

ORAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN SPANISH: A STUDY OF FIRST-GRADE
SPANISH SPEAKERS IN A DUAL IMMERSION PROGRAM

by

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Para mis alumnos por siempre inspirarme a ser una mejor maestra.

To foster children's language development, create opportunities for them to talk, and then talk with them (not at them).

Marie Clay, *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The development of oral language is fundamental to a child's literacy growth (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). It is vital for young children to practice and master their native oral language for three important reasons: Speaking and listening 1) are the foundation skills for reading and writing; 2) help children develop higher-order thinking skills; and 3) are academic, social, and life skills that are valued in school and the world (Resnick & Snow, 2008).

Most recently, and due to the emphasis placed on standardized testing and scientifically research-based teaching methods, the development of oral language has unfortunately been relegated to a more incidental result of many classrooms. In addition, because teachers are spending more time on academic content, children are not given many opportunities to build their oral language (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005).

As a public school English as a Second Language teacher in a dual immersion program, I am aware of the challenges dual immersion teachers face trying to meet the need for appropriate native language oral activities for their Spanish-speaking students. Because they have not been exposed to many language experiences in Spanish, these children do not have an expansive vocabulary; they do not use complex sentence structures, and they are not accustomed to talking frequently with adults. This chapter

introduces the issues that these children with an unfinished oral foundation in Spanish confront when developing literacy skills in their first and second languages.

Role of the Researcher

I have been teaching in a K-6 dual-immersion Spanish-English program in a large metro area in the Upper Midwest for the last three years. My teaching responsibilities have included teaching guided reading and intervention groups in Spanish during Readers' Workshop, a daily instructional model that includes mini-lessons, literacy work time, and a closing share time to review what was learned. At the time of this research, I was teaching in a first grade classroom in which approximately 90% of the students were Spanish native speakers with a variety of language and literacy abilities that ranged from below to above grade level.

This dual-immersion program follows a 90/10 model; meaning that Spanish is used in the early years for all students for nearly all of the instruction (usually 90%), and English is gradually increased as a medium of instruction each year until the proportion of English instruction is roughly 50% (usually by fourth grade). In the first grade classroom where I co-taught with the classroom teacher, all language arts instruction is delivered in Spanish; in addition all students receive oral language development instruction in English for approximately 40 minutes every day.

Background of the Researcher

I have been interested in oral language development since I started working as an ESL teacher in a transitional bilingual kindergarten program fifteen years ago. At that time, the majority of my students were native Spanish speakers who had recently

immigrated with their families to the United States. Because the students were transitioned into English-only classes after Kindergarten, I often wondered two things: what level of English oral proficiency these students achieved at the end of elementary school, and how much their Spanish oral language continued to grow after being transitioned into English-only classes so rapidly. Five years later this bilingual program was changed from transitional to developmental, so the students started receiving language arts instruction in Spanish from Kindergarten through sixth grade. Oral language skills in English and Spanish remained as very important focus of my teaching. It was around this time when I began observing that a growing number of the Hispanic children starting in the bilingual program were coming in with an incomplete oral foundation in their native language. This growing trend reflected key changes in our student population, which no longer consisted of newcomers but instead were children who had been born here in the United States. Currently, many of the Hispanic students who enter the dual-immersion program where I teach show similar language challenges. Even though Spanish is their home language, these students do not have the grammatical structures and vocabulary needed to communicate using complete and meaningful sentences. This leads to my research questions: Does additional instruction focused on listening and speaking skills increase students' control over the basic structures of oral Spanish? What reciprocal effect will stronger oral skills have on students' reading and writing skills?

I am motivated personally and professionally to find successful ways to meet the language needs of these children, and work on designing strategic instruction to

strengthen their Spanish oral skills. My hope is that other dual-immersion teachers will be able to use this study in order to most effectively monitor language learning and shape instruction for those English Language Learners (ELLs) with low oral skills in Spanish.

Research Biases

I bring to this study two underlying biases. First, I believe that bilingual education is the most beneficial instructive program for our students. There are numerous educational, cognitive, socio-cultural, and economic benefits that result from being bilingual and bi-literate. ELLs make better progress in acquiring English and in academic development when they receive literacy instruction in their primary language at the same time as they are introduced to English as a second language (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1998). Cognitively, bilingual students perform better than monolingual students on tasks that require diverse thinking, pattern recognition, and problem solving. They also possess enhanced meta-linguistic awareness or knowledge about the structural properties of language (Cloud, Genesse & Hamayan, 2000), which is very important in the acquisition of reading because it facilitates decoding (Adams, 1990). In terms of socio-cultural advantages, students in bilingual programs have the opportunity to gain greater intercultural understanding, appreciation and respect for other cultural groups. Economically, being bilingual and bi-literate enhance their future employment opportunities when they complete school.

Second, I think the on-going development of oral language skills is a major factor towards learning to read and write in both a first and a second language. Emphasis on oral language development, especially for students at risk, should not cease by

Kindergarten. These students need consistent small group instruction adapted to their oral language needs until they show strong oral skills (Crevola & Vineis, 2008). If this does not happen, these students will continue falling behind their peers and will likely not be able to read at grade level by the end of first grade (Gentile, 2006).

Guiding Questions

My research hopes to provide insights into the following questions: Does additional instruction focused on listening and speaking skills increase students' control over the basic structures of oral Spanish? What reciprocal effect will stronger oral skills have on students' reading and writing skills?

These guiding questions will supply the basis for my research in a first-grade dual-language classroom. The answers to these questions will hopefully provide some guidelines for dual-immersion teachers about how to meet the language needs of native Spanish students with low oral skills in their primary language.

Summary

The focus of my research is to study how introducing additional instruction in Spanish focused on listening and speaking skills, as a supplement to a dual-immersion reading curriculum, affects the oral Spanish of struggling Spanish native children. It is expected that children come to school with sufficient oral skills to support their literacy learning. However, a recent trend in the student population of our program suggests that this is no longer the case. There is a pressing need for scaffolding the oral primary language development of these Spanish-speaking children in the dual-language classroom if they are to become successful readers and writers.

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One I introduced my research by establishing the purpose, significance and need for the study. In the second chapter I will discuss oral language skills and their importance in emergent literacy. Research on L1 and L2 oral language development of dual-immersion students will be presented. Finally, advised instructional interventions and assessment for Spanish-speaking students with low oral skills in their primary language will be reviewed. In Chapter Three I discuss the qualitative research design and the action research cycles used for this study. Chapter Four reports the data on this study and provides examples of student anecdotal records, teacher journal notes, and comments on the changes observed on the oral language skills checklists. Chapter Five presents the two major findings of my research: 1) all the participant students did improve their control over the basic grammatical structures of oral Spanish with additional instruction, and 2) the children's increased control over oral language structures happened through conversations in a small group setting guided by the teacher. Finally, the implications and limitations of this study are considered.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The intent of this study is to examine how providing additional instruction in Spanish focused on listening and speaking skills, as a supplement to a dual-immersion reading curriculum, facilitates the development of oral skills of struggling Spanish-speaking children. In the dual-language immersion program where I teach, I have identified a growing trend of low oral skills in the primary language of Hispanic children who 1) have been born and raised in the U.S.; 2) have limited or no pre-school experience; and 3) lack the grammatical structures and vocabulary necessary to talk in complete and meaningful sentences.

This chapter presents an overview of oral language skills and their importance in emergent literacy. Research on L1 and L2 oral language development among students in dual-immersion programs in U.S. schools is examined, and the chapter concludes with a review of the need for effective instructional interventions for Spanish-speaking children with low oral skills in their primary language.

Oral Language and Emergent Literacy

According to Crévola & Vineis (2008), oral language refers to the act of listening to vocabulary and language structures with understanding (receptive language) and speaking to communicate one's thoughts (expressive language). The processes of speaking and listening require the same underlying knowledge of language, including a

working understanding of the linguistic structures and the social rules that determine how language is used in context. As social beings, we are always expanding our oral language skills (Pinnel & Jaggar, 2003).

Hall (1987) found that oral language emerges in children when the following conditions are present: (a) children are the major constructors of language; (b) parents, teachers, and caregivers serve as facilitators of language development; (c) language is embedded in the context of the daily life of the child; (d) children understand the functions of language as they use it to clarify information about themselves and others; and (e) language is learned in a child-initiated, holistic manner.

A large body of research shows the bidirectional relationship between aspects of oral language experience and emergent literacy skills (Adams, 1990; Clay, 1991; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The term emergent, in this context, means that knowledge of reading and writing and their purposes gradually emerges during children's opportunities to engage in meaningful oral interactions with adults. Snow, Tabors, & Dickison (2001) state that reading is a linguistic activity that requires knowledge about the structure of words. Children first acquire knowledge about the words of their language through the development of oral language skills. In turn, the word knowledge that children learn via oral language development is important to learning about printed words. Glazer (1989) has even suggested that without oral language, it might not be possible to develop the ability to read and write.

Clay (1998) indicates that families are unconscious teachers. They engage in conversation with children. They speak, but they also listen, think about what the child

understands, and reply carefully. Building on studies of children's language learning, she proposes the powerful idea that teaching is a form of conversation. Clay (1991) wrote, "Children need to be engaged in conversation about the things they know about because the familiar content provides them with opportunities to experiment with ways of expressing themselves" (pp.37-38). For children to improve their oral language, it is critical that they engage in many conversations with language-proficient adults. Conversation with an adult is the most effective tutorial situation to help the child's linguistic functioning move from one level to another. In summary, children need to talk, and adults need to support them in their speech efforts. In doing so, the foundation is laid to ease the child into literacy learning (Clay, 1991).

Need for Oral Language Instruction

Several studies have shown the connection of limited oral language skills to difficulties in learning to read and write. Bruner's research in 1966 highlighted the need for students to have a command of fluent and structured oral language as a precursor to literacy success. In 1983, Clay clarified the relationship between control over grammatical structures as revealed by a sentence repetition test. She determined that students with limited control of structures struggle with reading even the simplest of early reading texts. Clay (1985) advised: "We [teachers] could schedule time when children with poor language skills would be encouraged to talk, to question, to explain to other children and to the teacher as she moves among them extending their expressions of ideas into an oral statement" (p. 36).

The development of oral language is therefore considered essential to a child's literacy development. As children enter school, they bring diverse levels of oral language to the learning process. Kirkland & Patterson (2005) state that teachers face a challenge in meeting the individual needs of each language learner, as well as in discerning which methods work most effectively in enhancing language development.

Oral Language Development of Dual-Immersion Students

Large-scale studies of dual-immersion programs in the U.S. that have examined the academic language of minority students demonstrate that these bilingual programs result in reading and language art scores that approximate or exceed grade-level norms (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cloud et al., 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1998; Genesee & Gándara, 1997; Christian et al., 2004; Ramirez et al., 1991; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Most of the research has been qualitative, with each study focusing on a relatively small number of students in a single dual-language program. Cumulatively, these studies indicate that, on average, both English speakers and ELLs in dual-immersion programs achieve the goal of developing bilingualism and biliteracy. The ELLs, however, tend to develop more balanced abilities in the two languages than the native English speakers (Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003).

Two large-scale studies in particular have investigated the Spanish and English oral language development of native-Spanish-speaking (NSS) and native-English-speaking (NES) students in dual-immersion programs across the US. The first one, by Howard, Christian, & Genesee (2004), indicated high average oral English proficiency on the part of both NSS and NES students at the end of third and fifth grades, with average

scores in the mid- to high-4 range on a scale of 0 to 5. In Spanish, both group of students showed progress from third grade to fifth grade. In addition, as a group, the NSS students experienced a subtle shift from slight dominance in Spanish in third grade to comparable scores in English and Spanish by the end of fifth grade, while the NES students were always clearly dominant in English.

The second study was conducted by Lindholm-Leary (2001) using the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM). The oral language proficiency data showed that dual-language education students scored at, or near the top, of the SOLOM in their first language and almost all students were rated as proficient in their two languages, particularly by the upper grade levels. Students made statistically significant growth in both languages across grade levels. These data were consistent, whether the students were examined from a cross-sectional or longitudinal perspective, and regardless of the language measures that were used.

Oral Language Instruction in Spanish

Even though the strength of language skills in bilinguals' first language is widely recognized as a determinant factor in their learning of a second language, there is little research on those bilingual students who enter school with low oral skills in their L1 or with low levels of bilingual proficiency –in both L1 and L2 (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). In a review of Clay's research on oral language acquisition, Gentile (2004a) states that it is very important for teachers to have a clear understanding of how language develops and to know how the most common structures of the language are acquired by children who are learning to read and write. He concludes that this knowledge helps teachers interact

more effectively with their students in order to expand and refine children's language and use assessment results to inform language and literacy instruction. Gentile's research resulted in the design of the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI) or *Instrumento de la Adquisición de la Expresión Oral* (2006). This is an assessment in Spanish that provides teachers information related to the most common language structures that children control in their oral Spanish, and helps identify stages of linguistic development for instruction (Gentile, 2006). This system of assessment was constructed after analyzing almost 1,800 sentences dictated and written in Spanish by sixty first-grade children during their thirty half-hour lessons in early intervention (Descubriendo La Lectura, DLL/The Spanish Reconstruction of Reading Recovery™).

The following five sentence structures appeared frequently and consistently in the dictation and writing of the students who successfully completed the intervention in twenty weeks (Gentile, 2001; 2004a):

1. Simple Sentences such as:

Me gusta comer helado.

Hoy está lloviendo.

2. Sentences containing prepositional phrases such as:

Yo quiero jugar con mis amigos.

El perro está jugando con la pelota.

3. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a conjunction, for example:

Tenía mucha tos pero fui a la escuela.

Si me porto bien me llevará de compras.

4. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a relative pronoun such as:

El libro que acabas de leer es muy interesante.

No puedo cambiar lo que ya pasó.

5. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by an adverb, for example:

Los murciélagos vuelan de noche cuando hay muchos insectos.

Fue a visitar la ciudad donde vive su madre.

Control of these structures has typically not been evaluated or used to inform instruction because the way children acquire these basic sentence structures is assumed to happen naturally over time. However, for children who enter school with low oral skills, reading and writing instruction alone does not accelerate their oral language learning. Effective, targeted instruction must create a direct connection between language and literacy development (Gentile, 2001). In sum, teachers need to identify children's control over the most common structures. This enables teachers to scaffold children's responses by expanding and refining what they say and connect them to book language. It also provides teachers with insight into the language structures the children need to engage in instructional conversations in the classroom (Cazden, 1988; Gentile & McMillan, 1992; Clay, 2001).

The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI)

The OLAI contains four components, three of which have alternate forms (A, B, and C).

- Component I- Repeated Sentences and Sentence Transformations: This component has several purposes. It is one way to determine the language

structures a child controls as well as the ability to listen, follow directions, and respond. It also reveals if a child can detect the changes in meanings that occur when a speaker uses the same words in a different tone of voice to alter the meaning of a sentence. This recognition signals a level of linguistic control that occurs through prosodic functions of intonation, pitch, emphasis or stress, and juncture. According to Clay (1983) when a child fails to repeat a sentence verbatim, he usually repeats that difficult sentence in a way that indicates the structures over which he has control.

- **Component II- Story Reconstruction and Narrative Comprehension:** This component gives additional information about children's oral language acquisition by assessing the ability to listen to reconstruct or create a logically sequenced, illustrated story. Children whose oral language is not well developed must learn to follow a story line to interpret a story. This is a major first step in children's learning to read and compose texts.
- **Component III- Picture Drawing, Narration and Dictation:** Through drawing and narration, the teacher and the child establish a relationship of joint attention to something in the outside world, creating communication as they talk about the drawing. This component also provides an opportunity to dictate and write something after the drawing and narration are complete. Writing challenges a child to use his ability to segment sounds in words and write what he hears in sequence, a preliminary step to becoming literate (Elkonin, 1971). Writing and reading dictated text signals whether or not a child is able to use the written

representation of language to get meaning and make predictions. Clay (1991) said that for a child who is a nonreader, his oral control over language should receive attention so that it develops from sharing a book and conversation.

- Component IV- Information Processing and Critical Dialogue: This component is used to determine the child's ability to interact with the teacher in an instructional conversation for academic purposes of processing information (Gentile, 2006). Reading and interpreting informational text requires additional skill beyond reading stories containing dialog or narrative. Children have to be able to read and write expository text to participate in content area instructional conversations, write reports, or succeed in tests.

Need for Research

Results from the research collected on both native-Spanish speaking and native-English speaking students in dual-immersion programs are consistent in demonstrating that students can develop high levels of first and second language proficiency. A current gap, however, exists in the field of ESL regarding the relationship between L1 and L2 oral language development and instruction. My search to discover effective ways of instruction to meet the needs of Spanish native students with an underdeveloped foundation in their primary language aims to shed some light on this topic. Through this investigation, I want to determine if additional instruction focused on listening and speaking skills in Spanish during Readers' Workshop time can indeed help these students attain control over the basic structures of oral Spanish. Specifically I want to know: Will struggling Spanish native students, as a result of receiving additional oral language

instruction in their primary language, increase their oral skills in Spanish? What reciprocal effect will stronger oral skills have on students' reading and writing skills? It is my hope that the results of this study will improve efforts at strategic instruction and help monitor language learning in our dual-immersion program.

Summary

Oral language and conversational skills are critical in developing emergent literacy. This includes a child's ability to comprehend and produce complex sentence structures. Research shows that literacy should be developed in the child's stronger language; yet when children come to school with limited oral language skills in both their first and target languages, they are at risk for not developing strong literacy skills in any language. The OLAI is a tool to support the development of complex oral language structures in Spanish by focusing on adult conversations with children. Chapter Three presents the methodology for this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my research is to study how introducing an oral language intervention, as a supplement to a dual-immersion reading curriculum, impacts the oral language skills of struggling Spanish native speakers. Does additional instruction focused on listening and speaking skills increase students' control over the basic structures of oral Spanish? What reciprocal effect will stronger oral skills have on students' reading and writing skills? My hope is that other dual-immersion teachers will be able to use this study to plan and implement oral instruction for children in their classrooms with similar linguistic needs.

This chapter presents the methods I used to carry out this study. It includes a description of the qualitative research method as well as the rationale for its use in this study. The phases of data collection, data analysis, and their interpretation are discussed.

Qualitative Research

I have chosen to take a qualitative approach for this study. According to Dörnyei (2007), qualitative research “involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analysed primarily by non-statistical methods” (p. 24). Merriam (2009) states that qualitative researchers are concerned with understanding how people make sense of their world as well as the experiences they have in it. Merriam identifies the following four characteristics as the core features of qualitative inquiry: 1) the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning (rather than

the outcome), 2) the researcher is the focal instrument of data collection and analysis, 3) an inductive approach is used to plan the research; that is, a qualitative researcher gathers data from observations and intuitive understandings to build concepts or theories, and 4) words rather than numbers are used to provide rich and deeper descriptions of the findings of the study. The above mentioned characteristics best describe my research study because I was interested in determining what impact additional instruction in oral Spanish would have on students with low oral skills in Spanish. Daily student observations and reflections on my teaching allowed me to determine the most effective aspects of my strategic instruction, as well as the teaching areas that I needed to continue improving.

Action Research

I am using a particular type of qualitative research called action research. Action research is defined as a form of research that is practitioner based. It is done by teachers in their own classroom with the goal of improving pedagogy and student learning simultaneously (Phillips, 2006). According to Koshy (2010), action research is a method that involves action, evaluation and reflection and, based on the evidence gathered, changes in practice.

Richards (2005) states that the term action research refers to two dimensions of this kind of activity. Research is the systematic approach to carrying out investigations and collecting information to illuminate an issue and to improve classroom practice. The word action refers to taking practical action to resolve classroom problems. Action research consists of a number of phases, which often recur in cycles: developing an

action plan to help bring about the desired change in classroom behavior, observing the effects of the plan on behavior and reflecting on its significance, and initiating a second action cycle if necessary.

There are many different ways of collecting data on classroom events. Burns (1999) includes the following as examples of observational approaches to collecting classroom data: anecdotal records, teaching diaries/journals, and checklists. According to Freeman (1998), anecdotal records are quickly written and contemporaneous notes about students, their behavior and interactions, and other aspects of teaching and learning activities that are germane to the study being conducted. Similar in nature to a grade book, anecdotal records are used to make note of what is happening in the classroom in an organized manner. Teacher journals record the thoughts, feelings, reflections, and observations of the teacher on a specific lesson, activity, or student (Freeman, 1998). It is a tool that allows the researcher to reflect on her teaching by assessing the benefits of the instruction and the areas that need improvement. A checklist is a structured form of observation. Phillips (2006) states that it is perhaps the most efficient way for a researcher to collect observational data. On a checklist, the researcher keeps track of behaviors that are exhibited or events that occur. An effective checklist should include those behaviors that are deemed to be important in relation to the intervention or the desired effects of the intervention (Hendricks, 2006).

Data Collection

Participants

The participants in the study are five first-grade dual-immersion students. All the students are Spanish native speakers and they attend one of two first-grade sessions of a K-6 dual-immersion program. All these students receive ELL services in the classroom during literacy time. The five participants were chosen because they had been identified as having scored at the lowest levels of L1 and L2 oral proficiency in the pre-LAS 2000 assessment. All of them have been born in the U.S., and they are six years old during the course of the study. The students were placed into a group of five, and I taught them half-hour sessions daily for five months. The instruction took place within an oral language center during Readers' Workshop time in their classroom.

Setting

This study was done at an urban school in a large metro area in the Upper Midwest. The student population totals 636 children, 207 of whom attend the dual-immersion Spanish- English program at the school. Of the 636 students, approximately 94% receive free or reduced lunch. The ethnic background of the student population is approximately 11% Asian, 41% African American, 45% Hispanic, 4% Caucasian, and 1% American Indian. Approximately 67% of the students at the school receive ESL services. The dual-immersion program follows a 90/10 model; meaning that Spanish is used in the early years for all students for nearly all of the instruction (roughly 90%), and English is gradually increased as a medium of instruction each year until the proportion of English approaches 50% (usually by fourth grade).

Data Collection Process

First, I obtained the pre-LAS 2000 scores for the year 2008-09 by looking in the students' cumulative folders and by checking the district's Campus online system. Using the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI), I administered pre-study and post-study assessments to the students identified as having Level 1 and Level 2 pre-LAS scores in their native and second languages (Level 1 being "Not Fluent" and Level 2 being "Limited Fluency"). Next, I planned my strategic oral instruction in Spanish based on information from the OLAI and I kept anecdotal records on the students during my teaching. I reflected upon the instructional activities used in terms of student engagement and production of the targeted sentence structure in my teaching journal at the end of each session. In addition, I completed a checklist to determine student growth in the oral skills evaluated at the end of each action research cycle.

Lessons

I planned and taught a daily oral language center in Spanish for 30 minutes to a group of five children. Using the results and components of the OLAI, I guided my instruction and shaped my interactions with the children. Some of the oral activities recommended by Gentile (2006) that I included in my instruction were:

- Playing word games and talking about them (riddles, rhymes, tongue twisters, jokes, etc.).
- Telling or retelling stories and talking about them while looking at the pictures (wordless books, "tellingboard" from home, puppets, etc.).
- Playing board games and talking about them (anagrams, scrabble, etc.).

- Talking about toys and other objects and repeating, expanding or clarifying the children's responses.
- Sharing experiences and talking about them.
- Drawing or painting and talking with the children about their illustrations throughout the activity.
- Singing and making up songs, and talking about them.
- Listening to portions of audiotapes or watching snippets of videos and talking about concepts or ideas.
- Performing an imaginary play and talking about the performance.
- Creating photo albums of people or things at school or at home that the children consider important, and then having conversations about them.
- Learning to recite poems and teaching them to family members at home.

Anecdotal Records

My observations focused on one child per day, on a rotating basis. The observation notes included date, activity type and response of the focus-child to the activity, quotations from his speech and feedback on the child's production of sentence structures. These notes were written during and after each instructional session. I chose to use post-it notes to record my anecdotes because I had used this method in the past and it had worked very well for me. Each student participant had a different color of post-it notes. This gave me an easy and practical way to look for patterns or themes in the students' learning and production of the five sentence structures explicitly targeted.

Teacher Observation Journal

In my journal, I documented my thoughts and feelings about my oral lessons, as well as any questions, ideas, or concerns that came up during my instruction. I included things that went well during the lesson and things that needed modification. I used the journal to guide my lesson plans and I reread it periodically to look for recurring questions or comments.

Checklists

I designed a checklist with a rating scale that added value according to a continuum of the following categories: “Not Yet”, “Beginning”, “Developing”, and “Proficient”. The ten behaviors included in this checklist have been determined as essential for the development of oral skills. See Appendix A for an example of the checklist.

Procedure

In my study, my first step was acknowledging the problem of the first-grade students’ low oral skills in Spanish. Does supplemental and strategic oral language instruction increase first-grade students’ oral language skills? The next step in the action research cycle was the collection of baseline data to establish what was happening in the classroom before changing anything. The OLAI in Spanish was given to the participants who had the lowest scores in the pre-LAS 2000 in the school year 2008-09 in order to identify their stages of language acquisition. Form A was used to assess the children at the beginning of the study. Form B was administered at the end of the five-month study. The third step was the implementation of strategic additional instruction. A method for

evaluating the effects of the intervention was established. In this study, I used three data collection techniques: daily anecdotal records and teacher journal, and checklists completed at the end of each action research cycle. The final step was reporting on the finding from the intervention and planning further research cycles. I used reflective practice to identify growth in the students' control over the basic sentence structures in Spanish, looked for patterns in the anecdotal records and the teaching journal, and interpreted information from the checklists over the course of five different action research cycles. Each action research cycle focused on the practice and production of one of the five most common sentence structures.

Data Analysis

The results of Form A of the OLAI provided a baseline of the children's oral language acquisition stage in Spanish. The results of Form B were used to identify changes in the participants' receptive control of the five basic sentence structures explicitly practiced over the course of the study.

The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory was scored to identify response patterns and it was used to develop a profile of each child's language development. There were three parts to the profile: Part 1- Scoring repeated sentences; Part 2- Scoring story reconstruction and narrative comprehension; and Part 3- Scoring picture drawing, narration, and dictation. I listened to the audiotapes and looked at the notes from my observations to develop the profile. I identified the structures the child did or did not control in all three components. I created a chart to organize the anecdotal notes. The students' names were listed on the vertical axis; the date and categories such as child

engagement, sentence patterns used, child talks, etc. appeared on the horizontal axis. Comments, quotes, or notes about what the students said or did were written in the post-it notes on the chart. As the information started accumulating, I examined the entries for patterns related to my inquiry every two weeks. I used this information to plan my lessons and adjusted my instructional activities in the teacher journal. I reviewed the checklist filled out at the end of each research cycle to gain additional understanding into the students' oral skill development.

Validity and Ethics

I used as a guide the Ethical Issues Checklist proposed in Merriam (2009), in particular: 1) the purpose and methods of the study were explained to the parents of the children participating and they were given bilingual informed consent letters for their signature, with a copy of the risk assessment and a written assurance that there would be no negative consequences for not participating in the study, 2) the participants privacy was protected through the use of pseudonyms, 3) a Human Subjects Research form was submitted to Hamline faculty for review and acceptance, 4) permission was obtained from the school district Research Committee, 5) research materials would be destroyed within five years of the completion of the study, 6) internal validity of the study was ensured by comparing and cross-checking three different sources of data collected at various times throughout the study.

Summary

Action research is a powerful means of informing classroom instruction. It is part of a qualitative paradigm that allows the researcher to focus on a particular classroom need. The five monthly cycles of this study included data from student observations, teaching journal, and checklists. The next chapter presents the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of five action research cycles that analyzed student production of the five most common Spanish sentence structures explicitly targeted. These data inform my research questions: Does additional instruction focused on listening and speaking skills increase struggling students' control over the basic structures of oral Spanish? What effect will more robust oral skills have on students' reading and writing skills? The data are reported by cycle. Each cycle presents the results of anecdotal records chronicling student production, checklists tracking student oral skill development, and teaching journal of instructional activities. Results of the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI) administered pre and post study are examined as well.

Cycle one focused on simple sentences, the second cycle concentrated on expanded statements containing prepositions, and the third cycle practiced two phrases, clauses or statements linked by a conjunction. Cycle four focused on two phrases or clause statements linked by a relative pronoun, whereas the last cycle had as its focal point two phrases or clause statements linked by an adverb. The next section presents the results of each research cycle and of the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory given to the students before and after the instructional cycles.

The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI) Pre-Assessment

I administered Form A of the OLAI to establish a baseline of the participants' oral language acquisition in Spanish. There are four components to the inventory: Component I- Repeated Sentences and Sentence Transformations, Component II-Story Reconstruction and Narrative Comprehension, Component III- Picture Drawing, Narration and Dictation, and Component IV- Information Processing and Critical Dialogue. The following sections present the results from each component of the inventory.

Component I- Repeated Sentences and Sentence Transformations

This component contains five lists of the most common sentence structures in Spanish increasing in complexity, and four lists containing negative statements, questions, commands or exclamations that the students were asked to repeat. Each list of transformed sentences included a variety of language structures that provided me with additional information and was used to compare the students' capacity to listen and respond.

Repeated Sentences

Four of the six participants were able to repeat verbatim the seven sentences in Level I- Simple sentences. The other two repeated six of the seven sentences verbatim. This indicated that the children possessed receptive control over this very basic simple sentence structure. Only one of the participants managed to repeat most (6 out of 7) of the sentences verbatim in the next level (sentences containing prepositions). Three students repeated four sentences and one child was only able to repeat one of the seven sentences

accurately. Level III- Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a conjunction showed a range that expanded from two students repeating five sentences verbatim, one repeating four, one repeating only two and one student not being able to say any of the sentences back at all. This showed that the students, for the most part, were not used to expressing sentences joined by conjunctions to denote cause-effect and conditional relationships. The next level of sentences complexity contained two phrases or clauses joined by a relative pronoun. Two of the participants repeated five of the seven sentences verbatim, one student repeated two correctly, one student repeated only one and one student was not successful repeating any of the sentences at all. This showed that less than half of the participants were starting to use relative pronouns when communicating who or what was responsible for a particular action or outcome. The last level, Level V, contained sentences made up of two phrases or clauses linked by an adverb. These sentences were the most challenging for all the participants. One student was able to repeat verbatim only two of the sentences, this being the highest score; two students repeated one correctly and two students had a score of zero sentences repeated accurately. These data indicated that the students were not yet able to generate complex sentences that showed the relationship between how something was done and when or where something had happened. The following table summarizes the pre-assessment sentences repeated verbatim:

Table 4.1

OLAI Pre-Assessment Sentences Repeated Verbatim (Out of Seven)

	Level I Simple Sentences	Level II Prepositions	Level III Conjunctions	Level IV Relative Pronouns	Level V Adverbial Clauses
Student 1	7	4	5	1	2
Student 2	7	4	4	2	1
Student 3	6	4	2	0	0
Student 4	6	6	5	5	0
Student 5	7	3	2	5	1

Sentence Transformations

The analysis of sentence transformations revealed that two of the students were able to repeat five out of seven negative statements verbatim, two reiterated three negatives, and one student could not repeat any negative statements at all. In terms of questions, the highest number repeated verbatim was five by only one student, one student repeated four questions correctly, two students repeated three questions verbatim, and one student was only able to say again one question. Interestingly, four of the students answered the first question affirmatively instead of simply repeating it. This could be an indication that these children were more used to giving yes/no answers than to formulating questions on their own. Regarding commands, the range of accurate repetitions spanned from five given by one student, four by another student, and three, two and one by the remaining three students. The last sentence transformation (exclamations) showed a more uniform number of statements repeated verbatim. Four

students repeated three exclamations accurately, whereas one student repeated two accurately. This revealed that the children were starting to detect some changes in meaning that occur when the speaker utters the same words using different intonation, pitch, emphasis or stress (Clay, 1971).

Table 4.2

OLAI Pre-Assessment Sentence Transformations Repeated Verbatim (Out of Seven)

	Negatives	Questions	Commands	Exclamations
Student 1	5	5	5	3
Student 2	3	3	3	3
Student 3	0	1	2	3
Student 4	5	4	4	3
Student 5	3	3	1	2

Component II- Story Reconstruction and Narrative Comprehension

This component assessed the children's ability to listen to and reconstruct or create an illustrated story in a logical sequence. Following a story line to interpret a story is a major first step in children's learning to read and create text in a second language (Gentile, 2006). Three of the five children were able to recreate the story in which the sequence of events was logical. The largest number of sentences used in the reconstruction of the story was fourteen, five of these sentences were linked by the conjunction *y* and a couple was joined by the relative *que*. The rest consisted of simple sentences, half of which included the preposition *en*. The rest of the reconstructions showed an average of six sentences per story, half of which were simple sentences and

the rest included phrases or clauses linked by the conjunction *y*. No sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by an adverb were observed in any of the participants' reconstructions of the story. The shortest reconstruction contained three sentences, all of which were simple sentences with one example of a prepositional phrase. The story reconstructions indicated that the students were beginning to identify an established logical sequence of events in a story: a beginning, middle, and end. They were not able, at this point, to include more complex sentence structures beyond simple sentences with a few prepositional phrases, or a variety of conjunctions besides *y* to link their clauses or phrases.

Component III- Picture Drawing, Narration and Dictation

The student's narration while he/she was drawing determined what thoughts, feelings and intentions the child was able to communicate independently. The opportunity to dictate and write something about the drawing allowed the student to show knowledge about concepts about print and phonemic awareness, i.e. the ability to segment sounds in words and write them in sequence (Clay, 2001). The longest sentence dictated contained four words, two of the sentences contained phrases joined by the conjunction *y*. All the students used simple sentence structures and four included the phrases *me gusta* and *es un/el*. When asked to read their dictated sentences aloud, all of the students were able to do so however, two of them showed some inconsistent one-to-matching when pointing to the words while reading. The five students were also able to rewrite many of the words in the sentences that they have dictated. As they were writing, a couple of the children segmented the words by syllables while the rest segmented by

sounds. They showed nascent ability to write the letters of the corresponding sounds in sequence. Most of the students were able to write more frequent single-syllable words like *se*, *la*, *es*, and *me* correctly. None of the students, however, were able to write words containing consonant clusters and blends such as *pr*, *bl*, and *em*. Children's ability to attend to hearing sounds in words that they speak is, according to Elkonin (1971), a fundamental preliminary step towards becoming literate. The sentences that the students dictated about their pictures and later were asked to write down are shown in Figure 4.1.

Student 1: Es una cobija. Yo la cuidaba.

Student 2: Me gusta el color y me gusta mi mano.

Student 3: Siempre se apaga y se prende.

Student 4: Me gusta mi mamá y mi hermanito. Me gusta la campana.

Student 5: Es el robot Bumblebee. Pelea con Megatron.

Figure 4.1
Students' Dictated and Written Sentences: Pre-Assessment

Component IV- Information Processing and Critical Dialogue

This evaluated the student's ability to interact with the teacher in an instructional conversation. Because this component was optional for the first half of first-grade, I did not administer it in either the pre or the post assessment procedures of my study.

Cycle One: Simple sentences

According to the data provided by the OLAI, all the students participating in the study showed control over basic simple sentences when talking. Examples of simple sentence structures such as *Me gusta mirar tele* or *Yo tengo un DSI en mi casa* were

common answers given by the students when asked about their favorite things or favorite personal objects. The checklist (see Appendix A) filled out at the end of this first cycle showed most of the students starting to recite and respond to stories, poems, rhymes and songs in Spanish. Four of them were beginning to participate in the small group conversations taking turns speaking and listening to the speaker, while one of the students was not able to do so yet. Most of the students were starting to follow two- or –three step oral directions, use some social vocabulary, and maintain eye contact with the speaker when interacting in small group. Most of the students were not yet able to ask and respond to questions, and to communicate ideas and feelings in complete sentences. Retelling a story or a personal experience in a clear sequence of events, as well as listening carefully so that to expand the ideas of others were the tasks that presented the most challenges for the students by the end of this cycle.

The teaching journal that I kept showed that the participating students were not interacting freely, neither with me nor the other students; even by the end of this first cycle they were raising their hands when they wanted to make a comment.

Even though I have tried a variety of oral activities, the students are not yet eager to participate in the conversations unless I prompt them. I feel it will take longer that I had expected to get them out of the habit of raising their hands every time they have something to say. I hope that once the children get used to having daily conversations in the small group, this will no longer be an issue.

As a consequence of this, it was necessary to continue modeling what a conversation in a small group looked and sounded like in the second research cycle. Also, even though the

students had shown control over basic simple sentence structures, their production of complete sentences remained limited as shown in the following student examples:

Student 1: *Los dos niños están jugando.*

Student 2: *Él tiene un carro de juguete.*

Student 3: *Hay unos bloques.*

Cycle Two: Expanded Statements Containing Prepositions

The main goal of cycle two was to help the students expand upon their statements by adding a prepositional phrase. The refinement of sentences was introduced for the first time as another way to provide consistent modeling of complete sentences. According to Gentile (2006), refinements generally include higher-level vocabulary such as difficult words, synonyms and idiomatic expressions. The anecdotal records of this cycle pointed out that three of the students were able to add prepositional phrases from the very beginning. The other two students, however, needed extra support with the concept of prepositions and the meanings associated with them.

The end of cycle two checklist tracking the development of the students' oral skills showed progress in three areas: the students had now started participating more in the small group conversations, they were getting better at maintaining eye contact with the speaker, and reciting poems and singing songs with expression. Three of the students had begun expressing their ideas and feelings using more full sentences, and two of them seemed to be paying more attention to other speakers in order to expand upon the idea being discussed. Only one student, however, had shown to follow a sequence of events

when retelling or summarizing a personal experience. None of the students were yet able to use some content vocabulary when speaking.

The students appeared to be getting more familiar with the framework of the instructional oral lessons. This, in turn, meant greater participation and confidence on their part.

Today for the first time, Student 3 asked to share what she had done over the weekend with her family. This is very encouraging! In general, all the children now show more interest in talking about daily events in their lives. The next step will be to get them to listen to each other more carefully and establish better eye contact with the speaker.

There was some increase in their spontaneous production of sentences containing prepositional phrases as they got to play games like *¿Dónde está Walter?* and *Veo, veo*.

For example:

Student 5: *Veo algo de color amarillo debajo de la mesa.*

Student 2: *¿ Es el bloque detrás de la caja?*

Student 4: *Creo que Walter está al lado del edificio.*

Cycle Three: Sentences With Two Phrases or Clauses Linked by Conjunctions

The OLAI had illustrated that the students frequently chose the conjunction *y* to link phrases or clauses in a sentence. The first part of this cycle focused on the revision of some basic conjunctions like *porque*, *pero*, *aunque*, and *si bien* followed by purposeful teacher repeating of what the children were saying using expansions and refinements.

Observations noted on the anecdotal records showed that the students preferred to repeat just the second clause or phrase after the conjunction, for example:

Student 1: *No vine a la escuela ayer.*

Teacher: *¿ Por qué no viniste a la escuela ayer?*

Student 1: *Porque tenia mucha tos.*

Teacher: *No viniste a la escuela ayer porque tenías mucha tos.*

Student 1: *Si, porque tenía mucha tos.*

One possible explanation for this observation is that the students usually had less difficulty repeating the last part of the statement that they had heard, instead of recreating a full statement from the start. Towards the conclusion of cycle three, the students started repeating two phrases or clauses using some of the conjunctions practiced, even though they still needed to be reminded how to start their sentences.

The participants showed considerable improvement in two of the oral language skills tracked on the checklist: asking and responding questions, and telling needs and ideas to peers and teachers in more complete sentences. Three of the students continued showing growth with retelling a personal story following a logical sequence.

As the students were given more opportunity to share something meaningful to them on a daily basis, their involvement in the conversations increased. It was my conclusion that the predictable structure of the oral instruction, together with a better understanding of what listening to somebody entailed, helped the students feel more comfortable in small group conversations. Also, I noticed that the students had stopped

raising their hands when they wanted to add a comment or ask a question, and instead were using the statements we had been practicing to take turns:

Student 2: *Tengo un comentario.*

Student 3: *Quisiera preguntar algo.*

Cycle Four: Sentences With Two Phrases/Clauses Linked by a Relative Pronoun

I selected three relative pronouns to model sentences with two phrases or clauses joined by relatives: *quien*, *el/la que*, and *el/la cual*. Some examples of expanded statements with relative pronouns recorded on the conversation notes were:

Student 5: *Me quitó mi lapiz.*

Teacher: *¿Quién fue el que te quitó tu lápiz?*

Student 5: *José fue el que me quitó mi lápiz.*

One example of refinement using the same sentence:

Teacher: *¡Qué pena que José fue el que extrajo tu lápiz!*

Student 5: *Sí, José fue el que extrajo mi lápiz.*

All the participants were ranked as developing in their abilities to follow two-or three- step oral directions, take turns listening and speaking when interacting with others in one-to-one or small group conversations, and use social vocabulary. Two of the students had begun using some content vocabulary and two others continued strengthening their skills in this area. With regard to retell and summary of a personal story in a clear and logical sequence, three of the students were now at developing stages while the other had just started using connectors like *primero*, *luego*, *entonces*, *por último* when telling a story. Another indication of continued growth was the fact that all the

students had started exhibiting beginning or developing skills in all the areas listed on the oral development checklist.

Based on my notes in the teaching journal, the techniques of expanding, repeating, and refining the students' sentences were becoming more natural to the students by the end of this cycle.

The students have started to repeat their own sentences, with expansions or refinements, even though I am not reminding them to do so. Most of the children show more confidence when repeating them too. I think that our discussion about simple versus complex sentences is helping them understand the concept of complete, meaningful sentences. It is finally starting to happen, after four months of small group conversations!

Cycle Five: Sentences Containing Two Phrases/Clauses Linked by Adverbs:

The last cycle of the present study focused on extending sentences using adverbial phrases, this level of sentence structure presented the students with the most challenges, as reflected in their OLAI's. The adverbial relatives that I focused on were *cuando*, *donde*, and *como*, as exemplified in the following conversation notes:

Student 4: *Me cansé bien recio.*

Teacher: *¿Cuándo te cansaste mucho?*

Student 4: *Cuando corrí en recess.*

Teacher: *Entonces te cansaste mucho cuando corriste durante el recreo.*

Student 4: *Sí, me cansé mucho cuando corrí durante el recreo.*

Even though the students had more difficulties repeating such expanded and refined statements, they put effort into listening carefully and saying back exactly what they were hearing. Likewise, the students began reminding each other to repeat after the teacher since they seemed to be more aware that the expanded/refined sentences expressed more complete thoughts, and they were easier to understand.

The data from the checklist in this last cycle showed positive trends in all the oral skills being evaluated. All the students were now very comfortable at participating in the small group conversation, and were more proficient at following basic conversational rules. Two of the students were now able to communicate their needs or ideas using some of the complex sentence structures that they had practiced. The same students also were more capable at retelling or summarizing a story with an understandable sequence. The skills, which all the students continued to be developing, were to listen attentively to what others were saying and expand upon their opinions or thoughts. This indicated that it had taken longer for the students to comprehend the concept of listening with a purpose instead of listening just to show attention.

By the end of cycle five, the students had decided what their favorite oral activities were and were willing to initiate them on their own with no teacher support. Interestingly, all those activities that allowed the children to establish meaningful connections with their lives and families became the most popular ones like sharing or show-and-tell, finding out and telling about their parents' childhood and comparing them to their own, commenting on a family photo album that they had created, and sharing

with our small group songs, poems, and rhymes that family members had taught them at home.

It is amazing to see the children looking forward to our small group conversations, willing to share and listen to each other. They are frequently using some of the same complex structures we have focused on in the oral lessons. I am very curious to see what changes the OLAI will show in their Spanish oral language. Will the improvement in their oral skills be reflected in their reading and writing abilities?

The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI) Post-Assessment

Form B of the OLAI was administered to all the participants after Cycle five of the study. The results of this oral inventory provided a record of the improvement in the participants' oral language acquisition in Spanish. The same components in Form A, administered before this study began, were repeated as follows:

Component I- Repeated Sentences and Sentence Transformations

All five students were able to reiterate verbatim the seven simple sentences with ease. This indicated that now all the children in the study had a firm grasp over basic simple sentence structures such as *Yo quiero comer manzanas*, *El pájaro voló*, and *El carro se descompuso*. In Level II- Sentences containing prepositions, one student obtained the maximum score of seven, two students were able to repeat six sentences verbatim, and two students scored five sentences repeated accurately in total. Even though all students showed increased control of this sentence structure, the student with the maximum score made the highest gain; this child went from being able to repeat only

four sentences in Form A to repeating verbatim all seven in Form B, such as *Yo hice una cara chistosa en la foto* and *Van a tener una piñata para mi cumpleaños*. Level III- Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a conjunction showed a narrower range of accuracy that expanded from two students repeating verbatim six of the seven sentences, one student repeating five, and the remaining two being able to say back correctly four sentences containing conjunctions; for example: *Me gustan los gatos porque son bonitos*, *Ellos quieren ir si los dejan* and *Mi mama me sacó el diente con la mano pero no me dolió*. This proved that the students were now more used to expressing sentences linked by conjunctions in order to represent cause-effect and conditional relationships. Also, one of the participants was able to repeat correctly the sentence *Fuimos al centro e hicimos compras*, what indicated that this child was becoming aware of the substitution rule of the conjunction *y* by [*e*] whenever the phrase or clause after *y* starts with *h* or *i*. In the next level of complex sentences containing two phrases or clauses joined by a relative pronoun, all students were now able to reiterate more of these sentences verbatim. One student obtained a score of six, another achieved a score of five, and a third one scored four correct sentences in total. The remaining two participants repeated two sentences verbatim. Though this score was still low, the same two students had not been able to repeat any of these sentences at all before this study began. Examples in this sentence category included: *Ésa es la chica que se enfermó*, and *No llegó, lo cual me sorprendió*. These scores showed that at this point all the students were aware and, in most cases, had started using relative pronouns to communicate who or what was accountable for an action or an outcome. Level V- Sentences made up of two

phrases or clauses linked by an adverb showed significant student gains in spite of being the most challenging level of sentences for all the participants. One student was able to repeat verbatim five of the seven sentences, three students repeated four sentences accurately, and one student had a score of two. These data indicated that all the participants, except for one, were receptively able to generate sentences that showed the relationship between how something was done and when or where something had occurred as illustrated in the following examples: *Iremos al parque cuando terminemos nuestro trabajo; Yo fui a la casa de mi tía donde me golpeé la rodilla.* Table 4.3 summarizes the results of the post- assessment:

Table 4.3

OLAI Post- Assessment Sentences Repeated Verbatim (Out of Seven)

	Level I Simple Sentences	Level II Prepositions	Level III Conjunctions	Level IV Relative Pronouns	Level V Adverbial Clauses
Student 1	7	7	6	6	5
Student 2	7	6	6	4	4
Student 3	7	5	4	2	2
Student 4	7	6	5	5	4
Student 5	7	5	4	2	4

Sentence Transformations

The results of sentence transformations for negative statements, questions, commands, and exclamations are detailed in Table 4.4. These scores indicate that, in general, all the students were able to repeat a higher number of sentence transformations

verbatim. One student obtained the maximum score of seven, with an average of 5 negative statements repeated accurately. Regarding questions, there was a slight increase in the participants' ability to say them back correctly, the average now being 4.2 questions accurately repeated. In terms of commands, only one participant did not show improved manipulation of this structure, the rest of the students averaged 4.8 commands repeated verbatim. All the students made the largest gains with regards to exclamations, the final category of sentence transformations, with an average improvement of 5.6. This revealed that all the participants were progressively more skillful at detecting the changes in meaning associated with different intonation, pitch, emphasis or stress of same word utterances.

Table 4.4

OLAI Post- Assessment Sentence Transformations Repeated Verbatim (Out of 7)

	Negatives	Questions	Commands	Exclamations
Student 1	6	6	6	6
Student 2	4	3	5	6
Student 3	4	2	2	4
Student 4	7	5	7	6
Student 5	4	5	4	6

Component II- Story Reconstruction and Narrative Comprehension

The students' ability to listen to and reconstruct or compose a story using illustrations in a logical sequence increased as presented in the following results. All five children were able to recreate the story following a coherent sequence of events. The

largest number of sentences generated in the story reconstructions was sixteen; seven of such sentences contained a more diverse use of prepositions like *como*, *con*, *hasta*, *ya*, *al*, *para*. Three of the sentences consisted of clauses connected by the conjunctions *y* and *también*. Two sentences showed the use of the adverbial relatives *donde* and *cuando*, and three contained phrases linked by the relative pronoun *que*. Notably, this student chose to use just one simple sentence when composing her story. The rest of the story reconstructions showed an average of 12.5 sentences per story, with an important increase in the number of statements including prepositional phrases, conjunctives, and a few relative pronouns or adverbs. On the other hand, the number of simple sentences decreased to one fourth of the total sentences produced by the children. Overall, the story reconstructions indicated that all the students were able to match pictures to language in order to create a story with a logical beginning, middle, and end. The children were more skillful at selecting grammatical structures of greater complexity when narrating their stories as well. Indeed, they seemed to have a greater understanding of more elaborated grammatical structures than the ones they were actually using in their daily speech.

Component III- Picture Drawing, Narration and Dictation

The structures applied by the students to tell the most important idea about their drawings were compared with the structures they had used in the pre-assessment oral language inventory. All the participants dictated sentences that had an average of 13.6 words per statement. None of the dictated statements were isolated, simple sentences; instead all of them revealed comprehensive sentence structures with different prepositions and multiple conjunctions. In particular, one of the dictated sentences

consisted of two clauses linked by the relative pronoun *que*; this being the most complex of the responses given. In addition, every one of these statements was radically more meaningful than the ones provided by the students in the pre study assessment. The students were at this point communicating a complete thought, a genuine indicator that their oral language has grown to be more fluent and structured (Brunner, 1966). The five children were able to rewrite most of the words in their dictated sentences with confidence. Their phonemic awareness, i.e. the ability to segment sounds in words and record them in sequence, had also improved greatly as shown in Figure 4.2. The examined results allowed me to conclude that all the children in this study not only exhibited strengthened oral skills but also were reflecting these skills in their writing as well.

Student 1: Esta es la nueva escuela que voy a ir el lunes.

Student 2: Me gusta mi casa porque puedes dormir y descansar en la cama o en el sofá.

Student 3: Fui abajo del agua en el lago y luego mi papá me atrapó.

Student 4: Yo aprendí a andar en bicicleta en dos llantas nomás en un día.

Student 5: No te sueltes en la barras trepadoras porque te puedes pegar en la
la cabeza.

Figure 4.2

Students' Dictated and Written Sentences: Post-Assessment

Summary

In sum, the five action research cycles presented positive results in student production of the five most common Spanish sentence structures. All the students progressed a minimum of one stage in their control of language structures as demonstrated on the OLAI. The two students that achieved stage IV were now capable of using complete sentences with varied prepositions and conjunctions. The student at level V had added some relative pronouns and adverbs to her repertoire of sentence structures. This student showed understanding and used more complex sentence transformations such as negatives, questions, commands, and exclamations. The two other students were transitioning between levels II and III, which meant that they had started to produce complete sentences with varied prepositions and understood, and occasionally used, sentence transformations.

The students had begun to establish an oral language foundational system that, according to Clay (1991), was helping them strengthen their oral skills each time they engaged in meaningful interactions with the teacher. They were also expressing themselves in a more explicit way, and they seemed to be using language to understand situations with which they could establish meaningful connections on a daily basis (Gentile, 2001).

In Chapter Five, I will discuss major findings of these results, the implications of this study for dual-immersion teachers, and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Oral language skills form the very foundation upon which reading and writing skills are developed. A child who enters Kindergarten with a low oral language capacity will, almost certainly, face extraordinary challenges in reading and writing in the primary grades. Moreover, a child who does not develop strong oral language skills in the primary grades will likely not be able to read and write well by the end of third grade, and will struggle in his comprehension of grade-level texts throughout the elementary grades. Recent experience within the Spanish-speaking student population of our dual-immersion program demonstrates that many of these children are starting school without having mastered the basic sentence structures of their first language. We believe it imperative that these students receive additional explicit oral language instruction tailored to their needs, to help them strengthen their oral skills if they are to achieve the ultimate goal of becoming successful readers and writers.

This capstone project looked specifically at student production of the five most common Spanish sentence structures explicitly targeted. I wanted to know what impact the introduction of an oral language strand, as a supplement to the dual-immersion reading curriculum, would have over the oral language skills of struggling native Spanish speakers. I had two guiding questions: Does additional instruction focused on listening and speaking skills increase struggling students' control over the basic structures of oral

Spanish? What effect will stronger oral skills have on their reading and writing skills?

This chapter examines the major findings of the study, its limitations, some implications for teachers in the dual-immersion program, and suggestions for further studies on this topic.

Major Findings

This study resulted in two major findings. The first finding showed that the participants did improve their control over the basic grammatical structures of oral Spanish. The second finding reaffirmed that children construct control over oral language through conversation guided by an adult.

The first finding demonstrated increased student control over the five basic sentence structures identified by Gentile (2006): 1) Simple sentences, 2) Sentences containing prepositional phrases, 3) Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a conjunction, 4) Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a relative pronoun, 5) Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by an adverb. The main teaching technique used, which encompassed intensive teacher language modeling in conjunction with the expansion and refinement of the students' utterances, was a key factor in helping the children solidify their command of simple sentences and of sentences containing prepositional phrases. Through this process, their production of the more complex sentence structures increased as well, which in turn resulted in a greater number of sentences uttered during our small-group interactions. The scaffolding language technique --whereby the teacher repeats the student's utterances using

expansions and refinements, as used by Gentile's study (2006)-- showed itself to be effective in this study and should be used consistently in any oral language instruction.

The second major finding from my research supports Clay's affirmation that children construct control over oral language through conversation (1991). This supplemental oral language group offered the students an extra daily opportunity to dialog with a language-proficient adult around significant topics in their lives, among other themes. The daily small group conversations provided a suitable language environment wherein the students were encouraged and supported in their efforts to communicate ideas, feelings, and opinions. The students showed positive results in learning social vocabulary and in being active participants in the conversations. By the end of the last cycle of the study, the level of student engagement had grown to the point that the children were initiating the conversations in our small group and I was able to take on the role of observer. Even though it was challenging at times to keep the conversation focused on one topic, all the children had finally realized that their thoughts could be transmitted through spoken utterances (Crévola & Vineis, 2008), that the complexity of their sentences determined how well what they were saying was understood by their listeners, and that language can be used for a multitude of functions including describing, agreeing, questioning, clarifying, and explaining.

Limitations of the Study

This study had a few limitations. First of all, the number of participants was five students, a small sample size. If the sample size of the participants had been larger, I would have been able to better generalize the results. Secondly, the five research cycles

were limited to five months, a relatively short period of time. Though the cycles provided me with quality data, it would have been ideal to conduct the study over the course of an entire school year (approximately nine months), and so determine whether lengthier cycles might have further helped the students improve their control over the basic structures of Spanish. Finally, my observation of the students took place during the time of the oral language center only. I was unable to observe them at different times during the school day and confirm if they were transferring some of their improved oral skills to other subject areas.

Implications for Teachers

Elements that dual-immersion teachers might incorporate from this study include the following:

- For students who enter a dual-immersion program with an underdeveloped oral foundation in their first language, it is crucial that they receive strategic oral instruction in addition to their core reading curriculum. Assessment of their oral language skills is, therefore, a key element.
- Supplemental oral instruction should be provided on a daily basis during small group time, to no more than six students per group (Crévola & Vineis, 2008).
- Intensive language modeling provided by the teacher through conversations is an efficient way to improve a child's language skills (Clay, 1991).
- Expanding and refining a child's utterances are essential techniques in supplying a complete grammatical version of what he/she wants to communicate (Gentile, 2006).

- Focused conversations between the teacher and the students offer the latter opportunities to experiment with the language rules they are discovering, thus improving their language acquisition. This social interaction plays an important role in the child's cognitive growth and development.
- Systematic assessment of a child's control over the most common oral language structures and sentence transformations allows the teacher a means of evaluating the student's patterns of attempts at constructing language (Clay, 1983; Gentile, 2006).
- Language feedback given by the teacher should not entail a simple grammatical correction; instead it should always be related to the content of what the child is trying to communicate (Crévola & Vineis, 2008).
- Daily oral instruction should include a variety of language activities that interest the students and allow them to make meaningful connections. Meaningful and authentic language use activities engage students, thus promoting learning.

Professional Growth and Insights

This study has allowed me to make a contribution to the field of bilingual education by conducting action research in the classroom. The process in itself was challenging but worthwhile. I had the opportunity to examine a real issue in one primary dual immersion class, design an intervention, collect data, reflect on the results, and modify my instruction to continue improving my students' learning. My observational skills and my ability to collect and organize student data have improved as well, and I

have acquired a greater understanding of the challenges of oral language instruction in my first language, Spanish. By sharing the findings of this study with my colleagues and administrators, I hope to offer some guidelines on the instruction of Spanish speaking children who come to our dual-immersion program with low oral skills in their first language. I plan to prepare a report and present it to teachers in other dual-immersion programs in my district. Also, I may share my results with educators outside of my district at bilingual and literacy conferences.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are many possibilities for further research in regards to oral language development of dual-immersion students who enter school with low oral skills in their first language. This research in particular calls for more studies on effective strategic instruction that builds students' oral language capacity and helps accelerate their literacy skills. Future studies might examine how increased oral language skills in a first language impact the acquisition of oral skills in a second language. It would be important to study other assessment tools in Spanish that can be used to monitor progress in language development. There also needs to be more research on other essential factors, besides control over basic sentence structures, for oral language development in Spanish. Finally, large-scale investigations into the oral language development of struggling Spanish native speakers in the pre-school years could provide valuable information for the planning of strategic oral instruction in the primary years of schooling.

APPENDIX A

Oral Language Skills Checklist

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