The Routledge Handbook of Spanish as a Heritage Language

Kim Potowski, Javier Muñoz-Basols

What Do We Know About U.S. Latino Bilingual Children’s Spanish Literacy Development?

Publication details
Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez
Published online on: 08 May 2018

How to cite: - Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez. 08 May 2018, What Do We Know About U.S. Latino Bilingual Children’s Spanish Literacy Development? from: The Routledge Handbook of Spanish as a Heritage Language Routledge
Accessed on: 13 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT U.S. LATINO BILINGUAL CHILDREN’S SPANISH LITERACY DEVELOPMENT?

Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY, USA

Introduction

At 24% of the total U.S. population, Latino children constitute the fastest growing segment of the school-age demographic, and Latinos are projected to continue to drive the overall national population growth (Child Trends Databank 2016). Roughly 75% of Latino children, regardless of nativity, are exposed to Spanish at home (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). In this chapter, the focus is specifically on Latino children from Spanish-speaking homes, and thus Spanish-English bilingual children will be used to refer to this group.

An estimated 63% of Spanish-English bilingual families in the U.S. are of Mexican origin, but every Latino group is represented from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Without question, this is a vastly heterogeneous group of learners, with varied life experiences that directly influence academic outcomes (Nieto & Bode 2008). However, as a group, Latino children represent the largest single group of children living in poverty in the U.S. (López & Velasco 2011). This is of concern given that poverty is a well-known risk factor for academic difficulties (e.g., Hoff & Tian 2005; Whitehurst 1997). Schooling often represents the first formal encounter with English for many Spanish-English bilingual children, so reports that Spanish-English bilingual children generally struggle more to comprehend English text than their native-English speaking peers are rather expected. In fact, gaps begin early and evolve to the point that, at high school entry, the average Latino 8th grader performs two years lower than the level of an entering White middle school student (Aud et al. 2011). These reading achievement gaps persist even among Spanish-English bilingual children born, raised, and educated in the U.S., underscoring the challenges associated with the simultaneous demand of acquiring oral language and literacy skills in English for children whose first language is Spanish.

But how is this already large and growing population of learners faring in Spanish reading achievement? The answer to this question is arguably more daunting to address for a multitude of reasons. First is the emphasis on English as the language of instruction in the U.S., which engenders a limited understanding of best practices to support Spanish literacy development. As intuitive as it may be, it is important to note that use of Spanish is, of course, necessary for
Spanish literacy attainment (e.g., Carlisle & Beeman 2000; Duursma et al. 2007), an instructional situation that is not typical of U.S. classrooms (see Lindholm-Leary in this volume). Another less obvious consideration is that effective literacy instruction differs across Spanish and English, though there are some similarities (Escamilla 2000). In this chapter, I begin with an overview of key contextual factors in interpreting Spanish–English bilingual children’s reading development and achievement. I then focus on the processes involved in reading development in English and Spanish. This is followed by a summary of research on the case of Spanish–English bilingual children’s English reading development in the U.S., an area of research that has amassed considerable evidence. The chapter then turns to the current state of knowledge on an area of research that has not generated as large a body of empirical findings, likely on account of the socio-political climate in the U.S., despite its long history: that of Spanish–English bilingual children’s Spanish reading development in the U.S., including issues of bilingual assessment. My focus on only reading is a result of the scarcity of work on writing, both in general and among this population of learners in particular. Similarly, the influence of vocabulary on reading outcomes has received considerable attention, but we know little about the influence of other language components, such as syntax and pragmatics.

Spanish in the U.S.: some considerations

Given that literacy and its development are heavily dependent on social factors, it is important to understand the status of Spanish in the U.S., as well as the demographic characteristics of the bulk of children and families from Spanish-speaking homes in the U.S. (these topics are addressed in greater depth in other chapters of this volume). As Nieto and Bode (2008) underscore, “student achievement does not come out of the blue but is influenced by many factors—that is, student achievement is related directly to the conditions and contexts in which students learn” (p. 13). In other words, though beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth stressing that there are numerous sociocultural factors, such as parental education and expectations for student achievement, that must be considered in understanding Spanish–English bilingual students’ academic outcomes.

As a minority language, Spanish in the U.S. does not share equal status with English at the classroom level nor in society. In fact, a deficit perspective has tended to dominate work focused on Spanish-speakers in the U.S. (e.g., Flores 2005), meaning that children’s Spanish is seen as a barrier to their success. Use of Spanish for instructional purposes has thus been a source of heated debate, and many school districts and states have enacted restrictive language policies barring the use of any non-English language in classroom instruction (for a review, see Gandara et al. 2010). Yet there is also a long line of research demonstrating the cognitive and other benefits of bilingualism, such as advantages in the executive function domain—an umbrella term for a set of higher-order, cognitive processes that facilitate planning, problem solving, and the initiation and maintenance of goal-directed behavior (e.g., Abutalebi et al. 2008; Bialystok 1999; Bialystok et al. 2012). But this line of research has typically focused on adults with roughly equal proficiency in Spanish and English, a situation that tends to be atypical of bilingual learners given that they often use their languages for different purposes, known as the complementary principle (Grosjean 1982, 1989, 2008). As previously noted, regardless of nativity, most Latino children in the U.S. are exposed to both Spanish and English (Hernandez 2010), yet many are in the process of developing their English language skills during the formal school years. Because students with this profile are often excluded from bilingual studies, a sizable subpopulation of Spanish–English bilingual students is not represented in the current research basis, leaving open the question of whether such executive function advantages hold for this group of learners.
A related and arguably more pressing question relates to Spanish-English bilinguals’ widely cited low levels of Spanish and English language proficiency. As previously noted, Latino children represent the largest single group of poor children (López & Velasco 2011), and poverty is a well-known risk factor for academic difficulties, including language development (e.g., Hoff & Tian 2005; Whitehurst 1997). The mechanisms underlying the links between poverty, academic achievement, and language proficiency are complex and beyond the scope of this chapter but include:

- Families from lower income backgrounds tend to have less access to print materials, at least partially due to their cost (Lindsay 2010).
- Parental formal education levels tend to be lower, and children’s literacy development has been found to be correlated with parental education levels (Aud et al. 2010).

Latino parents tend to have the lowest education levels compared to other groups of U.S. parents (Aud et al. 2010). Considering their economic standing and low levels of education, it is not unexpected that a considerable portion of Spanish-English bilingual children does not evidence age-appropriate language proficiency levels. Again, it is not that bilingualism itself poses a “risk” for low academic achievement. However, attempting to disentangle the effect of language status from low socioeconomic status on student academic outcomes is elusive because these variables tend to be confounded, creating compounding obstacles to successful academic outcomes.

Another intimately related issue is that of the assessments available to gauge Spanish-English bilingual students’ language proficiency and literacy skills more broadly. Monitoring development in Spanish and English is critical because children’s language skills may be distributed across the two languages (Bedore et al. 2005; Espinosa 2012; Hammer et al. 2014; Pearson et al. 1995). Indeed, changing patterns of language input (e.g., more English input upon formal school entry) complicates the identification of what constitutes “typical” language development among bilingual children (for a review, see Anderson 2004). At the same time, amount of linguistic exposure is itself an imperfect predictor of children’s growth in each language (Pearson et al. 1997). Thus, researchers underscore the urgent need to assess bilingual children repeatedly over time in both languages and specifically urge the development of measures specifically designed for, and normed on, bilingual children (Caesar & Kohler 2007; Espinosa 2012; Hammer et al. 2014; Mancilla-Martinez & Vagh 2013; Marchman & Martinez-Sussmann 2002). Monolingual measures are not representative of the experiences and language abilities of children negotiating both languages (typically simultaneously), and lack of accurate and valid measures places a limit on the quality of instruction provided to this growing group of learners. This limits the extent to which appropriate language support can be provided and contribute to an over-representation of students deemed “at-risk” for low academic achievement.

Unfortunately, the dearth of measures designed for and normed on Spanish-English bilinguals leaves the use of monolingual measures as the standard in bilingual language assessment. One notable exception is the new standardized receptive and expressive vocabulary measures, the Receptive and Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Tests, Spanish-Bilingual Editions (Brownell 2012a, 2012b). Designed for and normed on Spanish-English bilinguals who speak Spanish and English with varying levels of proficiency, these measures allow children to respond in either language, making it possible to capture both receptive and expressive conceptual vocabulary (i.e., vocabulary knowledge in terms of known concepts, regardless of the language of the label for the concept). In a preschool study focused on Spanish-English bilingual children, my
colleagues and I investigate the utility of accounting for Spanish–English bilingual children’s conceptual vocabulary knowledge rather than monolingual Spanish or monolingual English vocabulary knowledge (as suggested by work on translanguaging; see Garcia & Wei 2014). Our findings suggest that English-only vocabulary measures underestimate Spanish–English bilingual children’s language skills and highlight the need for assessments that are specifically designed for this growing population of learners—rather than relying on monolingual measures that are adapted, as has been the case historically (Mancilla-Martinez et al. under review). Garcia’s work on translanguaging similarly underscores the need to draw on bilingual students’ full linguistic repertoire.

With the challenges of disentangling language proficiency from income status in mind, and the recognition that measures designed for and normed on Spanish–English bilingual children remain scarce, the knowledge base to date on Spanish literacy instruction, together with studies focused exclusively on the case of Spanish–English bilingual children in the U.S., is summarized below.

English literacy development

Literacy refers to an individual’s ability to read and write, but comprehending written text involves the orchestration of many skills (Snow 2002). Specifically, the ability to comprehend text is dependent on, but not limited to, the reader (e.g., memory, word reading, and vocabulary skills), the text that is to be comprehended (e.g., narrative vs. expository), and the activity in which comprehension is part (e.g., skimming for key information vs. answering questions on a test) (Snow 2002, p. 11). Importantly, literacy is mediated by a larger sociocultural context, which includes economic and cultural factors.

Without discounting the complicated nature of literacy development, there is wide consensus that, among monolingual English speakers, word reading and language comprehension are the primary component skills. Word reading refers to students’ ability to access printed text (word identification and decoding are often used as interchangeable terms). In other words, word reading involves the ability to pronounce printed words, which may be accomplished via sight word recognition or sound-by-sound decoding. Language comprehension, on the other hand, refers to students’ ability to understand the meanings of words. Limitations in word reading or language comprehension skills contribute to compromised reading comprehension. The Simple View of Reading (SVR; Gough & Tunmer 1986), one of the most influential and parsimonious theoretical accounts of reading comprehension, specifically underscores the central roles that word reading and language comprehension skills play in reading comprehension outcomes for monolingual English speakers (e.g., Catts et al. 2006; Johnston & Kirby 2006; Vellutino et al. 2007).

Children acquire language comprehension skills prior to developing word reading skills. Thus, early instruction tends to focus on word reading skills, which becomes the primary predictor of reading comprehension outcomes during the primary grade years. Once children develop grade-appropriate word reading skills, language comprehension skills become the key differentiator. In other words, the influence of word reading and language comprehension on reading outcomes shifts over the course of development, such that word reading skills are more predictive of reading outcomes early on, while language comprehension skills become more predictive once students have developed adequate word reading skills.

Like all developmental processes, reading unfolds in unique ways for each individual, but there are trends at the group level that help explain variation in outcomes. For instance, some work shows that motivation influences reading (e.g., Wang & Guthrie 2004), but this finding
does not consistently hold across racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Unrau & Schlackman 2006). More robust evidence is found concerning two frequently overlapping groups of students: those from low-income homes and those from linguistically diverse homes. As shown earlier, the effect of poverty on a range of developmental outcomes, including literacy, is very well documented (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1997; Coleman 1968). Though bilingualism is not in itself a risk factor for low academic achievement (Snow 1992), students whose native language is not English tend to evidence lower reading achievement levels than their monolingual English-speaking peers (for a review, see August & Shanahan 2006). When the academic needs of the large and growing population of students from Spanish-speaking homes are considered, there is even more cause for concern. Unlike native speakers of English who spend several years acquiring oral language skills before formal reading instruction begins, Spanish-English bilingual children are charged with the challenging task of acquiring literacy skills while simultaneously developing oral proficiency in English. Based in part on this circumstance, Spanish-English bilingual children show a striking gap in reading comprehension achievement when compared with native English speakers (August & Shanahan 2006). For example, the most recent 4th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress results reveal that 45% of Latino students scored at the below basic level in reading, compared with 21% of their White classmates (NCES 2015).

Similarly to findings for monolingual English speakers, both word reading and oral comprehension skills predict Spanish–English bilingual students’ reading comprehension outcomes. But in contrast to the general population, the developmental shift to reliance on language skills once word reading is automatized does not appear to occur for struggling Spanish–English bilingual readers at the late–elementary level (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux 2010). Nakamoto, Lindsey, and Manis (2008) report a similar finding among their sample of Spanish–English bilingual students. In both these studies, the average reading comprehension performance among students was well below grade level expectations, suggesting that the influence of word reading and oral language on reading comprehension outcomes depends on the text being processed (i.e., the extent to which the student is reading text that is within their age-appropriate reading level). In other words, without age-appropriate oral comprehension skills, developmental shifts in the contributions of word reading and oral language skills to reading comprehension cannot be expected. These findings highlight the unique process of skill development among many Spanish–English bilingual readers. For these learners, there is a clear gap between oral language comprehension and word reading from preschool through 5th grade. Although the word reading skills of Spanish–English bilingual students eventually become on par with national norms, their overall oral language comprehension skills remain well below the national average (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux 2011a). It is thus not surprising that word reading remains a stronger predictor for struggling Spanish–English bilingual readers in 5th grade (i.e., those reading at the 2nd grade level). In other words, the model is effectively one of comprehension at the 2nd grade level, when in fact word reading is expected to be a stronger contributor than language comprehension. These findings suggest that it may be possible to identify poor comprehenders on the basis of this skill profile (i.e., low language comprehension and age-appropriate word reading) rather than waiting to assess reading comprehension after the primary grade years. At the same time, they underscore the need to provide better and sustained support for Spanish–English bilingual students’ language comprehension skills as early as possible.

A more recent analysis of this same sample’s English reading comprehension achievement further underscores the important role of early language skills on later reading outcomes. Students’ reading outcomes were assessed at 8th grade and, in contrast to findings for 5th grade, language skills now emerged as predictive (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux 2017). Although students on average continued to perform below grade level on reading
comprehension in 8th grade, they were closer to grade-level expectations. That is, the reading comprehension gap relative to national norms narrowed.

In summary, Spanish-English bilingual students evidence lower English reading comprehension achievement levels, which compromises their ability to access the curriculum. The empirical base to date underscores the important role that early language comprehension skills play for later reading outcomes and suggests that increased efforts to improve Spanish-English bilingual learners’ language skills are needed.

**Spanish literacy development**

This section reviews research about the typical course of Spanish literacy development carried out in Spanish-speaking countries, because it can help inform our understanding of how best to meet the literacy needs in Spanish and English of the large and growing population of Spanish-English bilingual students in U.S. classrooms. Teachers interested in concrete methods of teaching Spanish literacy are directed to Freeman and Freeman (2009) and Beeman and Urow (2012).

To a greater extent than in English, given that English has a more complex orthography, typical literacy instruction in countries that educate children in Spanish emphasizes phonological recoding1 and spelling sound patterns (López & Greenfield 2004; Perez 1994; Signorini 1997) because Spanish has a more transparent and predictable orthography (Carreiras et al. 1998; Cuetos 1993; Signorini 1997). In other words, there is a generally clear letter-sound correspondence in Spanish. Spanish has a total of five vowels and the names of the vowels represent the sounds they make, facilitating the spelling of Spanish vowel sounds (Treiman & Kessler 2014). For instance, in Spanish there is a prevalence of consonant-vowel syllables (e.g., casa) while in English there are more complex syllable endings (e.g., milk). In turn, an instructional focus on phonemic awareness is considered unnecessary in Spanish, although it is valuable in English (Goldenberg et al. 2014). Thus, it is important to ensure that methods shown to be effective in English are not simply adopted when providing Spanish literacy instruction (Escamilla 2000; Goldenberg et al. 2014). More specifically, well-executed instruction in Spanish tends to focus on the syllable as a unit. Because Spanish has more multisyllabic words than other alphabetic languages like English and French, decoding is applied primarily at the sound and syllable levels (Honig et al. 2000). However, some work shows that students who have difficulties learning to read in Spanish can still benefit from instruction at the phoneme level (e.g., González et al. 2000). Of course, there is no “one best” approach to literacy instruction in any language, and teachers must be equipped with a suite of approaches.

I will now review studies focused on Spanish-English bilingual children’s Spanish literacy in the U.S. The two instructional contexts in which Spanish literacy is taught are dual language programs and transitional bilingual programs. Dual language programs have as an explicit goal the development of children’s Spanish, and they use Spanish for a minimum of six years during significant portions of the school day to teach content (see Lindholm-Leary, this volume). On the other hand, as their name implies, transitional bilingual programs use Spanish for a maximum of three years and only until children are deemed proficient enough in English to be transitioned to an all-English classroom. Clearly, the former have Spanish literacy as a long-term goal and the latter do not. But given the relative scarcity of dual language programs in the U.S., there are only a few studies to cite about children’s Spanish literacy, and most of them reported on students’ scores on standardized Spanish reading tests rather than literacy development. For example, Thomas and Collier (2002) examined the standardized Spanish reading scores of bilingual Latino students in Houston who began school as English Language Learners, comparing
those in dual immersion programs (the darker bars in Figure 29.1) to their peers in more traditional bilingual programs (the lighter bars).

Clearly, students in dual immersion developed stronger levels of Spanish literacy than those in other program types, but this is not particularly surprising since dual immersion has biliteracy as one of its goals.

Potowski (2007) examined scores of a group of 8th graders who had attended a dual immersion school since preschool. She used two sections of the Logramos (2002) norm-referenced reading achievement test: the vocabulary portion, consisting of multiple choice questions presenting words in the context of a phrase or short sentence and students choose the answer whose meaning is closest to that of the given word, and a multiple choice reading comprehension asking questions about poetry, fiction, biographical sketches, social studies selections, and topics of general interest. Potowski compared three groups of students: 31 Latino bilinguals; 16 students who began the program monolingual in English; and 5 students who had recently arrived from Latin America (up to two years prior to the study) and were essentially monolingual in Spanish.

Table 29.1 shows their scores.

Table 29.1 Eighth grade dual immersion students’ reading scores, national percentile ranks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilingual Latinos (n=31)</th>
<th>Second language Spanish (n=16)</th>
<th>Recent arrivals (n=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>48.9 (sd 24.8)</td>
<td>33.6 (sd 22.7)</td>
<td>79.2 (sd 10.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td>66.7 (sd 24.3)</td>
<td>58.1 (sd 31.4)</td>
<td>77.4 (sd 17.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The bilingual Latino students’ reading scores, at 66.7%, evidence what Potowski (2007) considered “strong levels of Spanish proficiency” which were in fact not very far behind the scores of the recently arrived students. Their isolated vocabulary scores were a bit lower, but Potowski noted that the vocabulary items were considerably more difficult. Her more recent research in a different school (2017) administered the reading portion of the Language Assessment Scales to two groups of bilingual Latinos across four grade levels: those in dual immersion and their peers attending an all-English program in the same building (see Figure 29.2).

Even less surprisingly than the findings of Thomas and Collier (2002), Potowski (2017) found that students in dual immersion develop stronger levels of Spanish literacy than those in all English programs. Although both sets of findings seem perhaps too logical to merit notice, it is important to document Spanish literacy development rather than simply assume that dual language is superior in promoting it.

Pérez (2003) looked at the dynamic processes involved in children’s Spanish literacy development in two dual immersion schools and how they were influenced by teachers, parents, and local policies. She found that students began to use their developing Spanish literacy knowledge starting in kindergarten to make meaning from English texts, even though the teachers did not begin formal English literacy instruction until 3rd grade. That is, once they understood written language as a tool, they brought all of their developing skills to interpreting whatever texts they encountered.

Overall, then, Spanish–English bilingual children’s Spanish reading development tends to be strongest among children instructed in Spanish, as might be expected. In fact, it is unreasonable to expect Spanish literacy among children who have not been provided with Spanish language instruction. A few exceptions are to be noted. Nakamoto, Lindsey, and Manis (2007) investigated the word reading and reading comprehension skills of bilingually instructed (early transition) Spanish-speakers in the Southwest region of the U.S. (n = 261). Students were followed longitudinally from 1st through 6th grade, but their Spanish skills were only assessed in kindergarten and 1st grade. During these early school years, students evidenced word reading and reading comprehension skills on par with national monolingual norms. In a different study using the same sample, Nakamoto, Lindsey, and Manis (2008) conducted a cross-linguistic examination of students’ Spanish and English reading comprehension.

Figure 29.2 Percent correct, LAS reading exam
Their Spanish and English word reading, vocabulary, and listening comprehension skills were assessed in 3rd grade while their Spanish and English reading comprehension performance was measured in 6th grade. Similar to findings during kindergarten and 1st grade, students’ 3rd grade Spanish word reading skills remained within national monolingual norms. In contrast, their 3rd grade Spanish language skills were in the low-average range. This suggests that their Spanish reading skills had atrophied over time.

I now turn to studies of Spanish literacy in different transitional bilingual programs. Focused on pre-schoolers attending a Spanish-English transitional bilingual education program in Illinois, Mancilla-Martinez and Jacoby (under review) documented the Spanish receptive vocabulary development of Spanish-speaking children from immigrant low-income homes. On average, children’s Spanish vocabulary skills, which started below age-level norms at the beginning of the preschool year, grew to surpass age-level norms by the end of the preschool year. These results suggest that this model for preschool instruction warrants further attention in terms of understanding how it contributes to Spanish-speaking children’s academic outcomes. Similarly, Proctor, August, Carlo, and Barr (2010) studied the Spanish reading development, the relationship between Spanish and English, and the influence of income status with 101 Spanish-English bilingual students in 2nd to 5th grade. Students resided in the West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast of the U.S. and were instructed in English only, Spanish only, or bilingually (transitioning out after 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade, once they had attained 2nd grade proficiency in Spanish literacy). The authors found that children from Spanish or bilingually instructed classrooms generally came from lower income families compared to students in the English-only classrooms. As might be expected, Spanish and bilingually instructed students outperformed English instructed students on the Spanish measures. More notably, there was no difference on the English measures between the three instructional groups. That is, instruction in Spanish did not worsen outcomes in English; this seemingly counterintuitive finding has been reported very frequently in dual immersion research (see Lindholm-Leary, this volume). However, a concerning finding was that students’ Spanish reading achievement declined by 5th grade, even among the Spanish-instructed students. Given that students were transitioned to English instruction upon attainment of 2nd grade Spanish literacy proficiency, the authors hypothesize that students were thus only able to develop lower order Spanish skills. They conclude that there is a need for Spanish literacy instruction if Spanish literacy skills are to be maintained long term, particularly since Spanish literacy instruction does not appear to interfere with English literacy development.

Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux (2011b) echo Proctor and colleagues’ conclusions. They examined the association between early patterns of home language use prior to formal school entry (i.e., mostly Spanish, equal amounts of Spanish and English, and mostly English) and Spanish and English vocabulary growth during preschool to 5th grade among English-instructed Spanish-speaking children on the East Coast. Early Spanish use in the home did not interfere with the development of English vocabulary (also see Hammer et al. 2013 for similar findings). However, despite their English-only instructional context, all learners’ vocabulary knowledge in both languages was below the national average, and this vocabulary gap persisted from preschool to 5th grade. Furthermore, students’ Spanish vocabulary growth did not vary among the three language groups, meaning that students from mostly Spanish-speaking homes did not evidence higher rates of Spanish vocabulary growth compared to students from mostly English-speaking homes. More concerning was that the Spanish vocabulary gap widened relative to national norms for all three language groups. Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux conclude that, as others have noted (e.g., Duursma et al. 2007; Lyon 1996; Yamamoto 2001), simply coming from a home in which a language other than English is used does not necessarily lead to written proficiency in
that language. In fact, as Proctor and colleagues (2010) suggest, literacy in a minority language is at risk in the absence of formal instruction.

Most recently, the applicability of the SVR for English-instructed Spanish-English bilingual students’ Spanish and English reading achievement in 3rd, 4th, or 5th grades was investigated by Proctor, Harring, and Silverman (2015). The authors examined whether the reading process was comparable between Spanish (a transparent orthography) and English (a more opaque orthography). They used analogous measures of reading comprehension, decoding, and language comprehension to test the SVR model. Results provide support for the SVR as a theoretical framework in both languages. However, differences by language emerged in the influence of decoding and language comprehension skills on reading comprehension outcomes. Specifically, both decoding and language comprehension were related to reading comprehension in Spanish and English. However, a significant interaction was only found in English, indicating that decoding exerted a stronger influence on reading comprehension outcomes for students with weaker English language comprehension skills, but a weaker influence on students with stronger English language comprehension skills. In contrast, no such interaction was found for Spanish reading comprehension. Given the limited research to date that has examined the applicability of the SVR on Spanish outcomes, it is difficult to interpret this finding. Although students’ decoding skills in both languages were within the national monolingual norms, their Spanish reading comprehension skills were more than 1 standard deviation below national norms, and their English reading comprehension skills were at the low-average range. That is, they could decode well in both languages, but had trouble with reading comprehension.

The findings of Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux (2011b), Nakamoto and colleagues (2007, 2008), and Proctor and colleagues (2010, 2015) show that there is a similar trend in the Spanish reading profiles of Spanish-English bilingual children as with their English performance. Specifically, during the primary grade years, word reading, language comprehension, and reading comprehension skills tend to remain in the average range, particularly among students with some form of formal Spanish instruction. However, after the primary grade years, word reading skills remain relatively strong (even among students in English instructional context, perhaps due to the more transparent orthography of Spanish), but language and reading comprehension skills increasingly decline.

Summary and future directions
The literacy achievement of Spanish-English bilingual students in the U.S., in English and also in Spanish, raises serious concerns and underscores the need for more research to shed light on how best to support their literacy achievement in both languages. One of most pressing needs is a valid and reliable assessment tool designed for and normed on Spanish-English bilingual children (Hammer et al. 2014). As previously noted, the Receptive and Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Tests, Spanish-Bilingual Editions (Brownell 2012a, 2012b) are potentially promising assessment tools to move the field from reliance on monolingual measures.

Additionally, and intimately related to the issue of bilingual assessment, home language use is typically treated as time-invariant, an assumption that may well be inaccurate. Drawing on data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten (ECLS-K) Cohort, an analysis of patterns of language use from kindergarten to 8th grade revealed considerable instability (Mancilla-Martinez & Kieffer 2010). At kindergarten entry and again at the beginning of 8th grade—a novel aspect of this nationally representative longitudinal dataset—parents reported on whether a language other than English was spoken...
U.S. Latino bilingual children’s literacy

at home, and, if so, the frequency with which this language was spoken by the mother to the participating child and by the child to the mother. Patterns of home language use were found to be dynamic, with only half of the sample demonstrating stability across the years. While most families shifted toward more English use over time, some reported actually using the minority language more frequently. This means that the home language use screening questions typically asked at school entry (i.e., kindergarten) may not reflect changes in home language use experienced by a substantial portion of bilingual children and their families. This lack of information makes it difficult to design instructional supports to match students’ language experiences across the school years. It is important to reassess the practice of gathering data on home language use only at school entry, as well as to ensure that, at a minimum, the research community recognizes the limitations in designs, analyses, and theoretical models that focus on the home language environment of bilingual learners only at one specific time.

The issues of literacy highlighted here have important long-term implications. The national high school dropout rate remains highest for Latinos (10.6%) compared to those of African Americans (7.4%) and Whites (5.2%) (Kena et al. 2015). Spanish–English bilingual students disproportionately face multiple risk factors, including those associated with poverty, that severely compromise their opportunities to learn. Yet, Spanish–English bilingual children in the U.S. are overwhelmingly instructed in English-only programs, which is problematic for at least two reasons. First, evidence from school districts around the U.S. shows that dual language instruction leads to stronger English, stronger Spanish, and stronger academic development. Second, all-English instruction puts EL students at a disadvantage because they require academic proficiency in English. In addition to increasing the number of dual language programs, more research on students’ Spanish literacy development in all program types is needed.

Notes
1 Recoding is similar to decoding, but decoding only works for regular words and not irregular ones, sight words, or words that have letter sounds that children have not yet learned such as none and enough.
2 Although Scheffner Hammer et al. (2009) found that the children of mothers who switched to English in the home evidenced less Spanish vocabulary knowledge than those whose mothers did not switch to English and continued using Spanish.

Further reading
This chapter outlines the role of bilingualism in shaping awareness of various dimensions of language and literacy development: vocabulary, syntax, phonology, narrative structure, and print.

This practical guide provides a theoretical overview of translanguaging for educators, sample instructional units at elementary, middle and high school levels, and descriptions of translanguaging strategies to support bilingual learners, including strategies specific to literacy development.

These proceedings from the U.S. Department of Education Research Symposium on High Standards in Reading for Students from Diverse Language Groups provide cognitive models of language transfer and reading development among bilingual learners, as well as descriptions of sociocultural contexts for bilingual literacy development within the U.S.


References


U.S. Latino bilingual children's literacy


457


