Linking Service-Learning Opportunities and Domestic Immersion Experiences in US Latino Communities: A Case Study of the “En Nuestra Lengua” Project

Viktorija Tijunelis, Teresa Satterfield, José R. Benkí

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Linking Service-Learning Opportunities and Domestic Immersion Experiences in US Latino Communities: A Case Study of the “En Nuestra Lengua” Project

Viktorija Tijunelis
University of Michigan, USA

Teresa Satterfield
University of Michigan, USA

José R. Benki
University of Michigan, USA

Abstract: We report on the service-learning component of a Spanish-language Saturday school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for elementary-aged Spanish-language heritage learners and also examine the newly forming Latino community served by this innovative program. The US Spanish-speaking population is growing throughout the country, resulting in greatly increased numbers of English language learners who enter the school system as heritage Spanish speakers. The current study provides compelling data that first language Spanish literacy support can be very beneficial for these students as they acquire English literacy. Such efforts also provide numerous experiential- and service-learning opportunities for native Spanish speakers, as well as for intermediate and advanced second language Spanish learners in this study. Both first- and second-language service-learners benefit from the Spanish immersion environment of the Saturday program outlined. Moreover, our case-study findings show that heritage students in the program and their largely immigrant parents are forming part of a diverse community that values bilingualism, Spanish literacy, and academic achievement.

Keywords: community-based learning/aprendizaje comunitario, heritage language learners/aprendices de lenguas heredadas, immersion learning/aprendizaje de inmersión, learner communities/comunidades de aprendices, service-learning/aprendizaje-servicio, Spanish/español

1. Introduction and Background

Second-language (L2) learning in higher education has long included an international study abroad component, and research suggests that these “real-world” experiences benefit L2 students who have certain skills in place (Linck, Kroll, and Sunderman 2009), notably increasing their L2 linguistic and cultural competence over their counterparts who do not study abroad (Freed 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey 2004; Sunderman and Kroll 2009; Tokowicz, Michael, and Kroll 2004).

Given the growing Hispanic1 demographic in the United States, intensive domestic immersion programs within native Spanish-speaking communities now present an attractive alternative to traditional international study abroad for motivated L2 learners of Spanish in the United States. As Barreneche (2011) observes in this journal, these changing demographics present an opportunity for civic engagement through service-learning, with students rooted in the wider US community bringing their linguistic, educational, and cultural expertise to Hispanic communities with needs arising from the migration or immigration experience.
Student civic engagement and learning can take place through volunteerism to address community-defined needs. However, what typically distinguishes service-learning from other forms of extracurricular community involvement is the documentation and formal evaluation of learning in an academic context (Bringle and Hatcher 1995). In recent decades, educators have regularly implemented service-learning programs as part of Spanish-language curricula, particularly in regions or cities with a history of Hispanic communities such as California, Florida, and the US Southwest, as chronicled by Tilley-Lubbs, Raschio, Jorge, and López (2005) and edited volumes by Hellebrandt, Arries, and Varona (2004); Hellebrandt and Varona (1999); and Wurr and Hellebrandt (2007).

The emerging pattern of growth in the US Latino population offers new prospects for service-learning, due primarily to the different community needs arising from these recent changes. Sectors of the country, such as the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast, where traditionally there has not been a significant Hispanic presence, are currently experiencing a rapid expansion, as documented by the 2010 US Census (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert 2011). Additionally, the majority of this Latino population growth is the result of United States–born children of immigrants or migrants rather than from the continued arrival of immigrants themselves.

Because of these new dynamics in the Latino population, as well as other factors, much remains to be done to develop effective instructional programs for Hispanic students who enter school with Spanish as their dominant language, and with little or no skill in speaking English. Statistical trends indicate that this group will continue to be the largest growing demographic in US schools for several decades to come (Pew Hispanic Center 2009; US Census Bureau 2008). A question for current researchers and educators is how to institute sustainable yet high quality programs that prevent students with limited English proficiency from being “predictably” at risk of low academic performance. An abundance of research indicates that accessing the child’s first language (L1) knowledge best facilitates literacy development in the L2, particularly where learners are dominant in the L1 and have adequate motivation (August, Calderón, and Carlo 2002; August and Shanahan 2006; Cummins 1979, 1981; Pardo and Tinajero 2000; Pollard-Durodola and Simmons 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa 1976; Slavin and Calderón 2001; Verhoeven 1991; among others).

The reality of the present educational climate, however, is such that schools may not be able to provide students with any instruction in L1 Spanish, whether through bilingual education specifically for native speakers of Spanish or dual bilingual programs for both L1 and L2 Spanish speakers. Regardless of a local community’s policy or stance on immigration, the fact is that 70% of English-language learner students are native-born US Latinos (Tomás Rivera Policy Institute 2010). Given that current demand for elementary school Spanish instruction for L1 speakers exceeds capacity, new solutions are called for in order to address this important need.

As an effort to develop a sustainable model for US communities experiencing new and explosive growth in the Hispanic population, the “En Nuestra Lengua” (ENL) Literacy and Culture Project was initiated in May 2010. The initial run of the project was intended as a demonstration of the viability (i.e., proof-of-concept) of a Saturday-school Spanish language and literacy program for heritage language (HL) students of Spanish. We use the term ‘heritage language learner’ to refer to a child who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree functionally bilingual in that language and in English (Valdés 1997). Saturday/Sunday-school models promoting language education have been successful in other cultural contexts for Jewish, Japanese, and Chinese students (Chao 1997; Wang 1996). This L1 language immersion format is rarely implemented for US Latino communities: we note that Carreira and Rodríguez (2011) find only two such academic programs in Los Angeles. “En Nuestra Lengua” should, therefore, be viewed as a novel resource among the available interventions for Spanish-speaking children. Coupled with the Saturday schedule, the ENL program’s service-learning component is especially innovative.
The linguistic and literacy results in the ENL program to date not only supply evidence for the Spanish Saturday-school concept, but they also strongly align with previous research findings of using L1 knowledge to “jumpstart” L2 achievement. The ENL pilot project accommodated 40 HL students of Spanish in grades K–3, in 90-minute classes on Saturday mornings. The activities are based in a centrally located public elementary school in Ann Arbor, Michigan that many of the students attend during the week. Over the seven-week period, the number of total student participants for the pilot was approximately 50, as an additional class was provided for the pre-K, three- and four-year-old siblings of the older school-age children. All students received textbooks and other reading materials in Spanish at no cost to the parents. The program has grown (though still at a small scale), with approximately 85 students in the 2011–12 academic year, and Saturday class sessions of 2.5 hours throughout the school year.

Concurrent with the children’s language instruction, a parent information group is held to support Spanish-speaking caregivers in their interactions with the US public school system, and to provide a forum for other relevant topics. This strategy is in keeping with evidence from Gándara and Contreras (2010), suggesting that early intervention for Hispanic children needs to move beyond the classroom, involving the homes, helping parents to understand the demands of school, and providing guidance on how home practices can align with educational goals. Parents also participate weekly in carrying out cultural presentations on Latin America and Spain, reading stories, and singing to groups of children. “En Nuestra Lengua” is institutionally housed within the University of Michigan, a large public research university (2010 Basic Carnegie Classification of RU/VH) where the two project directors are members of the faculty. The project is also embedded within both the local elementary educational community and the growing local Latino community. These connections present a natural opportunity of combining scholarly investigation, student instruction and achievement, and support to the community through service-learning. The foci of the present report are 1) the service-learning aspects of the ENL project and 2) the emergent community which the project serves. One of the strengths of the project is how the intersections between the university communities (faculty and students from nearby Eastern Michigan University, Michigan State University, and Wayne State University have been involved as well) and the local Latino community are leveraged to maximize learning and academic scholarship.

2. Service-Learning in the ENL Project

The ENL project is a collective effort, with numerous people coming together to contribute their valuable knowledge and time. One of ENL’s guiding principles is the use of native or highly proficient (near-native) speakers of Spanish as the lead classroom instructors. Adherence to this principle has been critical to maintaining an appropriate classroom dynamic, in which the young HL students, who are also native speakers, respect and view their teachers as “authorities” and/or models of spoken and written Spanish. In order to maintain the authenticity of this classroom atmosphere, all less-competent Spanish speakers who wish to support the ENL project are very much welcome, and opportunities are provided specifically for them based on their L2 Spanish proficiency level. Since the ENL Saturday school implements a “Spanish only” policy, every occasion to interact with native speakers is of high quality and provides L2 learners with that crucial $n + 1$ (Krashen and Terrell 1983), in terms of the Spanish immersion environment. Advanced L2 students participate as teacher aides, Spanish reading-level evaluators of lower elementary HL students, or research assistants. Intermediate L2 students also participate as English reading-level evaluators, a vital function for the research objectives of the project.

Every semester since the ENL’s inception in May 2010, L2 Spanish students from the University of Michigan have participated in the project as service-learners under Bringle and Hatcher’s (1995) definition of service-learning as “a course-based educational, credit-bearing
experience . . . [with] formal documentation and evaluation of academic learning” (112). Here are some salient examples:

1. One student collected reading-level data as part of an independent study Spanish course supervised by the project directors. The final product was a paper in the target language based on interviews that the student conducted in the Saturday class of six- and seven-year-old students.
2. A graduate student visited the ENL program in fulfillment of course requirements for a bilingual education seminar taught by the project directors’ colleague.
3. Through the university’s Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, which matches undergraduates with faculty research projects, students encoded ENL evaluation and survey data for project documentation. Students in this program presented their research findings at a yearly, university-wide symposium.

Several more L2 Spanish learners have participated in ENL under a slightly broader conception of experiential-learning that is not necessarily course-based; however, their duties include formal documentation and/or evaluation of learning in an academic context. Three students, as research assistants supervised by the project directors, assessed Spanish reading levels and collected classroom observational data of younger HL students. Additional students, including a graduate student in linguistics, an undergraduate student in education, and four undergraduate research assistants from a bilingual research laboratory (directed by a colleague in the Department of Psychology) performed English reading-level assessments.

The ENL project seeks out and presents unique service-learning opportunities for native speakers to use Spanish in contexts in which they may not have had significant experience in speaking or writing. University and high school students, native Spanish speakers, and heritage Spanish speakers have participated in the following roles: lead classroom instructors (six graduate students), Spanish reading-level evaluators (three graduate and two undergraduate students), and teacher aides (twelve high school and five undergraduate students). The university students come from a variety of relevant disciplines, including cognitive psychology, education, romance linguistics, anthropology, and speech-language pathology. While not all student participation has been course-based, all of the classroom instructors and reading-level evaluators produce teaching reflections and assessment data that document their learning, with some of that work resulting in scholarship with these students as coauthors. For instance, two of the instructors co-taught a science unit during the winter and spring of 2011 as part of a course project. They subsequently developed a scholarly manuscript from an extended investigation on the role of ethnic identity in the motivation of academic achievement in science among elementary school–aged Latinos (Satterfield, Morales, and Benki, in preparation). Another student, selected from the University of Arizona, participated in ENL through support from the Summer Research Opportunity Program and presented his findings at a regional symposium at the Ohio State University in the summer of 2011 (Guzmán, Satterfield, and Benki 2011).

This participation of young adult and adolescent L1 Spanish-speakers as service-learners is a key feature of the ENL project on several levels. In addition to their intrinsic contributions as instructors, language evaluators, and classroom aides, these L1 speakers themselves derive benefits from their ENL experience. First, as mentioned at the outset of this section, native or near-native speakers are essential for providing appropriate linguistic and cultural models for the ENL elementary school participants. Second, these service-learners are also positive academic role models in general for the young students, having already achieved academic success as bilinguals. Third, as service-learners who are supervised by—and at times collaborate with—the project directors, they provide a measure of authenticity for the ENL project as an organization with Hispanics represented in all of the key positions. This also ensures that the project remain consistently attentive to the needs of the Latino community, as determined by this particular
community of Latinos. This type of authenticity is critical for obtaining and retaining the support of the parents and the community, as it demonstrates that ENL serves the community. Community members grow to have a voice in the functioning of ENL, consistent with Sigmon’s (1979) first principle of service-learning: “Those being served control the service(s) provided” (9). Thus, the parents are more likely to be directly involved in various aspects of the program. This step cannot be overlooked. Through involvement in ENL, many parents learn to navigate the US educational system, first by serving as role models in their children’s Saturday classes in Spanish and then by assuming a similar role in the child’s weekday English-language school. As the parents become more empowered, they ensure that the ENL project continue to reflect and respond to the needs of this specific community on their terms.

3. The Emergent Community of ENL

As early as the initial seven-week spring 2010 pilot, the ENL research team observed that parents who had not known each other prior to the project were “connecting” in substantive ways. Following an October 2011 discussion on parent–teacher conferences in US schools, the parents requested (quite appropriately) parent–teacher conferences with the ENL teachers. Clearly, a community was forming around Latino elementary students and their Spanish literacy. As a point of departure for other potential HL learning programs, we describe that emergent community, using data from selected questions in a December 2010 survey (see Appendix A), a September 2011 brief questionnaire (see Appendix B), interviews with parents and one instructor, and class observations in March 2011.

A paper survey was circulated in June 2010, and a follow-up survey was circulated in December 2010 at the end of the ENL fall 2010 term. The purpose of both surveys was to gather interim feedback on how the ENL project was functioning, as well as to collect information on family background, language attitudes, and home language practices. Receiving input on the program’s strengths and weaknesses has allowed the ENL directors and instructors to make adjustments to the curriculum and to provide support for the various needs expressed by participating families. The December 2010 survey was four pages long with thirty-five questions, many of which were adapted from Luna’s (2009) survey of language and cultural attitudes of families of Mexican origin in Indianapolis. Out of respect for community needs and preferences, one parent from each family unit completed a single anonymous survey. In December 2010, thirty-one families were participating in the ENL Saturday school. Twenty-eight families completed and returned surveys. Where appropriate, responses were recoded on a numeric scale from 5 to 1. Two examples include: questions on frequency of behaviors (5=‘siempre/todos los días’, 4=‘casi siempre/2–3 veces a la semana’, 3=‘a veces/una vez a la semana’, 2=‘casi nunca/ una vez al mes’, 1=‘nunca/unas veces al año’) and the importance of certain cultural constructs (5=‘muy importante/necesario’, 4=‘importante/necesario’, 3=‘me da igual’, 2=‘poco importante/ necesario’, 1=‘nada importante/necesario’).

The students took part in language evaluations in September 2011. These assessments served to organize the classes for the fall Saturday sessions, and to assess the children’s proficiency in Spanish and English. While parents waited for their children to complete the evaluations, an anonymous questionnaire was circulated in order to gather additional family feedback and preferences. Specific questions were presented concerning expectations, discussion topics for parents, and class scheduling. Fifty percent of the thirty-six participating families returned completed questionnaires.

In our presentation of this diverse community of parents, children, and ENL staff, the focus is on parental attitudes and decisions, since the parents are the primary decision-makers regarding participation in ENL. We follow McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) working definition for “sense of community” as a framework for understanding the structure of that community. Their frequently cited definition consists of four elements: 1) “membership,” consisting of
boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging, personal investment, and a common symbol system; 2) “influence,” the feeling that the group is important for its members, who conform to group norms, while simultaneously influencing the group; 3) “integration and fulfillment of needs,” that membership and participation brings fulfillment of the needs of members; and 4) “shared emotional connection,” composed of shared events, history, contact, and/or high-quality interactions among the members. This definition does not require community members to be in the same place geographically; however, in this context, geographical proximity is one unifying factor of the community members and enables other aspects of community building.

Each of these four elements is in a constant state of interaction and co-construction; just as the members of the communities that they describe, the constructs are not independent or static. In the following paragraphs, we elucidate, through the data, the structure of the ENL community through the regular Saturday classes.

3.1 Membership

The most readily-apparent element of membership is the shared symbol system, or Spanish language, that plays a primary role in determining association with this community. Families from various socioeconomic, national, and educational backgrounds share the common interest of raising bilingual children: this is the primary reason for sending their children to the ENL Saturday school. All of the teachers are native Spanish speakers and all the children are acquiring Spanish as (one of, for some children) their first language(s). All of the adults speak Spanish, including the parents, volunteers, and other staff. The predominance of Spanish is evident in the Spanish website, the “Spanish-only” zone during Saturday meetings, and the near-exclusive reliance on native speakers as teachers in the program. Indeed, for survey question 16, “¿Habla español en casa?,” the mean response of 4.61 for the twenty-eight respondents in December 2010 is about halfway between “siempre” and “casi siempre.” The response to question 15, “¿Habla español en contextos sociales (fiestas, reuniones, en la calle, tiendas)?,” was only slightly less at 4.16.

A less visible element of membership is related to emotional safety. The concept of feeling safe in the ENL community surfaced during an interview with Gloria (pseudonym), an instructor of the Saturday kindergarten-level Spanish class. Early in the conversation, she claimed that ENL is “a safe place to speak Spanish.” As the interview progressed, she expanded on this idea of safety:

“...I’ve heard a lot, since I started with ENL, the word safe. I don’t know if there is discrimination, or something, but they use a lot the word. ENL says this is a safe place for you to speak Spanish. You can do it here, and it’s right. It’s good, it’s not bad.

The dichotomy between good and bad implies that there are times when Spanish speakers experience negative reactions to their language. In contrast with the home and ENL Saturday classes, respondents reported in question 14, “¿Habla español en la escuela de su hijo?,” that they spoke Spanish much less often in their child’s daily school, with the mean response of 2.65, about halfway between “casi nunca” and “a veces.” When asked why they speak English with their children (question 23), the most frequent reason (64% of respondents) was “porque hay otras personas presentes que no saben español.” Thus, it seems likely that some parents do not feel comfortable speaking Spanish in their children’s school. It is also noteworthy that the second most frequent response (29%) was “nunca habla inglés con ellos,” where parents always use Spanish with their children in any context.

The September 2011 questionnaire provides additional information about how parents view the program as a safe place. Requests for “un taller para ayudar a los niños contra ‘bullying’” and conversations about “‘bullies’ en el hogar y en la escuela” indicate that families view ENL
as a community center where struggles from other parts of life can be discussed and reconciled.
The words of Hélot and De Mejia (2008) provide some insight regarding the need for a safe
place where Spanish interactions are perceived as good and valuable:

While bilingualism in internationally prestigious languages is generally considered worthy of
investment of considerable sums of money, as it provides access to highly ‘visible’ socially
accepted forms of bilingualism, leading to the possibility of employment in the global marketplace,
bilingualism in minority languages leads, in many cases, to an ‘invisible’ form of bilingualism in
which the native language is undervalued and associated with underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness. (1)

3.2 Influence

A dialogic relationship exists between groups and their members. In other words, groups
influence the people who belong to them, while these same people constantly reshape each
group’s identity. Conformity to group norms is displayed by members following ENL routines
and obligations, beginning with a song at the beginning of each Saturday session. Everyone
present, including students, teachers, aides, and parents gather at the stairs in the lobby of the
school and sing “Buenos días amiguitos” before classes begin. Within the classrooms, all ENL
students are expected to speak only Spanish and to observe appropriate classroom behavior.
Parents are expected to ensure that their children arrive on time with their class materials, to
take a turn in providing the snack for their child(ren)’s class, and to participate in leading an
activity during the snack time, such as reading a book or presenting on a cultural aspect of their
home country or town. Additionally, during the week, parents are expected to ensure that their
children complete their daily homework assignments. For their part, parents have consistently
fulfilled their obligations in terms of providing a snack and volunteering for a parent-led activity,
with some organizational guidance from the project’s Community Liaison.

During the class session, at times the youngsters themselves enforce conformity to the
Spanish-only rule during the Saturday classes. In one particular instance, a girl student tattled
on a classmate, “¡Él estaba hablando en inglés!” This excerpt indicates the boy’s non-conformity
and the girl’s desire to correct his behavior. Speaking Spanish during the lessons is both a
requirement and a core value of the adults who choose to have their children participate in
the program. This value is influencing certain students, as represented by the girl’s corrective
action with her classmate.

In the other direction, parents are empowered to suggest changes consistent with the Spanish
literacy mission of ENL, whether through a formal anonymous survey or questionnaire, through
a face-to-face conversation with the project directors, or through the project’s Community
Liaison. In turn, the project staff must be responsive to parental preferences in order to maintain
a relationship of trust. An excellent example of parent-initiated influence within ENL occurred
even before the first Saturday class. Originally, the project directors planned for the classes in
the initial spring 2010 term to take place in the evening during the weekday. When the Com-

munity Liaison polled the initial group of families for their preferred weeknight or afternoon,
they expressed a strong preference for Saturday mornings, and the project staff changed plans
accordingly. This scheduling change turned out to be enormously successful in enabling the
Spanish classes to take place within an actual school during morning hours, instead of in some
non-academic community location at the end of a long work or school day.

The importance of a designated liaison, a paid administrative position in the ENL project,
cannot be emphasized enough for successful communication between the project staff and the
community. The liaison for ENL is herself an immigrant from Latin America, has two Spanish-
speaking children in high school who volunteer as ENL classroom aides, and is well respected
within the wider local Latino community, with which she has many ties. The above-mentioned
shift to Saturday mornings is just one of a number of changes that have occurred as a result of feedback relayed by the Community Liaison.

3.3 Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

The third element of sense of community is integration and fulfillment of needs. As the families of ENL have their needs fulfilled with respect to the Spanish language development of their children—a shared value with the rest of the community—their membership within that community is reinforced (see McMillan and Chavis 1986).

Regardless of their country of origin, duration of residence in the United States, education level, and occupation, parents enroll their children in the ENL program for similar reasons. In terms of shared values and needs, there is broad agreement among the parents’ responses to question 20 in the December 2010 survey, “¿Por qué habla español con ellos?” Responses (a) “porque desea mantener el español” and (f) “porque considera importante el bilingüismo” were both chosen by 89% of respondents, and nearly as many chose response (b) “porque desea mantener la cultura de su país” (79%) and response (d) “con el objetivo de que aprendan el español” (68%). These responses indicate that Spanish competence, cultural competence, and bilingualism are valued by a broad consensus of the parents. Responses (c) “para que se consideren latinos/hispanos/paisanos” (50%) and (g) “porque desea que sus hijos puedan regresar a su país” (28%) received less support. Only one participant selected response (e) “porque no sabe inglés,” indicating that, for the most part, parents are choosing to speak Spanish with their children, and are not doing so because of their own linguistic constraints. This general convergence of needs signals that families are coming together across social strata to gain support from an organization that fulfills their shared desire to develop bilingualism and biculturalism for their children. These common needs supersede social differences that might otherwise separate participating families in the larger geographic community.

Parents’ expectations for their children’s participation as measured by the September 2011 questionnaire are consistent with the December 2010 survey results. Respondents indicated that they expect their children to read and write in Spanish (100%), spend time with other Latino/Hispanic children (100%), learn about Latino culture and our countries (94%), and be bilingual (89%). Only 50% expected participation to support their children’s general academic development. Other expectations that were written by parents on the questionnaire emphasized the high value placed on bilingual competence, such as the following: “que conozca y aprenda a sentirse orgulloso de sus países,” “que aprendan de la importancia del deporte y la comida típica de nuestra cultura,” and “que mantiene su identidad de los dos países.”

Parental involvement during Saturday lessons supports the need to develop bicultural competence. When parents are active in the classroom, they observe first-hand how their children are maintaining and developing their cultural and ethnic identities. In one class, a volunteer mother came to teach a short geography lesson with a globe. The children gathered around the globe and started looking for and naming countries in which their relatives reside:

Teacher: ¿De dónde son sus abuelos?
Student 1: ¡Ecuador!
Student 2: ¡México!
Student 3: ¡España!

The excitement with which the students were responding provided evidence that the ENL program was meeting some of the expectations expressed by the parents. Because the parent volunteers come from several different Spanish-speaking countries, the students have ample opportunities to learn about various cultures and how they relate to life in the United States. Hearing about similarities and differences across cultures, particularly in relation to language
variation and cultural awareness, is a key support in the children’s development of their own cultural and ethnic identity in the context of other Latino cultures.

The daily homework assignments are essential for the young students’ regular practice of Spanish literacy skills during the week, and they also provide an opportunity for parents to observe those skills developing in parallel with English literacy. In question 30 of the survey, parents report helping their children with ENL homework at an average frequency of 3.71 on the 5-point scale, slightly less often than “2–3 veces a la semana.”

In addition to observing their own children develop Spanish literacy, parents also witness gains made by the project as a whole through reports of average progress on reading level assessments. As described in section 2, the Illinois Snapshots of Early Literacy (Barr et al. 2004a, 2004b), a K–2 normed literacy assessment, is administered twice a year in both English and Spanish. Figures 1 and 2, which were circulated with the September 2011 questionnaire, illustrate the progress made by the kindergarten (Alacranes) and 1st grade (Jaguares) classes in Spanish and English, respectively, during the 2010–11 academic year.

3.4 Shared Emotional Connection

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), “the interactions of members in shared events and the specific attributes of the events may facilitate or inhibit the strength of the

![Image](image-url)

*The published fall and spring median scores for the grades K and 1 Spanish ISEL assessment are shown for reference.*
community” (13). This conclusion stems from the idea that the more time people spend together doing things that matter, the more likely they are to become close. While regular positive interactions foster a sense of community, under the shared valent event hypothesis, a shared crisis that the members experience and overcome can also generate a sense of community (McMillan and Chavis 1986: 14).

Meeting regularly on Saturdays for three hours allows all members of the ENL community to develop emotional connections in positive ways. Time is spent with people with similar backgrounds, sharing frustrations about the school system, exchanging suggestions for maintaining Spanish as the primary home language, and contributing to the ENL curriculum with snacks and presentations. Observations and written comments in the survey and questionnaire indicate that both HL students and parents have positive experiences on Saturdays. Towards the end of a lesson during a Saturday classroom observation, Gloria (the teacher) decided that the students needed to get out of their seats and move around, after they had sat quietly during a presentation. She announced that they were going to play “El corazón de la piña” (“the heart of the pineapple”). As she made this announcement, the children jumped out of their seats with excitement. The expressions on the children’s faces represented joy, enthusiasm, and the playful nature of this inclusive game. All of the children happily participated.
Selected comments from the parents in the survey ("¿Qué le gusta más de ENL?") provide direct evidence for these shared positive experiences developing a sense of community through participation in ENL.

1. Que nuestros hijos aprendan y que nosotros formemos una comunidad Latina.
2. La comunidad tan profesional.
3. La comunidad, el reconocer que hay Heritage speaker con necesidades diferentes que otro niños.
4. La comunidad. Es tan único que esta comunidad. Me gusta hablar con otros padres para enseñar español a mis hijos.
5. La formación de una comunidad Latina/hispanohablante.
6. La oportunidad de aprender junto con otros niños que hablan español para mejorar y aprender el idioma. También para que no sea solo en casa que escucha el idioma.
7. Que los niños estén aprendiendo el idioma y siempre están animados, el entusiasmo de los profesores.
8. Antes de venir a ENL conocía muy poca gente de habla hispana; así que ha sido muy beneficioso para nuestra familia. Mil gracias por proveer esta gran oportunidad!
9. El poder tener un lugar de encuentro para nuestra comunidad que nuestro hijos se sienten identificando con nuestro idioma y cultura. Y de paso puedan aprender el español de una forma más académica.

These comments suggest that the community is not merely a subset of the local Hispanic community; instead, a new community of families maintaining Spanish has emerged (see especially comments 1, 3, 5). Furthermore, the community includes members who previously may not have had any social connection to other Latinos locally (comment 8). It also includes a mix of Hispanics from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds who might not otherwise interact as community members with a common purpose. As Gloria observed: “They are 5 years old, and their parents are so important to this program. It’s a safe place to speak Spanish. That’s what they say. And it’s people from all kinds of people. You see children who’s parents are super PhD. They read in front of the other children. This mixing of families is beautiful.” The presence of academics at various levels within the program, as made clear in Gloria’s comment, has been an important factor in the project’s success. Connecting with the local university communities has been a major means to recruiting instructors and other personnel, whether they are paid or service-learners. In addition to attracting students, faculty, and volunteers for ENL, the proximity to an academic community has influenced the financial viability of the community program.

The funding of ENL is likely related to its relatively high diversity in educational and socioeconomic background for a Saturday-based academic program. To date, ENL has not charged any tuition or fees. This no-fee model is in contrast with the approach of the two weekend-based Spanish HL programs in the Los Angeles area that Carreira and Rodríguez (2011) were able to document, Grupo Educa and La Escuela Argentina de Los Angeles (LEALA). Both of these programs charge a significant tuition fee. While the ENL parental surveys have not investigated the extent to which a tuition fee would be a barrier to participation, fees comparable to those charged by the aforementioned programs would likely present a significant hardship for some families.

Instead of charging tuition, the program has relied on a mix of small university research grants, foundation grants, and private donations to fund its budget of modest instructor salaries, textbooks, supplies, and facility charges. Implementation of a sustainable ENL-style program in other communities, particularly those without access to university research grant funding, may require a tuition fee. Such a tuition fee could be implemented in various ways to minimize the impact on participation, and may even help to ensure fidelity in terms of attendance and homework completion. However, it is important to recognize the potential of such a fee affecting the diversity of participants.
Finally, it is worth observing that the experience of immigration, shared by many parents, likely contributes to a sense of community, despite the negative aspects of that experience, such as struggling to learn English, work documentation issues, or distance from family. To the extent that the families are overcoming at least some of those difficulties, in part through ENL, they are strengthening their emotional bonds.

4. Conclusion

In the current study, we provide compelling data in support of Spanish programs for elementary-aged Spanish HL speakers in the United States. We argue that such projects are critical for the maintenance of Spanish as L1 within rapidly growing domestic Hispanic communities.

These programs also support the learning of students of L2 Spanish through experiential- and service-learning opportunities that are increasingly in demand by L2 students and L2 teachers and are needed in Latino communities. The immersion context of a Spanish HL program offers experiences that are complementary to those available in international study-abroad programs. It is true that study-abroad programs offer a greater variety of interactive contexts in Spanish for a greater portion of each day. However, there are a number of unique aspects to the experience of offering time as a service-learner in a US Spanish HL program. First, the US context of HL programs (or other domestic immersion experiences) provides cultural and linguistic experiences with Spanish speakers who are residents of the United States. Such experiences are important given that L2 students likely will use their Spanish most often in a domestic context. Furthermore, there is increasing international recognition of the United States as a principal country where Spanish is spoken (Lipski 2008). Those Americans who use Spanish abroad (Latino or not) will be expected to have some level of cultural and linguistic competence with US Spanish.

We highlight the ENL Saturday-school approach as a viable service-learning and educational vehicle, where L1 Spanish students are brought together from diverse schools, races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents representing numerous Latin American Spanish-speaking countries as well as Spain unite for a common goal of supporting their children’s education. The project recruits Hispanic youth from local Ann Arbor High Schools to serve in the K–3 Saturday classrooms, as well as both L1 and L2 non-native Spanish-speaking young adults from the local university student communities who assist in all facets of the project. By following McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) descriptive framework for the structure of a community, we begin to analyze the varied relations and connections between the diverse ENL stakeholders in terms of membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs, as well as shared emotional connections. Based on this analysis, we concisely illustrate how the multiple and often fluid intergenerational, interethnic, and intercultural contacts are actually positive forces for building a new community. Future studies will be useful for monitoring the elements of that sense of community within the program and how the maintenance of these elements continue to serve this Spanish program’s participants, families, those affiliated with local universities, and the local community at large.

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NOTES

1 We use the terms Hispanic and Latina/o interchangeably, following usage in the United States by both members of the community as well as scholars of that community. It is worth observing that while both terms have similar meanings in English, the term latino in Spanish refers specifically to Latin Americans, and excludes Spaniards.

2 We report on class formation, curricula, and results of the program elsewhere in Benkí and Satterfield (under review); Satterfield and Benkí (in preparation); and Satterfield, Sánchez, Morales, and Benkí (in preparation). The ENL program’s website is <http://www.umich.edu/~tsatter/ENL/>.

3 Responses from interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and any other statements from ENL participants are included verbatim, exactly as they were provided, including any errors in grammar or orthography.

4 Correspondence with the authors regarding this article can be addressed to Teresa Satterfield (tsatter@umich.edu) and/or José R. Benkí (benki@umich.edu).

WORKS CITED


Hispania 96 June 2013


APPENDICES

Appendix A: December 2010 “En Nuestra Lengua” Survey

“En Nuestra Lengua”
Encuesta de opiniones y actitudes
Fecha: 11 diciembre 2010

El objetivo de esta encuesta anónima es conocer su opinión sobre varios aspectos relacionados con el uso del español, sobre todo en el contexto del programa de alfabetismo y cultura para los niños hispanohablantes de nuestra comunidad. En el equipo de “En Nuestra Lengua”, estamos muy interesados en conocer su experiencia. Sus respuestas son estrictamente confidenciales. Usted decide si desea completar o no esta encuesta anónima. Cualquier comentario o sugerencia que usted haga será tenida en cuenta para proponer acciones de mejora para la próxima etapa del programa.

Parte 1. Por favor provee la siguiente información biográfica.

2. Sexo: M □ F □
3. Nacionalidad o país de origen: _____________________
4. Años en los EEUU: _____________________
5. Nacionalidad o país de origen de su pareja: _____________________
6. Número de hijos: _____________________
7. Nivel de educación logrado en su país de origen:
   Primaria □ Secundaria □ Preparatoria/Colegio □ Universidad □ Graduado □
8. Nivel de educación logrado en los EEUU:
   Primaria □ Secundaria □ Preparatoria/Colegio □ Universidad □ Graduado □
9. Nivel de educación de su pareja logrado en su país de origen:
   Primaria □ Secundaria □ Preparatoria/Colegio □ Universidad □ Graduado □
10. Nivel de educación de su pareja logrado en los EEUU:
    Primaria □ Secundaria □ Preparatoria/Colegio □ Universidad □ Graduado □
Parte 2. Las siguientes preguntas se refieren a su uso de lengua. No hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas. Por favor, marque el cuadro que más claramente indica su respuesta.

11. ¿Cuán bien habla español?
   Lengua nativa □ Muy bien, pero con □ Bien □ Poco bien □ Nada bien □
   acento no nativo

12. ¿Cuán bien habla inglés?
   Lengua nativa □ Muy bien, pero con □ Bien □ Poco bien □ Nada bien □
   acento no nativo

13. ¿Hay otros idiomas importantes en su vida? No □ Si □ Idiomas: ________________

14. ¿Cuán bien los habla?
   Lengua nativa □ Muy bien, pero con □ Bien □ Poco bien □ Nada bien □
   acento no nativo

15. ¿Habla español en el trabajo?
   Siempre □ Casi siempre □ A veces □ Casi nunca □ Nunca □

16. ¿Habla español en la escuela de su hijo?
   Siempre □ Casi siempre □ A veces □ Casi nunca □ Nunca □

17. ¿Habla español en contextos sociales (fiestas, reuniones, en la calle, tiendas)?
   Siempre □ Casi siempre □ A veces □ Casi nunca □ Nunca □

18. ¿Habla español en la casa?
   Siempre □ Casi siempre □ A veces □ Casi nunca □ Nunca □

19. ¿Hay adultos en su hogar que no hablan el español?
   No □ Si □ ¿Cuántos? ________________

20. ¿Hay adultos en su hogar que no hablan el inglés?
   No □ Si □ ¿Cuántos? ________________

Parte 3. Las siguientes preguntas se refieren a su uso de lengua específicamente con sus hijos. No hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas. Por favor, marque el cuadro que más claramente indica su respuesta.

21. ¿Habla español con sus hijos?
   Siempre □ Casi siempre □ A veces □ Casi nunca □ Nunca □

22. ¿Por qué habla español con ellos? Escoja todas las opciones que aplican.
   □ Porque desea mantener el español
   □ Porque desea mantener la cultura de su país
   □ Para que se consideren latinos/hispanos/paisanos
   □ Con el objetivo de que aprendan el español
   □ Porque no sabe inglés
   □ Porque considera importante el bilingüismo
   □ Porque desea que sus hijos puedan regresar a su país
   □ Otra: _____________________
23. ¿Corrige errores gramaticales o de pronunciación en el español de sus hijos?
Siempre □   Casi siempre □   A veces □   Casi nunca □   Nunca □

24. ¿Cómo corrige estos errores? Escoja todas las opciones que aplican.
□ Nunca corrige los errores
□ Usando reglas de gramática
□ Dando ejemplos de elementos impresos
□ Repitiendo la frase con la forma correcta
□ Explicando “porque así se hace”
□ Otra: _____________________

25. ¿Por qué habla inglés con sus hijos? Escoja todas las opciones que aplican.
□ Nunca habla inglés con ellos
□ Porque desea que aprendan inglés más rápido
□ Para que se consideren estadounidenses
□ Porque es un requisito/sugerencia de la escuela de sus hijos
□ Porque ellos se quejan de no comprender el español
□ Porque hay otras personas presentes que no saben español
□ Otra: _____________________

26. Cuando sus hijos hablan o responden en inglés, ¿les pide que hablen español?
Siempre □   Casi siempre □   A veces □   Casi nunca □   Nunca □

27. ¿Considera necesario mantener la cultura latina/hispana/paisana?
Muy importante □   Importante □   Me da igual □   Poco □   Nada □

28. ¿Considera necesario el mantenimiento de la lengua para mantener la cultura?
Muy necesario □   Necesario □   Me da igual □   Poco □   Nada □

29. ¿Es importante que sus hijos sean completamente bilingües en español e inglés?
Muy importante □   Importante □   Me da igual □   Poco □   Nada □

30. ¿Piensa que es importante que sus hijos se consideren latinos/hispanos/paisanos?
Muy importante □   Importante □   Me da igual □   Poco □   Nada □

31. ¿Con qué frecuencia ayuda usted a sus hijos con sus tareas de la escuela diaria (no del programa “En Nuestra Lengua”), por cualquier razón?
Todos los días □   2–3 veces a la semana □   Una vez a la semana □   Una vez al mes □   Unas veces al año □

32. ¿Con qué frecuencia ayuda usted a sus hijos con sus tareas del programa “En Nuestra Lengua”, por cualquier razón?
Todos los días □   2–3 veces a la semana □   Una vez a la semana □   Una vez al mes □   Unas veces al año □
33. ¿Por qué no puede ayudar a sus hijos con la tarea tanto como quiera? Escoja todas las opciones que aplican.
- [ ] No hace falta ayudarlos más
- [ ] Porque está muy ocupado
- [ ] Porque ellos están muy ocupados
- [ ] Porque no pueda hablar o escribir bien el inglés
- [ ] Porque prefiere no hablar inglés con ellos
- [ ] Otra: _____________________

34. ¿Con qué frecuencia lee usted con sus hijos en español?
- [ ] Todos los días
- [ ] 2–3 veces a la semana
- [ ] Una vez a la semana
- [ ] Una vez al mes
- [ ] Unas veces al año

35. ¿Con qué frecuencia lee usted con sus hijos en inglés?
- [ ] Todos los días
- [ ] 2–3 veces a la semana
- [ ] Una vez a la semana
- [ ] Una vez al mes
- [ ] Unas veces al año

36. Si usted pudiera cambiar algo del programa de “En Nuestra Lengua” para mejorarlo, ¿qué cambiaría?
37. ¿Qué le gusta más de “En Nuestra Lengua”?

Appendix B: September 2011 “En Nuestra Lengua” Questionnaire

“En Nuestra Lengua”
Cuestionario
Fecha: 17 septiembre 2011

El objetivo de este cuestionario anónimo es conocer su opinión sobre varios aspectos del proyecto “En Nuestra Lengua”. Sus respuestas son estrictamente confidenciales. Usted decide si desea completar o no esta encuesta anónima. Cualquier comentario o sugerencia que usted haga será tenida en cuenta para proponer acciones de mejora para la próxima etapa del programa.

¿Cuáles son sus expectativas para su hijo/a en el programa de “En Nuestra Lengua” en este año? Marque todas que aplican.
- [ ] Que lea y escriba en español
- [ ] Que sea bilingüe
- [ ] Que pasa tiempo con otros niños latinos/hispanos
- [ ] Que mejore sus destrezas en general de alfabetismo
- [ ] Que aprenda de la cultura latina y la de nuestro(s) país(es)
- [ ] Otra expectativa: _____________________

Etapas de primavera: Las etapas de otoño 2011 y primavera 2012 van por 9 semanas, 2.5 horas cada sábado. Planeamos una etapa de primavera 2012 (abreviada entre 4 y 6 semanas, y quizás con un día escolar más corto). Nota: el último día de escuela en las escuelas públicas de Ann Arbor es el 15 de junio. Indica su preferencia para las siguientes opciones:

Cinco semanas de 2.5 horas cada sábado, 5 de mayo hasta 9 de junio.
- [ ] Preferida
- [ ] Me da igual
- [ ] No preferida
Cinco semanas de 1.5 horas cada sábado, 5 de mayo hasta 9 de junio.
Preferida ☐ Me da igual ☐ No preferida ☐

Cuatro semanas de 2.5 horas cada sábado, 5 de mayo hasta 26 de mayo.
Preferida ☐ Me da igual ☐ No preferida ☐

Cuatro semanas de 1.5 horas cada sábado, 5 de mayo hasta 26 de mayo.
Preferida ☐ Me da igual ☐ No preferida ☐

¿Cuáles temas le interesan para las conversaciones entre los padres?

¿Cuáles de las conversaciones del año pasado eran más útiles o interesantes?
☐ Cómo apoyar la lectura en español de su hijo/a
☐ Expectativas para padres en las escuelas de los EEUU
☐ Visitas de los abogados de inmigración
☐ Otras conversaciones: _____________________

¿Tiene sugerencias para oradores invitados?

Cualquier sugerencia o comentario para el equipo de “En Nuestra Lengua”. 

Hispania 96 June 2013