent bilingualism. These spaces are not limited to physical locations. They can be created virtual spaces wherein methods are employed by students to accomplish a specific purpose. In talking about such virtual spaces, Petrovic and Ballard (2005, p. 201) say that such space "creates a comfort level unavailable, and perhaps not creatable, in other physical spaces."

In other words, we are not talking about, as Turner (1969), a space where boundaries dissolve but a space where boundaries are erected. Notice, however, that counter-liminal spaces are made possible and necessary by the existence of the larger liminal space. Thus, they are, to my mind, part and parcel of liminality generally.

Importance of First Language Use While in School

Nieto (2004) suggests that the native language of students is their foundation for learning. It is the base students use "to learn the content of curriculum" (p. 214). She further says, "All good teachers know that learning needs to be based on prior knowledge and experiences, but in the case of language minority students, we seem to forget that as we effectively rob students of access to their prior learning...[s]tudents who speak a language other than English are viewed as 'handicapped,' and they are urged, through both subtle and direct means, to abandon their native language. The schools ask parents to speak English to their children at home, they punish children for using their native language, or they simply withhold education until the children have mastered English.... The negative impact of this strategy is incalculable" (p. 214). While situations often arise in which teachers must find non-traditional ways to communicate with their language minority students, native language cannot be viewed as the enemy. Tatum (1999, p. 139) states that "language is inextricably bound to identity. Language is not only an instrument tool for communication, but also the carrier of cultural values and attitudes."

Bilingual education has always been one such way to preserve native language while teaching proficiency in English at the same time. Both proponents and opponents of bilingual education have “always recognized its potential for empowering traditionally powerless groups” (Nieto, 2004, p. 226). As for the issue of power, it is of particular interest to note the power struggle between language minority students and their educators. On both sides, it could be argued, there is power in being able to speak a language not understood by the other. It is obviously an awkward situation when teachers have no idea what is being said behind their backs or, for that matter, in front of their faces when language minority students engage in L1 dialogue. It must be unnerving for teachers who are left wondering if the students are talking about them or perhaps planning a heist to take over the classroom.

Why is it that we fear what we cannot understand? L1 speakers routinely find themselves in situations where they cannot explain what they are doing because they lack the ability to do so in English. In her book *Silent Dancing* (1990), Cofer recalls her enrollment in school while not speaking any English. She relates an experience when she got up to use the restroom and asked a classmate in Spanish what she needed to do. Her classmate, knowing her insufficient English, mischievously instructed her to write her name on the chalkboard. Her teacher struck her on the head with a book as she approached the front of the classroom and led her back to her seat. In a misunderstanding due to Cofer’s lack of proficiency, the teacher thought she was being disrespectful. In actuality, Cofer did not understand English and therefore was unable to follow the teacher’s instructions about staying seated (p. 66).

In this extreme example, the student “instinctively understood then that language is the only weapon a child has against the absolute power of adults” (p. 66). The teacher had observed the conversation in Spanish between Cofer and her classmate and did not know what was being planned or discussed. Understanding the power that she had as a native speaker of a different language, and as a direct result of her experience, Cofer mastered English and maintained her Spanish as well.

At the same time, it goes without saying that those who speak English well inevitably hold power over those who do not. In Cofer’s example above, her classmate held all the power in instructing her to do something against the rules. How many of these situations do L1 speakers encounter each day? How many times are they blamed for acts they did not commit, but find themselves unable to defend themselves and their rationale for certain actions?

L1 Classroom Use and Academic Progress

A plethora of literature shows the effectiveness of bilingual education in the classroom. In a 2005 meta-analysis of bilingual education in Arizona, Arizona State University researchers Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass found such academic progress connected to L1 use in the classroom. They state that “literature has been remarkably clear in demonstrating that bilingual education is not only as effective as English-only alternatives, but that it tends to be *more effective*” (p. 62). One particular benefit is that bilingual education “permits students to develop an ability to engage academic content in two languages” (p. 61). Additionally, “such programs can be designed to treat children’s native language as a resource, leading to important positive effects on self-concept, self-esteem, ethnic identification and tolerance, and development of children’s native linguistic resources, especially in the context of two-way bilingual programs, which combine second language education for English students with maintenance bilingual education for [English language learners]” (Rolstad, 1997, cited in Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005, p. 63).

Even if a full bilingual education program is not feasible, due to lack of community resources, teachers can still encourage first language use. In innovative communities, much can be done to encourage native language use and maintenance through two-way programs. Similar to the Rolstad study, a 1998 meta-analysis by Greene yielded the same conclusion about bilingual learning. Greene concluded his analysis of eleven different studies by saying, “children with limited English proficiency who are taught using at least some of their native language perform significantly better on standardized tests than similar children who are taught only in English”.

Speaking of possibilities for two-way language classrooms that foster learning in both languages, Nieto (2004) suggests that “Native language maintenance might act as a buffer against academic failure by simply supporting literacy in children’s most developed language” (p. 215). Research has also revealed that students from diverse families have considerable sociocultural resources that can be used to enhance what is learned in the classroom. A language brokering activity includes any number of classroom exercises that require the use of one language to teach something in another. This study identified a number of such activities observed in the classroom.

A classroom example of two-way learning is found in Maynak’s (2004) study of Latino students in an English immersion classroom in California. Maynak performed a year-long qualitative study of Latino students and reported on classroom activities he witnessed that encouraged bilingual

students to engage in acts of translation. He suggests that “organizing classroom activities in ways that encourage students’ acts of translation represents a practical and powerful way to draw on and extend bilingual children’s ability to act as language brokers and to carry out intercultural transactions” (p. 17).

Further, Maynak cites an example of a student writing a story in English about going to Target, shopping with her family. The same student was then encouraged to translate the same story into Spanish in order to make a bilingual book. Another student who did not speak English shared a story about going to the beach. The teacher then asked for helpers to translate the story into English for the classroom newspaper. Such examples allow students to engage in activities that push the limits of their English. At the same time, students are allowed to perform beyond their levels of English competence and thus their language acquisition is facilitated (p. 15).

Given the importance of the L1 to students’ cultural identities, family connections, and academic progress, the purpose of this study was to examine the nature of first language use in an English immersion classroom with an eye to understanding the ways that students traverse the liminal space of nascent bilingualism. The specific research questions were the following: Why do L1 students use their first language? For what purposes do the L1 students use their first language? Are there specific places where L1 students tend to use their first language? Are there specific times that L1 students use their first language?

Methodology

Setting

The current research was conducted in Alabama at Little River Elementary School within the Tuscaloosa County School System. Little River Elementary is a mid-size elementary school of 333 students in grades K-5. With 10% of the student body being Hispanic, it has the largest Hispanic, Spanish-speaking population of all schools in the county. Other schools in the district are 1% Hispanic (School Tree, 2006). After Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher met with the principal from Little River Elementary, who suggested that the research be conducted in a particular 5th grade classroom because it had the highest number of students who regularly spoke Spanish to each other. It was a sample of convenience.

After selecting the classroom and meeting with the teacher, I provided the teacher letters of consent and assent to be sent home with each child.

The letters were sent home in both the Spanish and English languages. They requested permission to observe children in school settings and also to conduct audio-taped interviews with the L1 children during the course of the research project. Two of the parents did not understand exactly what was going to transpire and home visits were arranged to answer questions about the purpose of the research and the methodology to be employed. Once permission was granted by each parent, the researcher began the study.

Four L1 (Spanish-speaking) participants in the same 5th grade classrooms were observed and interviewed. Each student was at a different level of English proficiency. Two were designated English Language Learners and received regular help from English as a Second Language tutors. The other two students have been at school in the United States since kindergarten. Each child's parents speak only Spanish at home. Observations were made in classroom settings and other areas including the lunchroom, playground, and library. The classes observed--Social Studies, Science, Reading, and Math--ranged in size from approximately fifteen to twenty-five students on each occasion. Math and reading were the only classes tracked along ability levels. The advanced class (one participant) was larger than the remedial class (three participants). The class population usually consisted of four Hispanic students, twelve African-American students, and eight white children. The male to female ratio was about even.

The researcher attended the school two days a week every week, for a total of ten weeks, for about two hours on each occasion. The researcher visited the school a total of twenty times altogether. The days and times of each visit differed each week. This was done in an effort to capture natural classroom behavior, instead of behavior premeditated due to the expectation of a visit from the researcher. A typical content class lasted about one and a half hours. During each visit the researcher observed and recorded the classroom interactions of language minority students and their peers, looking to specifically discern the nature of L1 use.

During the data collection, codes were used for the language being spoken, the names of the students being observed, and the time, place and context of the interaction. After the data were collected and transcribed electronically, multiple copies were made of the research manuscript. During the domain analysis the researcher noted each and every use of L1 and L2. The researcher looked for the function of each use and the consequence that followed. At the same time, the researcher noted the rationale and the cause-effect relationship behind each use. At the conclusion of the domain analysis, as discussed at length below, findings showed three reasons for L1 use: academic use, non-academic use, and whispering.

Two students participated in two semi-structured, audio-taped interviews that lasted between twenty and twenty-five minutes. The other two students, for differing reasons, participated in three semi-structured audio-taped interviews. One participated in a third interview because of a technical problem with a prior recording. The second participated in a third interview because he was in some advanced classes and was observed fewer times than the other three who had every class together. These third interviews lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes. Permission to conduct the interviews was granted by the parents and students prior to taping, through the parents' letters of consent and, with the children, assent procedures.

The primary purposes of the interviews were to question how language minority students feel about using their first language at school, to ask about their perceptions of their teachers' and peers' response to the use of their first language, and to follow up on observations of their first language use in language brokering with other language minority students. Findings of the domain analysis provided much of the context for each question. To explore their feelings in a comfortable setting away from school and to encourage them to express themselves freely, the interviews were all conducted at the children's homes, either outside on the front porch or inside in the family room, depending on the time of day. Interviews were given in a mixture of Spanish and English, depending upon the language skills of the individual student being interviewed. The interviews were transcribed at their conclusion and the audiotapes were destroyed upon completion of the project. A preliminary interview protocol was developed at the beginning of the research project and added as questions arose from the observation phase of the project. The final protocol is provided in Appendix A.

An additional data collection activity occurred at the conclusion of the research period. Each student was provided with paper and crayons and asked to draw and color two pictures, one regarding the last occasion they spoke English and one regarding the last time they spoke Spanish. They were asked to include the setting and the people they were talking with. After they finished, they were questioned about specific aspects of their drawings such as who were the characters in the picture, where the situation occurred, what had been the topic of discussion, and why the particular language was used.

Findings

After analyzing more than one hundred pages of observational data, the coloring activity drawings, and two and a half hours of transcribed audio interviews (using qualitative analysis coding methods to identify themes and patterns), three broad categories of Spanish use emerged: non-academic, academic, and whispering. Spanish was used for non-academic purposes in different spaces. It was also used for academic purposes in different, created spaces. Lastly, it was used for whispering purposes in various spaces throughout the geography of the school.

A limitation to the project occurred in the context of L1 students whispering when speaking to one another. It was often impossible for the researcher to decipher what was being said in a classroom context. It was somewhat easier at lunchtime, when the researcher was seated directly with the participants. The interviews allowed for some follow-up here. However, the participants often did not remember their reasons for whispering or what was said.

Non-academic Purposes and Spaces

The purposes for which Spanish is used in non-academic spaces and places are numerous. While it was common to overhear conversations between David and Carlos about “el diablo que explota” (a type of firework) and between Yasmín and Brenda about “tias favoritas” (favorite aunts), it was also interesting to see how L1 was used as a tool for the specific purpose of being secretive. Brenda told me sometimes she speaks Spanish during the day “so nobody else could understand what we’re saying.”

L1 used for secretive purposes. A number of times, L1 was used as a shielding tool to disseminate privileged information to other L1 speakers. For example, seeing Yasmín and Brenda in a much longer library book check-in line, David looks around and then, in Spanish, tells the other L1 girls that his library line is much shorter. Yasmín and Brenda then run from the much longer line to join him. The secret sharing of information was very common between L1 students. In another instance, a boy steals a piece of paper off Carlos’ desk while he is not looking. While it would not be cool to be a “tattle tale” and expose another student’s mischievous actions in an elementary school setting, use of L1 allowed David to inform Carlos of the missing assignment and the culprit behind its disappearance, by saying, “él tiene tu papel” (he has your paper). Similarly, when Carlos suddenly slaps David in the face after a brief conversation with an English-speaking student, he is able to tell him that another student “me pidió

pegarte” (he told me to hit you) without the other student knowing he told on him. Thus, the sharing of information that might embarrass them or jeopardize their standing in front of their fellow classmates remains shielded from view through the use of L1.

L1 used for clarification purposes. Another non-academic use of L1 was for informational or clarification purposes. For example, the librarian explains a fundraiser that causes the class to become excited. David apparently doesn’t understand the exchange of information and asks Yasmín, “¿Qué dijo?” (What did she say?). Yasmín translates the information into Spanish for the benefit of David, and he too becomes animated.

L1 used for recreational purposes. By “recreational,” I refer specifically to such phenomena as joking, insulting, or “calling out.” The most common physical spaces for recreational uses of Spanish included the recess line, the trash can in the lunchroom, and the library book check-in line.

There were a dozen times L1 use was followed by laughing or the rolling of eyes. Jokes were shared between L1 speakers; David had a favorite joke that always started, “Se cayó un elefante...” (An elephant fell down), which was almost always met with someone saying, “¡Ya lo sé!” (I already know this one).

Insults were common between L1 speakers while making fun of or “calling out” each other. Carlos tells David that “su comida se ve muy feo” (your food looks disgusting) because he has ketchup all over his tray as a result of squirting too much accidentally. When David answers a question from the teacher by saying that fish is the grossest food, Yasmín challenges his answer privately by yelling at him, “pero tu siempre comes fish!” (but you always eat fish!). L1 insults were also directed towards those who made fun of their peers. When asked why she sometimes speaks Spanish on the bus, Brenda said, “because people make fun of us, and sometimes we talk about them and we don’t want them to know that we’re talking about them.”

Academic Purposes, Spaces, and Places

L1 used because it helps. The purposes for which Spanish was used in academic spaces and places were numerous. Generally, the use of Spanish for academic purposes followed intuitive assumptions about language use: L1 will be used more in classes that are more language dependent. Thus, there was far greater non-academic Spanish use in Math and Science classes, as opposed to the Spanish heard for L1 assistance in Social Studies and Reading. When I asked David about the last time he used Spanish

at school, he told me it was “en la clase de Reading” (in Reading class). He said, “no entiendo” (I don't understand) when I asked if he understood what was being taught in English during that class.

A frequent purpose was L1 assistance from one Spanish speaker to another about assignments and class projects. Carlos, Yasmín, and Brenda all told me that one of the principal reasons they use Spanish at school is to help David, who struggles with his English. When I asked Carlos, who helps David in his Science and Social Studies classes, to complete a sentence that started “I like speaking Spanish at school because...,” he responded, “it helps other people learn.” When I asked Brenda why she speaks so much Spanish to David in Math and Reading she said, “Because he hardly understands English, and I just like to help people and help him with English and tell him what he's supposed to do.” When I asked Yasmín why she spoke Spanish at school, she told me, “Because David and Brenda don't speak that much English.” Yasmín ultimately drew an academic situation from Math class as the last time she spoke Spanish. David ultimately recognizes the help he receives and asks for from his L1 friends and told me he speaks Spanish at school much of the time because “a veces le quiero preguntar algo a mi amigo” (sometimes I want to ask my friend something).

L1 used because it's just easier. It is interesting to note the use of L1 for ease of use purposes. Brenda tells David, “necesito tijeras nuevas” (I need new scissors) and David asks her for “papel azul” (blue paper) and “me das tu borrador” (let me see your eraser). While obvious that they know the nouns in English, from other instances when David said the word “eraser” in English at lunch and Brenda used the word “scissors” during other classroom instances, L1 was used as a convenient, more natural means of communication. Brenda noted, “sometimes it's just easier,” when I asked her why she spoke Spanish, outside of helping her classmates in Spanish. In the self-formed group of David, Brenda, and Yasmín, L1 was almost always the language of choice. During a group Math assignment I heard Yasmín saying to the others, “Esta es... Este es... No puedes usar esta” (This is this... This is that... You can't use that).

L1 used because it helps others to learn Spanish. Teachers created some opportunities for L1 use by the students. The gym coach told me, “Sometimes we use their help. Sometimes we count in Spanish when we do our warm-ups.” Carlos, when asked how he felt about leading the class in counting while doing warm-ups told me, “I think it's really cool [because] then other people can learn how to count in Spanish.” The music teacher plays songs in Spanish and asks Carlos or Brenda to use their Spanish to translate for the class, although they were too embarrassed each

time to respond. David, who would jump at the chance to translate, does not know enough English to explain what the song is about. The music teacher playing songs in Spanish ignited conversation between the students in Spanish. During one particular children's song, Brenda, smiling, looks at the students around her and says proudly in English, "My mother used to sing this song when I was little."

Whispering

Whispering occurred in both academic and non-academic settings. Whispering is treated separately because there were at least 43 instances of whispering in the collected data, and at least 22 of the decipherable occurrences happened in L1. Thus, one of the most interesting and frequent Spanish spaces created by the students was the whisper.

Whispering occurred frequently in the classroom as a means of academic L1 assistance and learning, to convey lost or misunderstood information from one L1 speaker to another. Sharing such information almost always took the form of whispering in order to not draw attention from teachers who might assume they were just chatting, which admittedly occurred, instead of focusing on the subject matter.

David was heard frequently whispering to his L1 classmates, "¿Que dijo?" (What did he/she say?) or "¿Que preguntó?" (What did he/she ask?). In one example, Mrs. Darling tells a story to her Science class about an alligator that is eaten by an anaconda. Days later the alligator claws its way out of the anaconda, splitting the anaconda in two. The class laughs and some girls say, "Gross!" and suddenly David's attention is drawn to a story he did not fully capture and, therefore, seemed bored with while it was being told. He turns to Carlos and asks, "Que dijo?" (What did she say?). Carlos whispers a quick synopsis of the story in L1 to his friend, while the class continues into other material, and David smiles and laughs at the conclusion of the story.

Outside the classroom, whispering also occurred in places where L1 use was more common than not. When interviewing Brenda and Yasmín, it was noted that the lunchroom was a common place where they used their L1. However, the girls' table (self-segregated) in the lunchroom was a place where Brenda and Yasmín would commonly whisper. Brenda told me that after speaking Spanish to Yasmín, other girls "ask us what we're saying and what we are talking about them [sic]." During observation, instances of speaking Spanish out loud were almost always followed by conversation in English to the girls at their table, explaining that they had not been gossiping about the girls in Spanish. The L1 girls would almost

always engage in using L1 out loud when the L2 girls got up to take their trays to the trash can. However, while L2 speakers were present, whispering enabled the girls to speak in their L1, resulting, as they explained, in less chance of being accused of talking about other people.

Secret sharing or information dissemination also took the form of whispering. When the class goes to the library, Yasmín and Brenda are two of the first to arrive and choose a table. The rest of the class files in, and soon their table is full except for one seat. David comes in with another girl and races her to the seat. She gets there first. David whispers to Brenda and Yasmín and then goes to an empty table. The two girls look at each other, nod, and then jump up to sit at David's new table. In the lunchroom David whispers with a boy at the end of the table in English and then turns and tells Carlos that the boy "no quiere su comida" (he doesn't want his food). Carlos, in turn, waits a few seconds, and then asks the boy if he is going to eat his food, and then gladly accepts his offer of extra chicken wings. So, information was dispersed without complications.

Other Observations and Implications

During this study the researcher was able to glimpse into the liminal space occupied by four Hispanic, Spanish-speaking students in Alabama. The research indicates why, for what purposes, and when Spanish is used by children in the geography of the school setting. These answers were obtained through observation and interviews. Just as Trubshaw (1995) and Turner (1969) concluded by studying the rituals of traditional villages years ago, these students show educators and researchers alike, the many obstacles faced in the quest to navigate the liminal space of nascent bilingualism. This process must be understood if educators are to effectively remove obstacles to fostering an environment where students feel comfortable using and maintaining L1 while developing their L2. The literature is quite clear: use of the L1 enhances learning, academic progress and the acquisition of English.

Teachers need to be understanding when dealing with students who are not native English speakers. When the class as a whole was asked questions, the L1 students being observed stayed silent 60% of the time. When L1 students were asked questions directly, the students did not respond immediately (within 15 seconds) 90% of the time. The teachers prodded for the answer, offering clues, and an answer eventually came out. However, the students' delayed response cannot be attributed to the students not knowing the answer. When interviewed, the students were vocal about their feelings of incompetence in answering questions out loud in

English. David told me that “es que no se decir la palabra muy bien” (I don’t know how to pronounce the words very well) when I asked him why he does not answer out loud during class. This hesitancy to use L2 when around English-speaking peers and teachers is one reason these students created counter-liminal spaces, that is, erected borders. Furthermore, this hesitancy transcended the classroom.

The lunchroom was of particular interest, as noted earlier, because a person may infer that it would be an easier atmosphere in which to speak in L1. While this seemed largely true for both boys, the girls’ peers were constantly questioning what was being said. When I asked Carlos in one of the follow-up interviews where he spoke the most Spanish, he told me that it was when he was at lunch, “when teachers won’t hear you, cuz sometimes they’ll get you in trouble.” Carlos went on to explain that he thought teachers and kids think that the Spanish-speaking kids are always talking about them when they speak Spanish: “They ask you, ‘Are you talking about me?’” Constant questions and accusations, as observed, lead students to believing they are being disrespectful to teachers and peers when they speak L1.

The students’ actions also showed that Spanish is a tool that L1 speakers utilize to their advantage. As noted earlier, Spanish-speaking instances covered everything from dissemination of information, to gossiping about others. Each child expressed some pride or pleasure in being bilingual. Outside of the classroom, Yasmín told me that she likes speaking to people in Spanish, “because sometimes they don’t know English. They only know Spanish.” When questioned about the same thing, Brenda told me she speaks Spanish “cuz some people might not know English, they might know Spanish [sic].”

As noted, the lunchroom was a prominent place to speak Spanish. When drawing a picture of the last time he spoke Spanish, David drew a lunch table and only labeled the people sitting at his table and the teacher’s table (see Appendix B). He labeled himself, Brenda, Yasmín, and Carlos sitting at the same table. This is of note because the lunchroom is typically very segregated in terms of gender, with all-boys and all-girls tables. In other words, David created a fictive space where he could speak Spanish freely, a community where he felt he could freely engage in L1 conversation without hesitation or fear of reprimand from teachers and peers.

It is often the case that children do not continue speaking Spanish once English is acquired (Fillmore, 1991). The evidence here suggests that students enjoy their bilingualism, nascent or otherwise. Whether this can be maintained is another question, and, as Fillmore has pointed out, doubtful. Nevertheless, this study evidenced, for the various reasons already

detailed in this study, the continued use of Spanish by both the bilingual speakers and the students trying to master the L2. This should be seen as an important building block in our understanding of the academic success or failure of language minority students.

Also noted in the study was the importance of continued encouragement by teachers and other school personnel of L1 use. In several instances, teachers were innovative and encouraging. These efforts were sometimes well-received by the L1 students who appreciated sharing their language. However, the students also sometimes shied away from engaging in teacher-directed uses of their language. This evidences a school culture that is in need of systematic approaches to L1 use. However, it may simultaneously evidence L1 student resistance to the intrusion into their counter-liminal space.

One implication of this study regards the very important counter-liminal space of whispering. Whispering for L1 assistance was common. However, teachers almost always responded negatively to students' actions, apparently assuming all whispering was off-task. "Pay attention!," "Is there something the whole class needs to know?," and "Quiet!" were common responses from teachers to whispering L1 students and their classmates. Teachers must realize that, while their concerns of students being off task are legitimate, it is also the case that whispering was used more frequently than not for academic reasons. Either way, whispering was revealed in this study as one of the most pervasive and important of the counter-liminal spaces.

The overriding implication of this study, however, is that teachers, especially in English immersion settings, who can respect these spaces while also respecting and encouraging students' use of L1 are needed to ensure the academic success of language minority students. In 1999, over eight million language minority students between the ages of 5 and 17 were living in the United States, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics in June 2004. This number will increase, as 10% of all preschoolers are Hispanic, the largest percentage of all ethnic groups. How educators respond to new challenges presented by an increasing number of students whose first language is Spanish will determine the success of many classrooms and public school systems as we head into the 21st century.

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Appendix A:

Interview Protocol

1. When do you usually use Spanish?
2. For what purposes do you use Spanish?
3. Where do you usually use Spanish?
4. With whom do you use Spanish?
5. How do your non-Spanish speaking friends react to your use of Spanish?
6. How do your instructors react to your use of Spanish in the classroom?
7. Do you speak Spanish at home with your parents?
8. Do you speak Spanish at home with your siblings?
9. Do you speak Spanish outside of school with friends who are also native Spanish speakers?
10. Do you like speaking Spanish?

During each interview additional questions were used in accordance with answers given by the student being interviewed. Additional questions included:

1. Why do you speak so much Spanish on the bus?
2. Do you feel more comfortable speaking in Spanish or in English?
3. How come it is easier to speak Spanish when you're outside the classroom?
4. Give me an example of the last time you spoke Spanish at school. Tell me about who you were talking with, and what the situation was.

5. Tell me about why you speak Spanish more in Math than in your other classes.
6. When you're working in small groups why do you always speak a lot more Spanish?
7. Do you mostly speak in Spanish when you are working with another Spanish-speaking student?
8. How come you feel that you have to speak English at school?
9. Do you ever feel like sometimes outside of school you have to speak Spanish?
10. Do you speak Spanish during certain classes?
11. Why do you think you speak Spanish on the bus with your friends instead of English?
12. The gym coach told me that sometimes when you do exercises to start class that you count in Spanish. Can you tell me about that?
13. How does that make you feel when you lead the class counting in Spanish during warm-ups for PE?
14. Why do you whisper so much in class?
15. Do other kids ask you what you're talking about when you are speaking Spanish?
16. How does that make you feel when people ask you what things you are talking about in Spanish?
17. What do they usually say to you?
18. Fill in the last part of this sentence: I like speaking Spanish at school because...
19. Do you ever speak Spanish at school because you don't want other people to know what you're saying?

20. Why do you get so tired of speaking in English?
21. How do the other girls at your lunch table react when you speak Spanish during lunch?
22. Do they ever kind of look at you funny?
23. Hay muchas veces que usted sabe la respuesta pero no la dices? (Are there a lot of times that you know the answer but you don't say it?)
24. Y quien te ayuda en la clase de leer? (Who helps you in Reading class?)
25. Porque no dices la respuesta si la sabes? (How come you don't say the answer if you know it?)
26. Si usted no entiende lo que esta preguntando en ingles. Hay alguien que te ayuda? (If you don't understand what is being asked in English, who helps you?)
27. Usted cree que en veces la maestra quiere que ustedes hablen en ingles? (Do you think that the teachers only want you to speak in English?)
28. A veces te sientas como que tienes que hablar ingles cuando estas en la escuela? (Sometimes do you feel like you have to speak English at school?)
29. Hablan español para que puedan decir cosas secretas? (Do you speak Spanish so you can tell each other secrets?)
30. Ustedes dicen muchos secretas entre si? (Do you tell a lot of secrets to each other during the day?)

Appendix B:

Sample Drawing

