Education and Language Acquisition in Spain

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Abstract

Different cultures place differing degrees of importance on language and language acquisition. In some areas, like Spain, children are immersed in English from a very young age and therefore, grow up bilingual. Other education systems, like the one used in many schools in the United States, only require two years of a foreign language in high school. Language acquisition, especially early on in life, is important to the creation of global communities and the facilitation of a deeper understanding of cultures other than our own. Educational systems, separate organizations, and the individual communities can all work together to promote the acquisition of language and the facilitation of global citizenship. The influence of historical events can also not be understated in how cultures view language and the importance of creating a global community. In the case of Spain, the intertwining of religion and education, then the separation of the two greatly impacted how education is viewed today.

Introduction

The importance of learning more than one language differs between the different cultures. For some cultures, it is a necessity and for others, it is unimportant and possibly even a waste of time. The theme of this paper is how language is acquired in different countries and the importance placed on language acquisition. This class presented the question of global citizenship and what it means to be a global citizen. In my opinion, being a global citizen means coming together as a global community and working to understand each other. To recognize that, although different, each culture is equally important and valuable is part of becoming a global citizen. With that in mind, I think it is the duty of a global citizen to go out into the world to learn as much as possible about other cultures and apply that knowledge, when needed, to their own culture. Appiah (2006), as quoted in William Gaudelli’s “Heuristics of Global Citizenship Discourses” (2009), states that “every human being has obligations to every other”. It is the duty of a global citizen to help other members of the global community when possible. In my attempt to fulfill my duty as a global citizen, I traveled to Spain as a part of a service learning class. While in Spain, I mapped small communities, learned more about Spanish culture through formal and informal interviews with residents, and worked with the Spanish Red Cross’s Youth Department. I supplemented my work with additional research done through the CSU Monterey Bay Library Online Database.

Methodology

In order to fulfill the requirements of the class and gather data for my paper, I went to small communities around Ponferrada and created maps of these communities. These maps were drawn in a notebook that also held notes about the communities and the residents. I also spoke with the residents in order to learn more about the towns and Spanish culture. This information also went into the notebook. The maps included details about the buildings in the towns my group and I studied. I included details such as type of building, number of stories, and location in my map of the community. The combination of ethnography and oral history allowed me to get to know the towns and gather data at the same time. The analysis of my data and formal writing of my field notes were done on my computer. The participants of my research included residents of the communities we visited, members of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, and members of the Spanish Red Cross. While conducting informal interviews with the residents of the communities, we asked them questions about the community’s history.

Body

When I was studying the communities, I went to Santalla, Priaranza, Toreno, Ocero, and Sancedo. While in Santalla, I went down one of the streets off the main street and after a few minutes of walking, came across a red and grey brick building with a clock on the side near the roof (See Appendix B). There were not any outside identifiers as to the purpose of the building except for a schedule taped to the window. A closer look revealed the paper to be a schedule for a van that went through the community lending books out to the residents as a kind of mobile library. My group mates and I speculated that the building was possibly a library. A resident saw our curiosity and after we asked him about the building, he explained that the building was a schoolhouse. That surprised us, as the building was smaller than the schools we were used to. However, the man then explained that there were only five students currently attending school, as the community was very small and the majority of the residents were eighty years or older. This schoolhouse and the mobile library tells me that the community still values education, despite the small number of students. Historically, Spain has had a rocky relationship with teachers. According to *Short History of the Spanish Civil War* by Julián Casanova, members of the clergy, who had always been in charge of teaching the youth, were banned from those positions in nineteen thirty-one by the Republic. However, after Franco took power, the Catholic Church was restored to power (2013). After Franco died, education was modernized and is now more secular (Socolovsky, 2005). In nineteen seventy, the General Law of Education and Financing of the Educational Reform passed that modernized education and improved the access to education (Flecha García, 2011). According to an interview done by Jerome Socolovsky in Madrid, during the years of Franco, education was more focused on religion rather than language. Every school session was started with a Mass and ended with Communion and confession (2005). According to a teacher that I interviewed, education is geared towards preparing the youth for the workforce. He said that children are taught English from a young age and are immersed in the language from the time they are four years old (See Appendix A for full transcript). Whether the Catholic Church is in charge of education or not affects the content of the lessons taught to the school children. It is possible that with the Catholic Church in charge, there is less focus on language. During my work at the Red Cross in León, I cut out pictures of food such as fish, beans, carrots, strawberries, and pasta. I then glued these pictures to a chart on a piece of poster board. Although I do not know the final purpose of this chart, I can speculate that the chart was possibly used to teach the school children the English words for the foods displayed. This is just one way that the Red Cross works with kids to educate them and help them. According to Álvaro Gutiérrez Valladares, the teacher I interviewed, the students are sometimes taught only in English in order to help them learn the language better. This idea is reinforced by a study done that examined the challenges Ukrainian students had while studying abroad in Poland. Many of the students were worried about not being able to communicate with people due to a language barrier. However, in the study, the students who were placed in mixed groups found it easier to make friends. However, in this study, the students were living in separate housing, away from the university and that lack of immersion made practicing and learning the language much more difficult (Grygiel & Rębis, 2018). In a study done Goriot, Broersma, McQueen, Unsworth, and Van Hout in the year two thousand and seventeen, children are possibly better able to understand and learn a new language when it is introduced in a classroom setting. Children in early English schools are better able to grasp the language than their peers in schools that do not offer English early on. Learning a language early on in school makes learning another language easier as proven by Maluch, Kempert, Neumann, and Stanat in their two thousand and fourteen study. This same study proves that when a school supports the learning of both languages, being bilingual is associated positively. While staying in León, I was walking past a group of about thirty students, about ten to twelve years old, possibly out on a field trip of some kind. The kids were chatting excitedly with each other in Spanish, but when a car passed by, their adult chaperones warned them away from the street in English. It is interesting to note that such warnings were given in English, meaning that the students had enough immersion and experience with the language to understand the warnings. In contrast, when I was in high school, I was only required to take two years of a foreign language in order to graduate. Many of the students in my language classes in high school only took the classes because they were required and did not actually care to learn anything about the language or the cultures of the speakers. My own high school did not have many resources for the foreign language teachers and actually, in my high school, only one language was offered: Spanish. Due to the lack of importance placed on bilingualism and language acquisition, many students were indifferent to the prospect of actually learning a new language. Many students in my high school foreign language classes only took the classes because it was a requirement and not out of a desire to actually learn the language. This led them to not retaining the language and still being, effectively, monolingual. Perhaps if bilingualism was stressed more in the early years of the students, there would not be such large amounts of indifference. All this leads to students who, unless through outside circumstances, never become bilingual and are therefore, unable to communicate with the parts of the world that do not speak their language. In Spain, not only is learning English encouraged from a young age as part of a desire to be multilingual, it is also encouraged due to practical reasons. English is the language of business and in Spain, it is almost considered a requirement in order to join the workforce. As a member of the global community, I visited Spain in order to not only understand and learn about Spanish culture and the Spanish people, but to also provide what support and help that I could offer. I was able to learn more about the responsibilities of a global citizen through my work with the Red Cross in León and Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. While staying in Spain, I had the opportunity to meet a wide variety of people and I learned that despite a minor language barrier, the people of Spain are incredibly open and friendly. While studying Priaranza, we noticed an old building. We asked a nearby resident about it and he actually allowed us inside the building and told us about its history. Not only was this information helpful for our research, but it also helped me better understand the global community. We had never met this man before and he was willing to share some history about his family with us, complete strangers. This level of understanding and compassion is part of being a global citizen. This class posed the question of what a social scientist does in terms of social responsibility and compassion. My answer is that a social scientist is supposed to not only observe, learn, and understand, but to also provide research and conduct studies that will facilitate that learning and understanding. The global community, as a whole, needs to be continually striving to improve relations within the community, learning from each other, and understanding one another. Without language acquisition, those goals become much harder as it is difficult to learn from each other and understand one another if there is a language barrier.

Conclusion

The content of this class and my experiences while working with the Red Cross and the Association taught me the value of not only language acquisition but the importance of early language acquisition. It is through this class that I realized the significance given to education and how it is not always easy to receive the education that one needs. Education in Spain has always been a complex subject and it is only in that last fifty or so years that it has modernized to the point of being able to best prepare the students for the workforce and indeed seem to be doing a better job, language-wise, than some other countries. I think language is an important part of global citizenship as it is hard to become a part of the global community if you cannot interact with and understand part of that community. As seen in the studies referenced, being bilingual has advantages and immersion from an early age works better than classes that do not have the support of the school and education departments of the governments. Being bilingual opens up many doors in life but it is important that we, as society, value not just the benefits of bilingualism but also the road that leads to bilingualism. Language acquisition needs to be valued in order for members of society to become multilingual. This course has not only improved my knowledge of Spanish culture and of the language, but it has also taught me what it means to be a global citizen and part of the global community. After taking this class, I now know more about my responsibilities as a global citizen.

Appendix A

California State University, Monterey Bay

Education and the Acquisition of Language

Ponferrada

Interview

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| --- | --- |
| Fecha de la entrevista / Interview Date | June 24, 2018 |
| Lugar de la entrevista / Place | Ponferrada, Leon (Through Zoom) |
| Nombre del entrevistado / Interviewee | Álvaro Gutiérrez Valladares |
| Entrevistador / Interviewer | Sarah Nelson |
| Transcripción / Transcriber | Sarah Nelson |
| Nombre del archivo / Sound file name | Álvaro Gutiérrez Valladares Interview Audio |

California State University Monterey Bay

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| --- | --- |
| **Time** | **Transcription** |
| 00:00 | <BOF> |
| 00:03    00:36      01:28  01:48    02:30  03:30  04:16  05:16  06:08  07:29  08:08  09:09  10:26  10:46  11:19  12:41  13:55  14:23  15:49  16:47 | *SN asked for permission to record interview. The interview took place on the 24th of June, 2018 over Zoom.*  *SN: Could you describe the language programs in place in schools that you’ve taught at?*  AGV: Sure. I’ve only taught at one school, other than that it’s been academies. So the school I’m in starts in preschool. I mean they have a program previous to that and the kids hear some English but that’s not formally taught. So starting at age three they start to have English classes and after that they just keep having them until in primary school they start having some entire subjects in English so then its bilingual education.  *SN: Alright. And what age is primary school? It’s a bit different in the U.S.*  AGV: Oh okay. So here we have what we call infantil which is from three to five. When they’re six years old they go on to first and primary and then it goes on from there.  *SN: And going into school, do most students already know another language other than Spanish? Or is it just Spanish and some English?*  AGV: Not usually. There are some who do. For instance, I have two students—one who’s Catalan and the other’s Galician—so they do hear those languages at home as well. But most of them won’t… Well I also have one—well two-two children—who are half French so they have French as well at home. So some of them do, but mostly it’s only Spanish.  *SN: How are the students encouraged to learn different languages? Are they encouraged to learn languages other than English?*  AGV: Well they’re not really. It’s mostly English now. Before it was primarily French and it was just a subject in school so it wasn’t immersion like it is now. It’s a pretty recent trend and it’s especially focused on English. It’s a big deal now. Everyone’s really obsessed with the children growing up to know English. So I think if you come back in 15 years you’ll have a similar situation to that you have in northern Europe. Most people being able to have a conversation in English—with or without an accent. Probably with.  *SN: What are some advantages to learning more than one language?*  AGV: Well you have a few. I mean you have a lot of correlation with knowing a lot of languages and having more ease in several subjects and what not. Traveling is a lot easier. You got a lot of doors open for you. I wish you’d have more languages that you could learn. Right now it’s mostly English unless you go the German school or the UC Francés or things like that. But in general I think it’s a pretty good thing.  *SN: What were your own language experiences growing up? How did you learn the language? What languages did you learn?*  AGV: Well I was raised in California. So I had Spanish at home, English as the language in school, and well I did French as a foreign language in high school in California but the usual experience there. I had a good teacher so that was good but it—you know foreign languages aren’t really a primary concern in California. Other than that, it’s been personal interest. So I can understand Italian, Portuguese, I keep up with French and I’ve learned [inaudible 05:03]. And that’s about it.  *SN: Are there—Is there a difference between public schools and private schools teaching language?*  AGV: Yes. Private schools are under a lot of pressure to attract students so they make even more of an effort to have it earlier. So you wouldn’t usually have it in preschool. I work at a private school so that’s one of the things they have centered on to attract parents. But public school are also moving towards the bilingual model. You have the school—I live in-near Boñar in Llamera- and the local public school is a bilingual school. So they’re adding a lot of curriculum.  *SN: Do you think that people will want to be trilingual or* *learn more than just Spanish and English in the future?*  AGV: Well I’d hope so. But the interest in English seems to be very practical. There’s this idea that English is the language that everyone’s going to be able to speak outside of Spain. It’s going to help you with your business ventures—if you go into a multinational company or whatever-whatever you have. You don’t have the same thing with, I don’t know, Russian or French anymore. Certainly not with Portuguese or Italian. So unless the practical situation changes and people think they’re going to have a similar advantage in learning—I don’t know—Chinese, I don’t think so. I mean you still have that obsession—the same obsession you have in the U.S. with you know STEM. We need math, science, things that are going to keep your nose to the grindstone. And here English is one of those things that keeps you to the grindstone. It’s something that’ll be useful when you go out into the workforce. So as languages, it’s not a philological interest let’s say. Sadly  *SN: What are the requirements by the government in regards to language? Cuz [sic] I know in the United States, in California, I think you have to have at least two years but nothing after that. So how is it different?*  AGV: Well they keep changing. So I’m not really up to speed on the most recent law. Each change though increases the requirements in age. You have a certain amount of hours a week. Starting in primary school. So it’s much longer than two years.  *SN: How*—*What are the opinions on learning another language here?*  AGV: I beg your pardon?  *SN: What are the opinions on learning another language? I know like a lot of people*—*when I was in high school*—*a lot of people only took the class because it was required. Like ‘oh I’ll just take it and not worry about it’. So like is it different here? Or are people just taking it because it’s practical?*  AGV: Well there’s a lot of pressure for people to take languages seriously, especially English. The idea is that this is absolutely necessary for you to be successful in the workforce so I want my child to be able to study English so they don’t fall behind of age. The kids, themselves, they have the general interest that kids have in any subject. But there’s a lot of social pressure in favour of learning foreign languages, but particularly English.  *SN: What are the parents’ views on learning languages? Cuz [sic] I think I heard that parents tend to—the older generations tend to not know English or know it as well as the younger generation. So what are the opinions of the older generation?*  AGV: Well they’re the ones who are pushing the most for it. They have a bit of a—they’re trying to not-not learn it but-you know-experience the learning vicariously. They want to learn vicariously through their children. They think it’s an important thing to have. They feel that that they missed out on that. And it’s a huge concern, especially for the older parents. Yeah I’m trying to think of what parent hasn’t wanted English. Everyone’s—Who—Maybe it’s because I’m the English teacher, so no one’s going to come and say “you know your subject is really really [sic] unimportant to me”. But I do get the opposite. A lot of people coming and saying that it was very important for them that there’s an English program in school and whatnot. So yeah no they-they take it seriously.  *SN: Do you think the-um-language learning experience differ in countries like France, or Italy, or other European countries?*  AGV: I really can’t say. I don’t um—I’m not familiar with their language programs.  *SN: Okay. Um.*  AGV: I’m sorry. That’s a very unsatisfactory answer. I just can’t make it up.  *SN: Any little bit helps, honestly.*  AGV: I’m not really aware of much interest in foreign languages in places like England. Uh France uh. They’re not famous for loving languages but that might just be what everyone thinks of the French. And I wouldn’t like to just double down on the stereotypes.  *SN: Yeah. Yeah. Uh. How like*—*What are some activities and how are languages taught in like to the young-to the younger kids?*  AGV: Well to the younger kids it’s mostly exposing them to the language. So uh the teachers in certain-certain circumstances will only speak to them in English. Uh. Particularly with formulaic things, something that gives them a lot of confidence. Once they start understanding just these few set phrases, then they-they feel more comfortable with it and they’ll be more adventurous later. Uh then specifically the English teacher will only speak to them in English and that’s uh, at first, a terrible shock to them. But afterwards, once they find out that they can start to understand they start feeling a lot more confident in themselves. You don’t really expect them to produce English until they’re-you know-five, six years old, really in primary. So right now it’s mostly—in preschool rather, it’s mostly them-you know-making a map of the language in their head.  *SN: Mhm*  AGV: But they’re learning it the same way that they learn their first language. They’re little sponges at that point.  *SN: Umm. Do you think it’s easier to learn uh English? Cuz [sic] I know some people say that English can be like a hard language to learn.*  AGV: Hm. Yeah it depends on your starting point. I mean it’s-it’s a Germanic language so it has the-a different structure than Spanish. Uh you have to start thinking of verbs differently. It’s-it’s—but then again it’s ubiquitous. So you get a lot of exposure to it. So that makes it easier. And it’s—I mean it’s not as difficult as it would be if they had—I don’t know—Chinese as their starting point.  *SN: Yeah*  AGV: So I mean it’s at least somewhat familiar to them. You can’t make a one-on-one map in translations but they—you—it’s pretty easy to find out what things are. Even if you’re just literally translating things. So it’s hard but it’s not impossible.  *SN: Okay.*  AGV: I mean a lot of times, at least English speakers think this is the easiest language in the world. ‘I’ve been speaking it since I was what three? Two?’ So it’s harder than English speakers tend to think but it’s easier than non-English speakers tend to think.  *SN: It’s-It’s*—  AGV: The golden mean in that sense. Yeah.  *SN: Uh how are the*—*Like what are the-the views of the other teachers towards language acquisition? Like are most of them like ‘yes! We want them to learn as many languages as possible or just let’s focus on English right now’?*  AGV: Now well that’s-that’s the thing. Most-most of them see languages in that utilitarian sense. So-so what languages are useful to teach our students? Uh and they usually go to English. Uh some others have a more um more lively love of language and they would like different languages to be available. They would like some-some variety, some-some choice in the matter. Um most of them though it’s just the ‘this is what we’re doing. Let’s go.’ And some of them are just kinda annoyed at having to learn English themselves. Uh I was talking to the history teacher the other day and he was very annoy—cuz [sic] he teaches Spanish history. So teaching Spanish history in English is just-just completely unnatural to him. Especially since he is not an English speaker, at least not natively or-or proficiently. So he’s had to learn English in order to keep teaching-that’s just terribly annoying. So I definitely understand that. Heck I think it’s unnatural to teach Spanish history in English. That’s just bizarre.  *SN: Do most teachers need to learn English or do they already know it?*  AGV: Yeah. For you to be in the bilingual center, you have to get a certain level of English. So most of them already know some English. Uh the older ones don’t cuz [sic] they learned French in school. But all of them are having to slowly get up to date. So this year I believe it was uh B2 level that was requested, by next year or the year after it was going to be C1 so they keep raising the bar for you to be able, you know, qualify as a bilingual teacher. And some teachers aren’t bilingual. Some teachers they’re just shoehorned in-grandfathered in and that’s—we’ll just leave that. Let sleeping dogs lie. But for new teachers, it’s getting to be an almost absolute requirement.  *SN: Alright. Uh I think that might be it for now. Um thank you so much for putting up with the technical difficulties.*  AGV: No! Don’t worry about it! My pleasure. Alright. Good bye then.  *SN: Bye.* |
| 17:05 | <EOF> |

Appendix B



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| 9/6 10:50 AM In Santalla at the schoolhouse | *Today I focused my observations on how literacy and education are viewed in the smaller towns.*  There is a red and grey stone building with a clock on one side and a black, metallic bell on top of the roof. On one of the windows was a schedule of a van that went around the neighborhood lending out books to the residents. | After talking to one of the locals, we learned that this building was a school and that there are only 5 students currently attending school. This makes me think that there aren’t that many people below the age of 18 in that town. Despite the low number of students, the fact that there is a mobile library tells me that the community still values literacy and education. |

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