Forms of bilingualism and play across linguistic boundaries in dual language classrooms

Kristina Wirtz, Ph.D Anthropology
Department of Spanish
<kristina.wirtz@wmich.edu>

Summary
This ethnographic study has followed a cohort of students from K through 3rd grade to examine the practices and attitudes of bilingual and "emergent" bilingual learners in a Michigan dual-language immersion elementary school. In our society, American-accented English predominates and has greater prestige over Spanish or Spanish-English bilingualism—a situation that sociolinguists describe as "diglossia." The school's mission is to develop balanced bilingualism (idealized as dual monolingualism) and to instill pride in Spanish language and Hispanic culture. And yet, bilingual speakers in the school often share a "code-switching" or "interlanguaging" norm rather than two monolingual norms. It is these differences and the tensions between beliefs (language ideologies) and speaking and listening practices that my study explores.

School Mission, Vision, and Beliefs Statement

Vision statement: La Paz Elementary will equip students with bilingual skills and multicultural understanding that will enable them to benefit from existing and future opportunities in a global society.

Mission statement: La Paz students will attain high levels of proficiency in their native language, in a second language, and meet or exceed targets for achievement in all academic areas. All students will demonstrate positive cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors.

Beliefs Statement
1. All students can learn and succeed academically
2. Diversity is an asset that can drive growth and understanding
3. Bilingual citizens will have increased opportunities in a global society
4. Parents are an integral part of the school learning community
5. La Paz Elementary School is part of a larger community and utilizes local, regional, national, and international resources.

Diglossia Theory
Diglossia describes a situation of two "separate and unequal" codes (where "code" refers to languages, dialects, sociolinguistic communities, etc.) (Eckert 1989). There is a "functional compartmentalization" between a vernacular or L(ow) code learned as an L1 and a normative or secondarily acquired prestige or H(igh) code normatively used in formal or official contexts (Ferguson 1959, Fishman 1967, 2006).

L(ow) "Code" vs. H(igh) "Code"
L1, vernacular
L1+L2, prestige
"separate and unequal"

functional compartmentalization:
Informal contexts
Formal contexts
Indexes "home,"
Indexes official, social
socially institutional power

Reasons for being bilingual #1: "communicate with more people" (accommodate monolinguals)

"would be good to speak Spanish with some of your friends that can speak Spanish."
"if your friends say something in Spanish";
"if you don't know any Spanish... and your friends don't know any other language and they wouldn't understand you";
"if you're in trouble and they only know how to speak Spanish..."

Reasons for being bilingual #2: "get a good job" (opportunities through skills)

Because you get better jobs and you be able to communicate more with the world...
So we can communicate with more people, and have more friends, and be able to get better jobs.
Because in English, you know Spanish you have to know English to have a job too.

Reasons for being bilingual #3: Speak to people/family in other countries

Cause we could connect with other countries that speak English--English and Spanish... if I speak only English and when I go to my where I was born, In Oaxaca, that would have been kind of hard
Para cuando vaya a México (¿por qué?) Cuando hablo mis tíos y my abuelo puedo hablar español más
because then you can communicate with other people from different from like Spanish is spoken a lot in different countries so now you can go to the countries and understand it
Pero no porque yo no se español porque pues hacer haces, puedes vivir, no vir, a Mexico o Spain y puedes espechar con otras personas

Reasons for being bilingual #4: Know "home language"

Why are you learning in English?
So that we don't. So that we can still get some of our home language.
And we don't always have to speak in Spanish

Porque mi mamá sabe, nación en [ciudad], que está en España
K-G2 just wants to know what her mom is saying to her sister in Spanish

PARENT 1: Porque no queremos que él pierda el español... Nosotros vamos a México cada año, cada dos años… yo quiero que él mantenga esa, su...
PARENT 2: Idioma
PARENT 1: Su idioma, su herencia

Study Site: "La Paz Elementary"

La Paz Elementary is part of a larger community and utilizes local, regional, national, and international resources.

Photo: Third-graders with recorder in class reading corner.

"La Paz Elementary" (a pseudonym) is an urban K-5 public school with a 50/50 dual immersion model. The school serves a socioeconomically, racially, and linguistically diverse student population including the local Hispanic community of primarily Mexican and Central American immigrants.