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**Bilingualism since early childhood. Learning Spanish as an L2 in the  
United States: challenges in the Dual Language Immersion Program**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project analyzes bilingualism since early childhood and Spanish as a second language in the United States. It will examine the importance of second language learning in the cognitive development of students, as well as the different characteristics that constitute bilingual education. In addition, an analysis of the most effective bilingual education among students will be carried out, which is the immersion program. Despite the great variety within this education system, this project will focus on describing the dual language immersion program with Spanish-English. Within this program, there will be identified the main benefits but especially the different challenges that have arisen among the learners. In order to achieve an effective development of their language skills, several solutions are proposed to address these challenges. These solutions are intended to improve the dual language immersion education system by promoting bilingualism and literacy.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, education, immersion, dual language, literacy, United States.

## **RESUMEN**

Este proyecto analiza el bilingüismo desde una edad temprana y el español como segunda lengua en Estados Unidos. Se examinará la importancia del aprendizaje de una segunda lengua en el desarrollo cognitivo de los estudiantes y también las diferentes características que conforman la educación bilingüe. Además, se llevará a cabo el análisis de la educación bilingüe más efectiva entre los estudiantes, que viene a ser el programa de inmersión. A pesar de la gran variedad con la que cuenta este sistema educativo, este proyecto se centrará en describir el programa de educación dual con español-inglés. Dentro de este programa, se identificarán los diferentes beneficios pero, sobre todo, los diferentes desafíos que han surgido entre los estudiantes. Para conseguir un efectivo desarrollo de sus habilidades lingüísticas, se proponen varias soluciones para abordar estos desafíos. Con estas soluciones se pretende mejorar el sistema educativo de la inmersión dual fomentando el bilingüismo y la alfabetización.

**Palabras clave:** bilingüismo, educación, inmersión, educación dual, alfabetización, Estados Unidos.



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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Being bilingual implies having the ability to speak two languages fluently. Learning a second language can make you a bilingual person; however, when this process occurs unconsciously, we can say that we are acquiring a second language. Children can become bilingual since their early childhood because due to their family context, they have grown up acquiring two languages at the same time. Because of this, bilingual education has appeared and has been carried out with different educational programs known as immersion. These programs are either a total immersion of the language to be learned or a simultaneous teaching of two languages. Although there are different immersion programs where a wide variety of languages are learned, they all share the same goal, to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy in the learner.

Education in the United States is very diverse, but in most states, there is a bilingual education where Spanish is studied as a second language. This rise of the Spanish language has been caused by a process of globalization where multiple social relations have been created with different countries around the world. There are different globalization processes where political, economic, and technological relations are carried out among others, but one of the most significant processes has been the social one concerning the Hispanic culture. In this way, it can be seen how the Spanish language and its culture have been an important global nexus due to the amount of territory that was conquered by Spaniards. This is due to the Discovery of America, which led to a large part of the American continent being composed today of Spanish-speaking countries or having Spanish as a second language, as in the case of the United States. Therefore, Spanish can be considered one of the richest languages in the world, that has evolved over the centuries, and as a result, several varieties of Spanish have emerged.

In each Spanish-speaking country, we can find a different vocabulary and even a different accent which can make learning Spanish a complex but not an impossible process. For this reason, it has been observed that since the 70s the United States has implemented a great variety of immersion programs in its elementary schools, most of them in Spanish. During all those years up to the present moment, immersion programs have grown significantly throughout the country. This constant growth has been the result of their effectiveness and, for the most part, the support of families and the enthusiasm of educators to maintain this system. This study will focus on the learning process and learning styles of the Spanish language since early childhood. From there, a description of bilingual education and the analysis of the immersion program known as dual language learning in the United States will also be presented.

Several researchers have conducted studies on the success of immersion programs in the United States and their effectiveness on students, however, there is very limited information on the challenges that may arise among learners in this type of education. The objective of this project will be to explore those challenges that have arisen in learning Spanish as a second language at an early age. This will be analyzed from the perspective of a specific elementary school called 'Ainsworth' in Portland, Oregon, specifically at the kindergarten and first-grade levels. I have been able to divide the different challenges into four categories which will be social, reading, grammatical, and communicative difficulties. To achieve this objective, I have relied mainly on my personal experience during the internship in the United States as an immersion educator, as well as on several bibliographic sources from other authors. Finally, solutions to these challenges will be proposed in order to reinforce the immersion education system and to achieve all the different goals so that an effective bilingual education can be carried out.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Learning a second language: learning process and learning styles

When studying a second language, it is important to distinguish between language acquisition and language learning. According to the study *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* conducted by researcher Stephen D Krashen, children can develop competence in a second language through two distinct and separate processes. “The first way is language acquisition that is a subconscious process. Language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication” (10).

That is, since it is a subconscious process, it is usually associated with children when they naturally speak two languages from an early age. By speaking several languages at the same time they do not become aware of the grammatical rules, and it becomes a more informal learning process.

However, Krashen states in his study that “the second way to develop competence in a second language is by language learning.” He uses “the term ‘learning’ henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them” (10). That is, because this is a conscious process, it is usually associated with not-so-young children since they can decide the language they would like to learn. They will be aware of the grammatical rules and it will be considered a formal process. This means that when the process of learning a second language begins, the learner will experience four stages. The educator Kolb refers to them as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Concrete experience (feeling) focuses on “being involved in experiences and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way. It emphasizes feeling as opposed to thinking” (105). In this phase of the learning process, the person will be able to 'feel' the language, or rather become familiar with it and evaluate what the learning of this language will bring to this person's life. Reflective



observation (watching) focuses on “understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them. It emphasizes understanding as opposed to practical application” (105). This mode of learning will be based basically on the action of observing. This way, by observing, for example, a movie or a real situation in which two native speakers are communicating, the listening skills will also be developed. Abstract conceptualization (thinking) focuses on “using logic, ideas, and concepts. It emphasizes thinking as opposed to feeling” (105). At this stage, after having developed listening skills and being able to recognize the different sounds of a language, the thinking comes in. Here, the brain will begin to think and understand many of the grammatical rules in a much more logical way. Active experimentation (doing) focuses on “actively influencing people and changing situations. It emphasizes practical applications as opposed to reflective understanding” (105). Finally, in this phase the process of 'doing' and experimenting with different options for effective learning takes place. This is where the practical part of the process begins and the study of vocabulary and grammar rules will be carried out.

In order to follow this learning process, there are different learning styles that can be defined as “cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (Keefe, 4). The researcher Reid has been able to draw on several studies conducted on students in U.S. schools and has come to the conclusion that learners have four basic learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. Visual learning is based on “reading or studying charts”; auditory learning is based on “listening to lectures or audiotapes”; kinesthetic learning is based on "experiential learning, that is, total physical involvement with a learning situation”; tactile learning is based on “hands-on learning, such as building models or doing laboratory experiments” (89). These four learning styles will offer the learner the possibility of learning a second language developing all their language skills reinforcing their knowledge by acquiring different techniques.

## **2.2 Bilingualism since early childhood**

Our society has transformed over the years into a globalized society in which bilingualism is increasingly becoming more present. When children have the ability to speak two languages since their infancy, they are considered bilingual because they have been acquiring these languages since birth. This has occurred in a natural way due to the context of their environment that allows them to communicate in both languages fluently.

The educational linguist Baker establishes a distinction between simultaneous and sequential childhood bilingualism. Baker defines simultaneous childhood bilingualism as “a child acquiring two languages at the same time from birth, sometimes called infant bilingualism, bilingual acquisition, and bilingual first language acquisition” (94). This occurs when the family speaks to their child in two different languages, so the child will acquire both of them simultaneously. He proposes the existence of four types of simultaneous acquisition which are divided into four different categories of early childhood bilingualism. According to Baker, these categories are:

- One person – one language: “The parents have different languages, one of which is often the dominant language of the community” (99).
- Home language is different from language outside the home: “The child acquires one language in the home, and a different language outside the home” (100).
- Mixed language: “The parents speak both languages to the child. The child will typically codeswitch with other bilinguals but not with monolinguals” (100).
- Delayed introduction of the second language: “The neighborhood, community, and school language is a higher status and a dominant language. Parents may delay exposure to that dominant language” (100).

However, Baker states that sequential childhood bilingualism occurs “when a child learns one language in the home, then goes to nursery or elementary school and learns a second language” (94). This means that the child will only speak one language in the family environment at home, but will become bilingual since the parents decided to enroll the child in preschool, where bilingual education will be accomplished. Moreover, some studies have demonstrated that “Spanish-speaking Mexican-American children attending a bilingual (Spanish-English) preschool gained linguistically compared to those who stayed at home” (Baker, 94).

For this reason, it has been observed that many families choose bilingual education according to their own needs as the educational linguists Maria Juan-Garau and Joana Salazar-Noguera state that, “we find families wanting their children to have competence in at least one foreign language” (2). Furthermore, they agree that “the ability to think in different languages, can have a positive impact on content learning. Not only does promote linguistic competence but it also serves to stimulate cognitive flexibility and thereby further cognitive development” (3). Therefore, this educational approach has become a popular method in schools all over the world. Besides, based on a study on foreign languages conducted by the National Institute of Educational Technologies and Teacher Training, “the increase in early childhood education students who have contact with a foreign language stands out, going from 65.6% in 2008-2009 to 84.8% in 2018-2019”. It has also been proven that there has been a “significant increase in the most recent years of primary school students studying a second foreign language, increasing from 5.8% in 2013-2014 to 20% in 2018-2019”. Thus, it can be affirmed that in most countries bilingual education has been implemented from early childhood.

### **2.3 Bilingual education**

Bilingual education can be defined as “the use of two or more languages in the instruction and assessment of learners, on the condition that the languages are used as a medium of instruction and not simply taught as an additional language” (García, 132).

The history of bilingual education can be found in several countries around the world, however, some researchers place a special emphasis on bilingual education in the United States since it was one of the pioneer countries in the creation of this type of education. One of the main reasons for the implementation of bilingual education in the United States was the imminent arrival of European immigrants. Many people from Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Spain, among others, who immigrated to the United States brought with them their language that would later be implemented in the country along with the native languages that already existed. This created the social need to communicate in a language in which everyone could understand each other, and this was English. As a result, a bilingual education was created where these languages coexisted together and were taught simultaneously creating a completely bilingual context.

This type of education spread throughout the United States, which led to the creation of bilingual schools since early times as the educational linguist Baker reports: “In the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States, linguistic diversity was accepted in both private and public schools” (184). However, despite the linguistic diversity that existed, many attempts were made by the government, which later in the 20th century tried to remove bilingual education completely. Americans claimed that a monolingual education speaking the English language would further 'Americanize' their country. The massive arrival of immigrants over the years and the participation of several states in World War I created a nationalistic feeling that tried to close the doors to bilingualism. This attitude from an international perspective, raised doubts about the quality of the U.S. education system and the competence of this country to compete internationally.

For this reason, in 1958 the National Defense and Education Act was developed promoting “foreign language learning in elementary schools, high schools, and universities. This helped to create a slightly more soul-searching attitude to languages other than English spoken among ethnic groups in the US” (Baker, 186). This meant the restoration of bilingualism in the country, which led to the creation of the Bilingual Education Act in 1967, which was designed to “help mother tongue Spanish speakers who were seen as failing in the school system, but ultimately was expanded to include all students for whom English was not their native language” (Baker, 187). In addition, since the Hispanic community was much larger in comparison to the others, Spanish became one of the essential languages alongside English. This resulted in the creation by Hispanics of the first school with a bilingual education in the U.S.

Strong forms of bilingual education aim at achieving bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy. According to the educational linguist Baker, within the strong forms of bilingual education, we can observe the difference between two models depending on the educational purposes pursued. On the one hand, the transitional model aims to “shift the child from the home, minority language to the dominant, majority language” (Baker, 207). This model is also known as subtractive bilingualism and an example can be when the language spoken at home is Spanish and the objective is to completely replace Spanish with the dominant language which would be English. This, however, can have a mostly negative effect on the learner as it can generate delays in school performance and cultural problems as it can affect the learner's identity.

On the other hand, the enrichment model aims to “extend the individual and group use of minority languages, leading to cultural pluralism and linguistic diversity” (Baker, 207). This model is also known as additive bilingualism and will result in what is known as immersion education where both languages become equally important. This type of bilingual education is the most predominant in the United States as it is considered beneficial since its main objectives are to ensure that learners can become bilingual and biliterate.

### **3. IMMERSION EDUCATION**

Immersion education is based on mirroring the idea of how a first language is acquired in a relatively subconscious way. Children are not aware that they are learning a language at home which is going to be their mother tongue. Immersion tries to replicate this process, especially in the first years of school, where students will retain the new information more easily. The focus in immersion is on non-conscious learning and more informal learning based on the content rather than the form of the language. In the later primary school years, immersion will focus on more formal learning of the grammatical and syntactical rules of the language. This language learning will become a fully conscious process that will reinforce and improve communication by developing fluency in the language throughout the grades.

When applied to language, immersion was first used to describe “intensive language programs for US troops about to go abroad in the Second World War. In the 1960s, ‘immersion education’ was coined in Canada to describe a new form of bilingual education” (Baker, 239). Besides, the English-speaking community residing in Canada at that time began to realize that the need to be fluent in French, the official language of the country, was becoming increasingly visible. Many of these people had studied French in school but more informally, that is, teaching the language as a subject that would focus on grammar and memorization, but not with the objective of achieving bilingualism. For this reason, the English community did not have sufficient language skills to be able to communicate with French speakers or work where only French was spoken. If they wanted the country's economy to survive, Canadians had to find a solution so that both English and French could be used as a means of instruction and above all, the use of French for socio-economic purposes. Thus, a group of parents in the city of St. Lambert, Quebec began to make improvements in the educational system and proposed the creation of a total immersion program. In this program, French would be taught exclusively throughout the elementary school from the beginning of kindergarten until students acquire sufficient fluency by approximately the sixth grade.

Nonetheless, this early total immersion raised concerns among families who thought that with this type of immersion, they would only develop language skills in the second language and would lose all their first language skills. For this reason, they decided to implement more partial immersion and mid-immersion programs. As the grades progressed, the French language would be reduced and some subjects would be taught in English. The program would be taught 50% of the day in English and the other 50% in French, creating what we know today as the two-way immersion program.

This success in immersion programs in Canada spread to the United States as well. It influenced many educators who started to use this bilingual education as a way to save and educate the minority language nations that were failing in American schools. These minority communities were mostly Native American and Spanish-speaking Latinos, so in this case, it would be the reverse of the immersion that was taking place in Canada. That is to say, these immersion programs in the United States would only be in the child's home language, which was Spanish, that was used in the early grades. These programs also evolved from total immersion to partial immersion, which would gradually introduce English in the higher grades.

The educational linguists Tedick, Christian, and Fortune define three types of immersion programs that predominate in the United States: one-way (foreign language) immersion, two-way (bilingual) immersion, and indigenous language immersion. One-way (foreign language) immersion programs “enroll linguistically homogeneous students who are typically dominant in the majority language and have no or minimal immersion language proficiency on program entry”. Two-way (bilingual) immersion programs “differ from one-way immersion primarily in the student population. They bring together minority language and majority language learners to be instructed in and to learn each others' languages”. Indigenous language immersion programs are “designed to revitalize endangered indigenous cultures and languages and promote their maintenance and development. They typically enroll children with indigenous heritage” (2).

Also, linguist Baker has found that these eight classroom features must be present for the immersion program to remain successful.

- First, “the minimum time the second language needs to be used as a medium to ensure customary achievement levels is four to six years” (297).
- Second, “the curriculum tends to be the same for immersion children as for their mainstream peers” (297).
- Third, “it has often been thought preferable to separate languages in instruction rather than to mix them arbitrarily during a single lesson” (298).
- Fourth, “the typical recommendation about how much time should be devoted to the two languages is that a minimum of 50% of instruction” (298).
- Fifth, “immersion education has historically enjoyed the synergy of teacher enthusiasm and parental commitment” (298).
- Sixth, “the immersion approach implies a relatively homogeneous language classroom. There will be no disparity of status due to some children being more proficient than others in the second language” (299).
- Seventh, “immersion provides an additive bilingual environment. Students acquire a second language at no cost to their home language and culture” (299).
- Eighth, “most immersion teachers have to ‘wear two hats’: promoting achievement throughout the curriculum and ensuring second language proficiency” (300).

Being enrolled in an immersion program can provide us with benefits such as “the development of proficiency in the immersion language, academic achievement, and majority language development at levels that equal or surpass those of non-immersion students” (Tedick, Christian, and Fortune, 5). Furthermore, “school-based language immersion programs have been successfully used to promote the learning of a second official language” (Garau and Salazar 2).



In addition to the benefits they provide, these three immersion programs have been created to adapt to the needs of each person since they offer different possibilities to learn a second language. That is to say, these programs have been designed to meet the different objectives and the amount of time they want to dedicate to the learning of this language. Within these programs, there is also the possibility of choosing the language you want to learn, but one of the most popular languages is Spanish, specifically the two-way immersion program with Spanish and English. This type of program is also known as dual language learning in the United States and is one of the most common educational methods used nowadays.

### **3.1 Dual Language Immersion Program in the United States**

Dual Language (or Two-Way) bilingual education in the United States typically occurs when “approximately equal numbers of minority language and majority language students are in the same classroom and both languages are used for instruction” (Baker, 222). It is possible to find that half of the children in a class are monolingual that at home only speak English; while the other half of the class may come from Spanish-speaking families that at home only speak Spanish. Both languages will be used in the academic environment for teaching so that the children can become bilingual. In this way, children who only speak English will learn and become familiar with Spanish and vice versa. These children may be referred to as dual language learners who are “preschool and school-age children who have been learning two languages simultaneously from infancy or who are in the process of learning a second language (L2) after the first language (L1) has been established” (Genesee, Paradis, and Crago, 3).

Dual language bilingual education in the United States was first established in the state of Florida, specifically in Dade County, where the first dual language bilingual school was established in 1963. At that time, the state of Florida was largely led by the Cuban community and its first language was Spanish. Since the state had a higher percentage of Spanish speakers, this Cuban community decided to create the first bilingual school that received the name 'Coral Way Elementary School'. This school offered a bilingual education and had a dual language program in which Spanish and English were taught at the same time. During the sixties, the Cuban community in the United States began to diminish due to the authoritarian regime in their country. With this, Americans realized that if the Cuban community disappeared, Spanish would also disappear with them and bilingual schools would not be as demanded. Because of this, American families supported the idea of maintaining the dual language program as the number of immigrants arriving in the country kept increasing. Since that time, in 1990 there has been a significant growth in the number of dual language bilingual schools throughout the United States, most of them being elementary schools, with English and Spanish predominating as the languages of instruction.

These schools with this type of education are known by several names such as dual language immersion, two-way immersion, and Spanish immersion, among the most popular. Dual language immersion begins in the schools from the earliest age in kindergarten, and this program is continued as they move through the grades, creating a new dual language class each year. These schools can have the characteristic of being completely bilingual, having classes where only dual language education is taught, or schools also called bilingual that only have several dual language classes in each grade, while the rest would be in English. In the United States, the two main dual language program models are 90:10 and 50:50.

The 90:10 model receives its name because the minority language, in this case, Spanish, is used for 90% of the day as the medium of instruction, and the remaining 10% of the time the English language is used. This instructional model will be used only in kindergarten and first-grade so that children can effectively develop proficiency and literacy skills in Spanish. In most cases, Spanish is the minority language in the classroom, as most of the children come from monolingual English-speaking families. However, in the rest of the elementary grades as the level rises we see that the two languages become equally important since it is assumed that the student has acquired an adequate knowledge in Spanish so that the following model known as 50:50 can take place. In this model, 50% of the instruction will be in Spanish and the other 50% will be in English, and depending on the school it can start either in the second-grade or in the fourth-grade. Since Spanish has already been acquired from an early age, students have achieved the same level of fluency in both languages by the time they finish elementary school in 5th grade. It may also be the case that depending on the fluency of the students in the minority language, there may be a change in the instructional model. It is possible to see the instruction of Spanish as 60, 70, or 80% of the day depending on the needs of the learner, while the rest of the time the instruction will be in English.

Along with these features, educational linguist Baker points out that some of the most relevant goals in Dual Language programs are (224):

- High levels of proficiency in students' first language and a second language.
- Reading and writing at grade level in both languages.
- Academic achievement at, or above, grade level.
- Positive intercultural (multicultural) attitudes and behaviors.
- Communities and society to benefit from having citizens who are bilingual and biliterate.

To achieve these goals, some practices are carried out in order for the dual language program to be successful.

- Firstly, we can observe how the two official languages of the program, in this case, Spanish and English, are given equal importance in the school. The two languages are used at the same time for teaching, contributing to the integration of both as a means of communication.
- Secondly, since the relationship between students and their interactions in either language is more complicated to control, the school environment tries to be as bilingual as possible. This is achieved by creating all kinds of advertising in both languages, such as extracurricular activities, cultural events, bulletin boards, and curriculum resources, among others. In addition, if the school's management team is going to make an announcement either in person to students or in a letter to families, it will also do so in English and Spanish. In this way, they ensure that bilingualism is maintained in the school environment even outside of the classroom.
- Thirdly, the level of biliteracy is considered equally important as the level of bilingualism that a student can achieve in this program. Students will have acquired almost the same level of fluency in both languages unconsciously developing their grammar skills. Because of this, they will need to emphasize skills such as reading and writing to create a language balance and to ensure the acquisition of literacy for correct bilingual development.
- Fourthly, the teachers and other school staff will be mostly bilingual. This will be necessary because teachers will encounter situations where they will have to switch languages on different occasions with students. For example, when a teacher is giving instructions in the minority language, they will likely need to be repeated in the majority language so that everyone can understand. However, it is often challenging to find teachers who are native Spanish speakers and not native English speakers with Spanish as a second language, which makes a big difference in the teaching method of this bilingual program.

Therefore, what dual language immersion schools do is seek help from bilingual parents whose first language is Spanish. They will be invited to share their language and culture only for part of the day and in the most challenging areas of the language, as the teachers need the reinforcement of a native Spanish speaker. In addition, the teachers who need it most can also count on the help of 'conversation auxiliaries' or 'interns' for the whole day as has been my case when I worked as an intern in a dual language program. My job as an intern consisted of assisting the teacher in all academic areas by making sure that Spanish was used correctly and that the students were able to learn both Spanish grammar and hear the Spanish language from a native speaker. Besides helping with language skills, I also had the mission of teaching the culture and making the children familiar with the different curiosities and traditions of Spain.

Implementing the culture is one of the most important parts of becoming fully immersed in the language and becoming a true bilingual. The interns and the school try to represent the Hispanic culture in the best possible way based on festivals, folkloric dances, facts and curiosities from other countries exhibited throughout the school and game shows. Given my personal experience at Ainsworth Elementary School, I have been able to see several of these practices such as Mexican and Salvadoran folkloric dances where both teachers and students performed together in the traditional costumes of each country. Also, contests such as 'Duelo de Literatura' that consisted of reading a series of books in Spanish and then dueling with another team answering questions about them. This encouraged reading in Spanish and at the same time made the children enjoy preparing possible questions like in a TV quiz show. Another example was the festival known as 'Hispanic Heritage Month'. It was presented with different stands with information about the culture and flag of each country such as El Salvador, Spain, and Mexico, among others. Besides, you could find different types of food from different Hispanic countries, traditional games such as hopscotch, as well as traditional music.

Finally, in order for the goals to be met, dual language programs should be extended for at least five years, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the successive grades until the end of elementary school in 5th grade. In this way, bilingualism and biliteracy will be ensured since learning and acquiring two languages at the same time requires constancy, thus ensuring the full development of all language skills. All these practices will create a multicultural environment making the students feel proud of their culture and fostering the families' interest in the Hispanic culture. Due to these proposed goals, challenges may arise among the students, since sometimes the expectations of the program may not be met, and as a result, the different difficulties mentioned below have been observed.

### **3.2 Challenges in Two-Way Immersion Program**

Although the majority of data collected in studies on two-way immersion education by a variety of authors is generally successful, challenges have also arisen among learners as the program has evolved over the years. Students who have previously reported low language skills and a lower level of proficiency in their native language (L1) are more likely to find the immersion program challenging. These students who struggle in L1 may develop a delay or learning disability in their second language skills. They will progress and develop literacy in the second language (L2) more slowly. It is necessary to identify the differences that exist between delay and learning disability since it is very common that in this type of bilingual program, there is confusion between these concepts due to the challenges that arise.

According to the educational linguists Tedick, Christian, and Fortune, learning disabilities are “rooted in a biological deficit in the brain that manifests itself in an inability to receive, send, process or comprehend concepts of verbal, nonverbal or graphic symbol systems” (256). However, learning delays are often “the result of sociocultural influences on the learner’s development. A lower performance level than

what is typically expected may result because of a mismatch between a student's actual background and the background presumed by the schooling environment" (256). Once enrolled, most of the students who present struggles in the second language will be dealing with a delay in its development. It is possible to identify two main reasons for this confusion between delay and language disorder.

In the first place, the student begins to have attitudes and behaviors similar to those that appear when there is a language disability. These behaviors that are shown in both cases are going to be, for example, a short attention span, which leads to low levels of comprehension, which makes them appear confused. As students show confusion and difficulties following oral directions, they also develop difficulties in expression. This triggers these students to stop participating in class due to nervousness and shyness caused by making mistakes in the language. Besides, there is a lack of understanding regarding bilingual development that causes this confusion between delay and disorder to emerge. The simultaneous use of the two languages in the two-way immersion program can affect the learner's cognitive development. This is especially evident in the speech that alternates from the first language L1 to the second language L2 or vice versa. This happens because there are often gaps in certain words of their vocabulary in one language and they use the other language to express themselves. It is also possible to observe how learners rely on the grammatical rules of their native language L1 and apply them to the second language in order to communicate. Due to this switch between the characteristics of each language confusion is generated thinking that there is a disorder, when in fact what happens in both cases where these issues have been found is a delay. This is related to the levels of fluency in the L1 and L2 of each student and the time and intensity that have been dedicated to the instruction of each language.

The confusion becomes quite serious when some families take their children out of the immersion program. They think it is a disorder because they present struggles in most language skills and believe that a monolingual education is a better option when, in most cases, it is a delay in the second language. This will be solved later in the upper grades with the continuity of the program by acquiring different learning strategies.

Although the main objectives of the two-way immersion program are to integrate students regardless of their socioeconomic background and to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy, this is not always the case and this is when challenges arise among the learners. The challenges have been observed in an elementary school from the perspective of kindergarten and first-grade. These will be divided into four different categories which are: social, reading, grammatical, and communicative aspects.

### **3.2.1 Social difficulties**

In the social aspect, one of the most important goals of the two-way immersion is to integrate the learners. This is important because in immersion programs we will find a great cultural diversity. In this type of bilingual education, it is frequent to find students who come from monolingual families where they only speak Spanish or English. Because of this, especially in kindergarten and first-grade classes with a Spanish-English dual language program, we will find learners who present some struggles in the social environment. For example: we can see the case of students who only speak Spanish in a class where almost every student speaks English as a first language and Spanish as a second language. When communication occurs, they will feel more comfortable using the language with which they are more fluent, in this case Spanish. This may lead to isolation and segregation between English and Spanish-speaking groups as they will choose to interact with students from the same cultural group where communication is easier. This action would be generating discriminatory attitudes among students from a very early age that could trigger consequences in their



future. Given that these actions become visible since kindergarten, it can lead to the formation of groups of friends based on their culture, and that these groups are maintained throughout primary education.

This will lead to the development of a major social challenge, since as the school years go by it can condition their criteria in later years, such as middle school or high school, and unconsciously they will continue to have this discriminatory view towards other cultures. This social segregation is associated with a language imbalance that is very common to observe in an immersion class since one of the two languages ends up being the dominant one. Even in a dual language class where the curriculum is 90:10 and Spanish is required to be spoken for 90% of the day, English is still dominant in contexts other than the classroom, such as recess and lunch, among others. Schools with this type of education seek that language balance among students by trying to ensure that both languages are used equally but, despite their best efforts, English ends up being dominant due to the social status of the language. Students in dual language programs tend to speak English for at least the first year of kindergarten even among minority groups. This causes a social challenge for Spanish-speaking students since in most contexts, they have to switch their language to English in order to communicate and work cooperatively. This is because in most social contexts, the majority language, in this case, English, is well-represented in the world and has a good reputation. Since it is the mother tongue of the United States, it has gained such importance around the world that its use has even become a social and work requirement.

Due to the high status of the English language, immersion schools in the United States are often required to maintain a good reputation and social appearance with enrollment requirements. These requirements will be that only a limited number of students who speak the minority language (Spanish) can enroll in the school and to not exceed the number of majority language students. This is in an attempt to avoid this language imbalance since the objective of many schools is to have prestige and good academic results. In this way, the schools believe that the dual language program will

continue to be successful among families and thus get more monolingual English-speaking families to continue enrolling their children in this type of bilingual program. However, these actions will create this social segregation between cultures, causing Hispanic families to have fewer social opportunities. They can end up marginalized because only middle and upper-class families will be able to enroll in the school as they have more economic resources.

### **3.2.2 Reading difficulties**

In the reading aspect, learners are also facing several difficulties that begin to be observed since kindergarten and can be prolonged in the following years of elementary school, causing the reading achievement among students to be impaired. One of the main causes regarding these reading challenges among students is the 90:10 dual language program, where 90% of the time the instruction is in Spanish and the remaining 10% of the time the instruction is in English. Since they started in kindergarten with this program, most of the students have not yet developed their reading skills fully in their native language, in this case, English. Many students who present reading difficulties in L1 are more likely to read poorly in L2 and will present handicaps such as low vocabulary and comprehension, confusion in sound-symbol associations, reversing words and letters, and poor recall of syllable sequences. In this type of immersion program where 90% of the day will be in Spanish, they will develop much more advanced reading skills in Spanish than in the other language. This would create a reading imbalance for both types of students with bilingual families.

It may be the case of a monolingual family where they speak English at home but their child attends a school and is enrolled in dual language Spanish-English. In this case, this student would be developing more speaking skills by learning to speak in their home environment rather than reading skills since they are developing them at school for 90% of the day in their second language, Spanish. Thus, a lack of reading

comprehension and fluency in the native language would occur due to not spending the same amount of time learning, which could lead to a possible delay in later grades. However, there is also the opposite case of a monolingual family where Spanish is spoken at home. In this case, the learner will be effectively developing the reading skills in their L1, which is Spanish, but would be suffering a delay in the acquisition of reading skills in their L2, English, because, in this type of program, it will only be used as instruction for 10% of the day. It has been observed that in both cases they have encountered difficulties in analyzing and remembering what they have read and showed struggles in integrating previous knowledge when reading in L2.

Another factor to take into account that causes the delay in the development of reading skills is the moment when kindergarteners acquire the phonemes and the sound that each letter produces in their respective languages. When Spanish speakers learn to read in Spanish, they will learn the vowel system earlier than a child who is developing literacy skills in English. This is because Spanish vowel sounds do not change their sound when reading them introduced in a word, whereas English vowels can change their articulation and their sound within a word. Even though Spanish vowels tend to be acquired earlier, the student who speaks English as a first language and is acquiring Spanish as a second language will present more difficulties in their reading performance than the student who speaks Spanish as a first language. This is because the Spanish speaker has previously acquired the language at home and although he cannot read yet, he is already familiar with the Spanish vowel sounds since the early years of life.

However, even though consonants tend to be acquired later when reading in Spanish, they will also be an issue for English speakers as they struggle to differentiate the sounds. This is because several consonants in Spanish have the same sound although they are spelled differently, which leads to confusion in English speakers, for example in the letters *v* and *b*. In words like *vaca* and *baca*, the sound would be the same but the meaning of each word is different. English speakers tend to be confused when finding these words in a text as they do not know how to read it because they think that having *v*

and *b* in each case is going to produce a different sound. In the case of English consonants, they will be acquired faster than Spanish consonants since each consonant has its unique sound, although it can also create confusion for Spanish speakers when they have to learn new sounds that only exist in English as the aspiration of the letter *h* when pronouncing a word. This reading development will predict how word and pseudo-word decoding will be in reading in both languages in later grades. Because of this, the early reading performance of the learners will be affected since literacy will only be developed in one language, which will condition a correct evolution of their bilingualism.

### 3.2.3 Grammatical difficulties

Students' grammar has also been affected in the Spanish-English dual language program. If a student shows difficulty in acquiring the correct grammatical structure of the first language, he is likely to find the grammar of the second language challenging. Some of the issues that have been observed concern the gender, morphology, and syntax of Spanish as it differs completely from the English language.

In the first years of immersion, especially in kindergarten and first-grade, there will be what is known as interlanguage among children. Interlanguage is the stage halfway between monolingualism and proficiency in a second language. The learner's syntax is affected by this process and what is known as code-switching occurs. This happens when a child changes what would be the correct order of a sentence, which would be subject, verb, and predicate, and the structure of the sentence is modified even though the message is understood. This can happen in the first language of the child as sometimes exists a delay in developing the language skills. A very common example of code-switching is when the child changes the order of the sentence and puts a preposition or pronoun in the wrong order: *go you and get it*. It has also been observed this switching between English and Spanish because students are using the grammatical

rules of their first language to express themselves in the second language as well as the vocabulary. Sometimes the students learn the structures of the sentences in Spanish automatically and they tend to forget other vocabulary, and this is when they draw on their first language which is English. Several examples would be: *¿puedo ir al bathroom?*, *he olvidado mi lunch*, *¿podemos jugar en el playground?*, among others.

Another of the grammatical issues that English speakers have experienced in an immersion class has been concerning gender in the Spanish language. The problem arises when the learner has to differentiate the gender of words between masculine and feminine in Spanish and to do this, the learner has to understand how to use the article. The article *el* is associated with the masculine gender and the article *la* is associated with the feminine gender, then the article has to coordinate in gender and number with the noun that follows it, and depending on whether it is masculine or feminine it will have one ending or another. For example, in English, *the horse* appears without gender but in Spanish, it would have a masculine gender that would be *el caballo*. *The bee* in English also appears without a gender, while in Spanish it would be translated as *la abeja* which would have a feminine gender. This process is very complicated for English-speaking students because they do not have previous knowledge of which words are masculine and which are feminine. Instead, they have to learn it by memorizing it to be able to use the correct article and ending, since in their language they do not have articles to differentiate the gender.

Finally, with respect to word morphology, learners also experience challenges when using their grammar on paper and having to write. This has been observed especially in tests such as dictation since for English speakers it was almost impossible to differentiate in cases such as *b* and *v* in Spanish as they are pronounced in the same way. Most of the students had doubts and did not know which one to use in terms of writing. These challenges arise from the earliest age in kindergarten when students are not yet able to understand the reasons for the grammatical rules of each language. Therefore, the early stages of immersion can be very challenging for them with respect

to their grammar usage. In most cases, they will use the grammar of their native language where they feel confident creating a greater challenge and confusion in the following years of immersion.

### **3.2.4 Communicative difficulties**

Communication between learners and teachers in the dual language program was also significantly affected. These communicative challenges have been observed especially when speaking in Spanish for both English speakers and Spanish speakers, even though it is the mother tongue of the latter. This is because, in these types of bilingual immersion programs, there are a large number of varieties of the Spanish language.

On the one hand, the vast majority of teachers that we can find in a Spanish immersion school will be teachers from Latin America due to the proximity of their countries to the United States. Although Spanish is spoken in Latin America, each country has a unique variety of Spanish with its accent and vocabulary. Despite this variety in the Spanish language and the different musicality of each accent, the way words are pronounced, especially certain consonants, is the same in all Latin American countries.

On the other hand, there is Spain where Spanish is also spoken but it is a different variety called Castilian. It has a vocabulary that in many words is completely different from the Latin American one although some of them are the same or similar. The problem arises when it comes to pronouncing Spanish from Spain and Spanish from Latin America which becomes challenging for students in an immersion class. Most students, who are enrolled in this type of bilingual education, finish elementary school speaking Latin American Spanish due to the influence of Latino teachers. When students speak with someone from Spain, communication becomes somewhat

complicated, especially if their Spanish is their second language because they have already acquired the other Spanish variety. The difficulties start when there is a teacher from Spain and a teacher from Latin America each in a different class which means that the pronunciation and vocabulary are not going to be the same. This could lead to confusion in the students understanding the content as it is challenging for them to try to acquire both varieties of Spanish when they are already presenting struggles acquiring the language in the first place.

Children are confused when they hear words with different accents to the point of thinking that it is a totally different word. An example I have observed is with the word *azul*: if a person from Spain pronounces this word, it will be pronounced in such a way that the *z* does not change its articulation and sounds as the word is read. Whereas if a person from Latin America pronounces the word *azul* they will write it in the same way but pronounce it making the *z* become an *s* and it will sound something like *asul*. Another example concerning vocabulary might be the word *peach* which in Latin American Spanish is translated as *durazno* and in Spanish from Spain, it is translated as *melocotón*. These differences in vocabulary confuse students into thinking that each word has a different meaning because they have not yet been able to understand and acquire all the varieties of the Spanish language.

Another of the communicative challenges that students face arises when the teacher is not a native speaker and speaks Spanish as a second language. In this type of immersion program, Spanish will be used as a medium of instruction for children who are learning the language in an almost subconscious way. Because of this, a perfect use of the language by the teacher is required. Even though they are qualified to teach Spanish to most English speakers, many times it can be observed how mistakes are made in the language that the students will later unconsciously replicate. Most of these errors come from their native language, English, and are known as *false friends* because they are words that have a very similar structure to English but mean something completely different. Several examples can be the word *carpet* in Spanish translated as

*alfombra* but used incorrectly in this context as *carpeta*, also the word *location* in Spanish translated as *localización* but used incorrectly in this context as *locación*. Learners tend to copy this behavior and end up incorrectly acquiring these words and creating a grammar of their own that will later be challenging to communicate with other Spanish speakers, for example, from Spain.

Finally, learners' communication will also be affected if there is language mixing performed by the teacher. That is, there may be times when the teacher speaks in the majority language but then gives instructions to do a task in the minority language. Some students who have difficulty understanding and following instructions will wait to hear the teacher speak in their majority language and then become uninvolved in the activity until language mixing occurs. This is a very common thing that teachers do in two-way dual language schools as they need all students to understand what is being said and they naturally switch to the child's strongest language to explain it. However, this generates an imbalance in communication as it can lead to students getting used to it and taking for granted that the teacher, or even their peers, will translate into their strongest language. This will lead to a lack of effort in learning the second language which can lead to a delay in their second language skills.

### **3.3 Improvement proposals**

The two-way immersion program is always changing with innovations and improvements for the continuity of bilingualism and biliteracy among students. Based on my personal experience as an immersion educator, I propose several solutions to address these challenges and achieve an effective bilingual education.

If a delay in any language skill is perceived, it is important to react proactively. That is, once this possible delay has been communicated to other teachers and the student's family, it is necessary to start collecting different evidence to confirm it. The



student will be given the special attention he/she needs by implementing new assessment tools to measure the student's progress during the course. In addition, it will also be necessary for the school to provide the learner with a series of specialists such as a speech-language pathologist or a psychologist among others. They will help them with their language and learning difficulties with appropriate materials for their development. With these support services, immersion educators will ensure that the students will be able to continue their immersion program and experience bilingual education with the rest of their peers.

Taking into account that most of the challenges come from the 90:10 dual language immersion model, where 90% of the instruction is in the second language, I propose the solution of exchanging this model for the 50:50 model at least in the early years of school, kindergarten, and first-grade. In this way, the same amount of time would be spent in both languages, thus eliminating the language imbalance that affects their grammatical and communicative skills. Using this 50:50 model during the first years of school would be a significant improvement. This is because, during these early years, children are still acquiring their L1 mother tongue and different struggles will appear that will later help to predict the possible issues they may present in the L2. Devoting equal time to both languages will create a language balance between the two languages. This will allow them to achieve bilingualism in their first two years of school so that in the upper grades they can upgrade their immersion model to 90:10. Doing this, they will acquire as much knowledge as possible in their second language while ensuring that they do not have struggles in their L1 to complete all the remaining years of immersion.

Another suggestion to solve these grammatical and communicative challenges will be encouraging schools to put special effort into hiring more qualified immersion educators whose first language is Spanish and who speak it regularly. Also to avoid language imbalance among students and their confusion between the varieties of Spanish, it is recommended to have a balance of teachers, 50% from Latin America and

the other 50% from Spain. The students will be able to learn both varieties of Spanish and this will also require a change in the curriculum of the program. It would be convenient for the Spanish part of the program to have different activities and assessments in Spanish from Spain and in Spanish from Latin America. This way, they can learn to differentiate and acquire the differences, especially in pronunciation, which will help to reduce their reading difficulties as well as their communicative ones. When they see it written in both forms they will be able to identify that it is the same word and that the only aspect that changes is its pronunciation. This will also help them to identify that some things receive different names despite designating the same element.

In addition, it will be important to focus on reading in L1 and assess them earlier to see if any struggles arise and then compare it with reading in L2 to be able to solve the reading challenges more easily and to know where they come from. Once they have acquired all the sounds in their native language and have learned to read, one of the most effective ways to acquire their reading skills in their second language is to use their listening skills. They will first have to develop their auditory skills with activities that only involve listening, such as acquiring the alphabet. In this way, by hearing these sounds they will be able to associate them with each corresponding letter and become familiar with the pronunciation of the new language which they can later replicate when they begin to read.

By changing the activities and adding new assessment tools to the curriculum of this program, the learners will understand that just as there is variety in vocabulary and grammar, there is also diversity in culture. Immersing students in different cultures will help them to be more open-minded when interacting with peers from different ethnic groups. It will be important to learn and celebrate every festivity of each culture such as Christmas or Hanukkah, as the main goal is to make the students feel integrated. Moreover, cooperative work in the classroom will solve the challenges that arise in the social environment as all students will mix, sharing their language and culture and most importantly breaking down ethnic and discriminatory barriers.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

With the arrival of technological advances and various improvements in education, the immersion program has become a program with limitless possibilities within bilingual education that transcends borders. These challenges lead us to conclude that much more investment is still needed in the immersion program to take full advantage of it.

Despite the presence of challenges in the dual language learning program, it has also been possible to observe an endless number of solutions for an effective immersion where bilingualism and biliteracy among students are achieved. It can be affirmed that in elementary schools, bilingual immersion education from kindergarten through the last year of elementary school has been favorable for the students. This bilingual program has offered successful academic achievement and high levels of bilingualism and biliteracy, along with fluency and proficiency in both languages. The successful learner profile includes students who belong to different ethnic groups, majority language students and minority language students, and most importantly students who have different cognitive abilities and come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The educators in this type of bilingual program have a great responsibility due to the various challenges that may arise during the duration of the program that are related to literacy and language learning. These teachers will be committed to be willing to work with and support the students and overcome all difficulties together in order to achieve the well-being of each child and a long-term success. Despite the various difficulties that may arise along the way in this bilingual education, there has not yet been enough evidence as to whether this program is detrimental to students with a language disorder. I believe we should continue to give this dual language program a chance to grow and there is no reason to deny all the amazing possibilities that immersion education can offer to any child.

With these proposed solutions it is intended to achieve the cognitive and social development of the learners. In order to reach this goal, it is also important to consider the learner as a unique individual with their weaknesses and strengths in the language learning process. Moreover, personality varies depending on the student, so it is essential to trust in each learner's ability to develop their language skills in their own time and to take into account the needs of each learner so that the immersion program can be successful. Believing and remaining committed to the immersion philosophy will ensure bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiculturalism above everything else.

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