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Can the Native Language Be Maintained?: Language Shift, Ethnic Identity, and the SNS Curriculum

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The United States has seen a dramatic increase in the number of Spanish-speaking residents in the recent years. With that growth there has been a concomitant effort on behalf of many in the bilingual education and foreign language professions to meet the challenge of helping native bilingual children develop and maintain their home language. In this paper, I will discuss three dimensions of Spanish language development and maintenance among elementary and secondary school students who come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. First, I will examine briefly some of the evidence of language shift, what Lilly Wong-Filmore (1991) has characterized as learning a second language while losing a first. Second, a developmental model of ethnic identity formation and attitudes toward the home language among Spanish bilinguals will be presented which may help explain when and how language shift can be prevented and reversed. Finally, I will place the discussion of ethnic identity within the larger framework of language acquisition theory and suggest some curricular implications for Spanish for Native Speaker and developmental bilingual classrooms.

LANGUAGE SHIFT

McArthur (1993:6), reporting on figures from the Census Bureau's 1989 Current Population Survey, notedthat there were over fourteen million Spanish speakers in the United States over the age of five, a 65% increase over 1979. Three and a half million of these Spanish-speakers were age five to seventeen, constituting just under ten percent of all children in American schools. Despite some public skepticism, these children seem to be acquiring both conversational and academic English at a remarkable rate, particularly in well-designed and executed bilingual education programs (Willig, 1985; Krashen & Biber, 1988; Cummins, 1989; Ramirez, 1992; Krashen & McQuillan, 1995).

Students often learn English so fast and efficiently, in fact, that many "shift" to their second language and lose their proficiency in Spanish. Fishman (1991) has been most prominent in documenting and analyzing language shift in several countries, and has noted that the move of non-English language speakers to the dominant language in the United States is a consistent and pervasive one. Several other researchers have provided evidence of language shift in a variety of settings, from prekindergarten to high school. Wong-Filmore (1983) looked at over 1,100 families throughout the United States where a language other than English was spoken at home, including Spanish, which constituted over three-fourths of the total sample. She compared two groups: those who attended primarily English-only or bilingual early education programs (EEC), and those who attended primarily home language EEC programs (in this case, Spanish-language preschools). Dramatic differences were discovered in the amount of language shift between the two groups. I have re-analyzed part of her data for statistical significance, with the results shown in Tables 1 and 2, to show just how dramatic this shift can be.

Table 1

Changes in Language Use at Home After Children Attended Early Education Program

	Bilingual GroupMostly English-Only/	Spanish Group
No Change	188	49
Negative Change[1]	308	29
Positive Change[2]	98	185

Chi-Square = 248.47, df = 2, p < .0001

[1] Less home language, more English

[2] More home language

source: Wong-Filmore, 1983, Table 8

Wong-Filmore characterized the decreased use of the home language by the children with the family as a negative change, given the likely limited nature of the parents' English in many of these homes. A positive change was an increased use of the home language. As you can note in Table 1, the shift to English among those children in English-only and even bilingual preschool programs is significantly above that of the comparison home language program, with a little over half of the former group reporting a shift to English. Similar results are found in Table 2, where the language of the EEC program among Wong-Filmore's main sample is analyzed. Again, highly significantly differences were found among the three groups, with students in both the English-only and bilingual programs showing a substantial shift to English. The impact of these early shifts to English, according to other data reported by Wong-Filmore, was difficulty in communication between parent and child, a difficulty which increases as the offspring lose more and more of their home language as they grow older.

Table 2

Changes in Language Use in Main Sample Homes by Language of Program

	English	Bilingual	Home Language
No Change	66	98	24
Positive Change	60	60	32
Negative Change	136	152	20

Chi-Square = 72.48, df = 4, p < .0001

source: Wong-Filmore, 1983, Table 9

While Hernandez-Chavez (1993) has pointed out that this shift to English does not always follow predictable generational patterns, varying according to social and linguistic contact across communities and families, there are several studies which show that the shift from Spanish to English among elementary and high school students can indeed seem inexorable at every level. Merino (1983) found that there were significant drops in Spanish accuracy from kindergarten to sixth grade over a two year period by half of her Chicano bilingual subjects. Pease-Alvarez and Winsler (1994) noted language shifts from Spanish to English among fourth graders in just one school year. Similar evidence of shift in elementary schools is also reported in Pease-Alvarez (1993).

As students grow older, loss of Spanish proficiency continues, even in Spanish/English bilingual settings. In a survey of randomly selected Latino high school students in Miami, Garcia and Diaz (1992) found that while 75.4% of the respondents could understand Spanish and English equally well, only 46.7% could write the two languages with equal proficiency. Thus, literacy seems to be one of the principle casualties of language shift. McQuillan and Tse (in press) found in a qualitative analysis of native bilinguals from several different language groups that literacy was also the weakest of the home language skills among their subjects.

What is somewhat surprising about Garcia and Diaz's results was that while the students who report their language use in the category "English and some Spanish" goes up from elementary to middle school, and it drops between middle school and high school. As Garcia and Diaz note, "sometime during the junior high grades and the senior year, high schoolers began making less use of English or Spanish exclusively" (p. 18). It could be that students are enrolling in Spanish second language or Spanish for Native Speaker courses during their secondary school years, thus regaining an interest in Spanish language use. Another possibility is that they are experiencing shifts in attitudes toward Spanish due to a more general development in their own ethnic identity. An examination of ethnic identity formation may be one of the keys to understanding how and why language shift takes place in school age children.

ETHNIC IDENTITY FORMATION AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES: THE TSE DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

Extensive work has been done on ethnic identity from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Phinney, 1990). Tse (1995) has attempted to fuse two of the most prominent frameworks--identity formation and social group membership--into a single developmental model of ethnic identity and language attitudes. She found that several studies have posited language as one of the key ingredients in the formation of ethnic identity, serving to provide individuals with boundaries which allow them to both become aware of and maintain membership in a given ethnic group (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979, Giles & Johnson, 1981; Heller, 1987). Although not the only element in ethnic identity formation, language remains, according to Tse, the most salient, a view which Fishman also shares, noting that it can become "the ultimate symbol of ethnicity" (p. 25).

Drawing upon similar models by Macia (1966, 1980), Phinney (1990), and Kim (1981) and using a grounded theory qualitative method in analyzing her interview data from members of several different ethnic groups, Tse has proposed a four stage developmental model, although she is quick to point out that not all ethnic group members experience each stage, nor do they necessarily move through them in a uniform fashion. Figure 1 outlines the basic stages and how they effect attitudes toward the home language. I will highlight the results of her major findings, illustrating the stages with quotes from her subjects. While not all of these subjects came from Spanish-speaking homes, the fact that Tse was able to find a general pattern across cultures lends strength to her model rather than detracting from it for our particular concern here, native Spanish bilinguals.

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Figure 1

Model of Ethnic Identity and Home Language Attitude Development

Ethnic Identification	Language Attitudes
Stage 1 Unexamined identity	Unawareness of or ambivalence toward home or dominant language (HL/DL)
Stage 2 Identification with the DL	Preference for the DL; ambivalence or negative attitudes toward HL
Stage 3 Ethnic emergence	Interest in and possible desire to develop/learn the HL
Stage 4 Acheived identity	Positive attitudes toward HL; decision made about role of HL in identity

In Stage One, ethnic identity is unexamined and "characterized by a lack of awareness or interest concerning ethnicity" and the home language. In some cases, this can be the individual viewing herself unquestionably as Latina; in other cases, it may be that the person perceives himself simply as "American." Maria, a Mexican-American subject, illustrates this first stage:

> Being raised in a household where you speak Spanish and you have Mexican cultural values everyday, I never thought about it, I never had to think about my culture because I was surrounded by my culture. I was surrounded by Spanish things that were influenced by the Spaniards or Mexicans, so I just took things for granted. (Tse, 1995b, p. 10) Conversely, Keith, a Chinese-American, states that ethnic group membership "wasn't' something I thought about really. It never seemed like an issue...all my life, we just did American things" (Tse, 1994b, p. 10).

In Stage Two, Tse notes that there is an "identification with the dominant culture and preference for the dominant language" with indifferent or negative attitudes toward the home language. This stage can be exemplified by either an outright rejection or mere uninterest in developing or maintaining the home language or culture. For some subjects, Tse reports this taking place in childhood, for others, it was during adolescence. Lara, a Filipino-American, noted that she distanced herself from other Filipinos in her school, and asserted "I'm not Filipino; I'm American" (Tse, 1994a, p. 18). In her book, Barrios and Borderlands: Culture of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, Denis Daly Heych (1994) provides what is perhaps the all-too-typical case of Elizabeth, who grows indifferent to her Spanish-speaking heritage due in part to her immigrant parent's belief that such a rejection is necessary for success in the United States. Elizabeth notes that "to fit in..[to have] a future...I lost my past" (377).

In Stage Three, ethnic identity becomes an interest or concern of the individual, what Tse calls "ethnic emergence," where issues of ethnicity are explored. In this stage, interest in developing or re-gaining the home language may emerge as part of identity exploration. The shift seems to come from a number of sources. For Maria, it was moving to a predominantly non-Latino community. She states that she felt "alienated from my culture. After I realized that, it took a couple of years to figure out that something was bothering me. And...I realized that it was because I no longer spoke Spanish." For Lara, emergence came when she was in college and took a course in Filipino history, in part motivated by Mexican and Jewish friends who exhibited a great deal of pride in their heritage. She states:

> The classes...really changed my view of being Filipino and being American and being hyphenated. I learned a lot. It got me past saying no to my culture, and saying that I'm not Filipino. It got me to a point you know that I am Filipino, very much Filipino. (Tse, 1994b, p. 14)

The exploration of ethnic identity at this stage often had a linguistic component. For some subjects, it led to an active interest in enrolling in a course in their home language, meeting more proficient speakers of the home language, reading texts written in that language, and even traveling to the country where their home language is dominant. Heych's (1994) Elizabeth expresses a strong desire to increase her Spanish proficiency, and has enrolled in language classes and is planning a trip to her native El Salvador. She states:

> I keep coming back to the importance of language to my identity...In the midst of the early memories and associations that the Spanish language recalls to me, there is a profound sense of loss, a feeling that something that should have been mine was taken away. (338)

In the final stage, Tse notes that individuals reach an "achieved' but not necessarily permanent, ethnic identity. Here, they come to a decision about the role of their home language in their identity, which may be an integral part, or may be just one of many elements. For Keith, learning Chinese did not become a critical part of being a Chinese American, whereas for Lara and Elizabeth, improving their heritage language is very much part of completing their ethnic identity formation.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, ETHNIC IDENTITY, AND SNS CURRICULUM

While there are various and competing models of first and second language acquisition, most assign an important role to affect and group membership as casual variables in linguistic development. Krashen (1981), for example, states that in order for an individual to acquire language, he or she must have a low "Affective Filter" so that the new linguistic elements can reach the Language Acquisition Device. Schumann's Acculturation Model (1978) also states that the social distance between the learner and the target culture is a key determinant of acquisition. Gardner and Lambert's (1972; Gardner, 1985) extensive work on motivation in second language acquisition have also demonstrated the role group identification plays in language development.

Given the potential importance of ethnic identity formation on heritage language maintenance and enrichment, we are faced with two possibilities as to the impact of SNS curriculum on identity, and visa-versa. The first is that heritage language programs can positively influence ethnic identity, preventing or attenuating the effects of Tse's Stage 2 rejection of the home culture, and strengthening the positive formation of identity for those who are ambivalent. The second possibility is that the timing of SNS curriculum should wait until such a time as students are in Stage 3, ethnic emergence, or Stage 4, achieved identity, where they are already positively disposed to the heritage language.

There is some limited evidence suggesting that heritage language programs at the elementary and secondary levels can in fact help promote positive attitudes toward the heritage culture and therefore increase the likelihood of further language development. Lambert and Cazabon's (1994) report on the Amigos two-way bilingual program in Cambridge, Massachusetts found that Latino fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in the project were positively disposed toward continuing to learn Spanish. Feuerverger (1994) examined an innovative program in Canada where multilingual, multicultural classrooms located in an inner-city, low-income neighborhood were provided books in the students' respective home languages. Children were encouraged to continue their language development through reading. In a series of interviews with the parents, teachers, and children, she concluded that the students exhibited a greater sense of ethnic pride and understanding after the

use of the home language books was introduced. McQuillan and Rodrigo (in press) found that SNS university courses also can have a positive impact on students' motivation to read and continue their study of Spanish.

It is important to note that one element in some of these home language courses, the wide use of home language books, provides an additional bonus: literacy development. Access to print is one of the most important factors in the acquisition of reading and writing (Krashen, 1993), and since literacy is one of the first victims of language shift, the use of heritage language texts can serve to bolster both cultural knowledge and language proficiency. Access, however, is one thing that many native Spanish bilinguals lack. Pucci (1994) surveyed schools in one major metropolitan area in the southwest and found that Spanish-speaking elementary students had extremely limited access to Spanish books in their school libraries, even in schools with bilingual education programs. Constantino (1994) discovered that many immigrant parents have little knowledge of the public library, the other major source of Spanish print materials. Ramirez (1992) found that the average home of students in the bilingual education programs he examined had only 22 books. With few books in the libraries and at home, the SNS classroom may be one of the only places bilinguals can get access to Spanish language print.

Language shift is not an inevitable phenomenon. While it seems strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors involved in ethnic identity formation, there is a potentially powerful role for SNS courses to play in giving students access to Spanish-language resources which in turn can be a positive influence on their perceptions of themselves and their home culture. Still, as SNS instructors we must be sensitive to the possible changes that take place in students' ethnic identity, recognizing that there may is an interplay between formation of attitudes toward the home culture and their disposition and ultimate proficiency in Spanish. Understanding these issues of attitude and identity can help us better see our role in the classroom and how it has an impact on our bilingual students.

NOTES

1. The social setting clearly plays a large part in the amount of loss and shift. Hakuta and D'Andrea's 1992 study of Spanish retention indicates that many of their subjects seem to have experienced little loss of Spanish by the time they reach high school, even in literacy. However, they note that the subjects were drawn from a single high school where 65% of the student are of Mexican descent living in "a predominantly agricultural community on the central coast of California" (p. 74). The majority of the town's 30,000 inhabitants arrived to the area within the last 20 years, and over a third of their subjects were born in Mexico. Students in more linguistically diverse urban settings or who are born in the United States may experience far greater shift. Even in Hakuta and D'Andrea's results, however, there is evidence of the strong pull of English over Spanish, as the age at which students reported speaking English significantly affected Spanish proficiency.

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