
“Spanglish” and Its Effects on L1 and L2

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The present study discusses and shows how “Spanglish,” the constant mixture of Spanish and English at the word, phrase and sentence level, affects bilinguals’ first and second languages. Researchers have demonstrated that code-switching can serve as a bridge between the two languages and that Spanish can facilitate English word learning, but they have not studied the effects of “Spanglish,” as a third language used by many Spanish bilinguals. From interviews, textual analysis, and interview observations of three Spanish bilinguals, it was demonstrated that “Spanglish” does affect L1 and L2. The results showed that “Spanglish” affects communication with Spanish and English monolinguals, leads to the creation of nonexistent words, and diminishes fluency in both Spanish and English.

Introduction

The fast growing Hispanic population in the United States has called for an increase in the number of researchers studying Spanish-speaking bilinguals. Given that 1 out of 12 kindergarten students come from homes where a language other than English is spoken and Spanish is the other language in almost 75% of these cases, bilingualism has become a very important subject in the education system (Carlson and Meltzoff 284). This ethnic and linguistic diversity among students in American schools has required educators to find new methods to help non-English speakers learn English. To be able to identify the most efficient methods that help students learn English and to create new ones that would make this process easier, researchers have studied numerous groups of bilinguals and have focused on investigating the advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism in English writing and learning processes. They have studied different factors of bilingualism, especially code-switching, and have looked at teacher-student interaction, peer interaction, use of L1 to help acquisition in L2, and art facilitating the English learning process.

When studying bilingual students, and especially Spanish-speaking bilinguals, it is necessary to investigate the use of code-switching and its influence on the English learning and writing processes because code-switching is widely used by many bilingual students. The basic definition of code-switching is the combination of two different languages at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence level within a speech event (Stavans and Swisher 194; Thompson 4). Thompson finds in his research that “speakers who code-switch have an understanding of code-switching...at both a conscious and sub-conscious level” (7). Most researchers agree that bilinguals use code-switching to facilitate expression and comprehension, to avoid miscommunication, to fill a lexical gap, and to create a multicultural identity (Gutierrez-Clellen, et al 92; Losey 215; Thompson 4; Cenoz and Gorter 358). Furthermore, they agree that the difference in frequency can be caused

by cultural untranslatability, emphasis for additional meaning, difference in audience, proficiency in the languages, and context (Becker 102; Brice and Anderson 19; Stavans and Swisher 195; Yi 25).

The use and purpose of code-switching has been studied for several years, but many contradictions have been found within this research topic. Some researchers argue that Spanish-speakers code-switch to better express their ideas and to avoid miscommunication (Gutierrez-Clellen, et al 92).

“Spanglish” has become so popular and important for Spanish speakers that it is necessary to find if it affects English and Spanish and, if it does, it is essential to distinguish if those effects are positive or negative.

Many professional Latino writers, however, emphasize that they use Spanish words in English texts because some Spanish words have resonance that they don't have in English, not because they couldn't figure out how to translate them (Torres 81). Furthermore, professional Latino writers like including Spanish words in their English texts because it reminds the reader that he/she is reading thoughts from Spanish-speaking people (Torres 85). However, this idea from a professional point of view cannot be generalized to all Spanish-speakers who code-switch because not everyone uses code-switching for the same purposes or is on the same academic level.

Code-switching has become an important subject in academics because, as it has been shown in previous research, educators and speech-language pathologists have viewed code-switching as a symptom of language deficiency or they consider people who code-switch to be lazy and ignorant (Brice and Anderson 17; Torres 92). Furthermore, English learning programs

such as ELL treat students' first language as an obstacle to learning English (Cenoz and Gorter 360; Urso Spina 100). This might be because of findings suggesting that code-switching may lead to violation of grammatical rules in both Spanish and English (Stavans and Swisher 206-214). However, it has also been recognized by many researchers that code-switching requires competence and grammatical proficiency in more than one language and that it's an indicator of verbal fluency and literacy skills (Becker 101; Gutierrez-Clellen, et al 92-93; Losey 215; Van Der Meij, et al 45).

Despite what educators and other professionals may consider code-switching's effects, recent research has indicated that students' code-switching can be an additional resource to achieve linguistic goals and can be used as a bridge between the two languages (Becker 102; Brice and Anderson 19; Cenoz and Gorter 366; Reyes 97; Van Del Meij, et al 45). These indications, however, are limited and do not clarify the extent to which code-switching can influence and benefit the English learning and writing processes. It was recently shown in the studies done by Becker and Kaushanskaya that Spanish speakers can use Spanish words when learning English to recognize the English word as a cognate (Becker 103; Kaushanskaya 709).

Code-switching between English and Spanish has become so common among Spanish speakers that it's usually referred to as “Spanglish” and it's recognized by everyone, including non-Spanish speakers. It was shown in the study conducted by Torres that “Spanglish” has become a “third language” to many Spanish bilinguals because it uses code-switching so frequently (75).

Researchers have not considered code-switching as a third language that Spanish speakers have created from the constant mixing of Spanish and English. Instead, they have looked at it as a separate tool that Spanish speakers can use to their advantage when communicating and learning English words. “Spanglish” has become so popular and important for Spanish speakers that it is necessary to find if it affects English and Spanish and, if it does, it is essential to distinguish if those effects are positive or negative.

Even though a great amount of research has been done about code-switching and its effects on English learning and writing processes, researchers have not studied the effects of “Spanglish” as a third language in these processes. They have only studied how the first language (Spanish) and

code-switching helps facilitate English word learning. Learning English words, however, does not mean obtaining full acquisition, fluency, and domination of grammatical rules of the complex English language. Even though bilingual students can use their first language to learn English and can use Spanish words to understand connotation in English texts, it is important to find if the privilege of speaking two languages simultaneously can prevent students from acquiring full fluency in English. In addition, it's necessary to find if "Spanglish" as this constant mixing of languages can have serious consequences on students' first language (Spanish) and if it can diminish Spanish fluency and competence. The present study tries to further investigate the effects of the use of "Spanglish" on both Spanish and English languages.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study are three Spanish bilinguals. Their names have been changed in this paper for privacy purposes. They are fluent in both Spanish and English and are from three different Spanish-speaking countries: Cuba, Bolivia and Mexico. Jessica and Shannon are freshmen college students at Edison State College and the University of Florida. Carla is currently a senior attending Golden Gate High school. Jessica and Carla came to the United States when they were four and seven years old while Shannon came when she was only two. Spanish is the native language of both Jessica and Carla and they spoke only Spanish until they learned English at the age of nine. Shannon learned both Spanish and English as a child, and she was selected for this study to serve as a point of comparison to the other two participants. Shannon considers herself to be more fluent in English than in Spanish and Jessica and Carla consider themselves to be equally fluent in both languages. All three participants said they use "Spanglish" with other Spanish-speakers, especially with family and friends. All three participants excel in academics and graduated or will graduate high school with a GPA above 4.0.

Procedures

The data obtained and used in this research was collected from three one-hour interviews, observations taken at the interviews, and a written question that was textually analyzed. The interview sections were recorded for several purposes and the main points of their interviews were transcribed. Each participant was interviewed at her house on different days. The interviews were held in a quiet place and there were not any distractions. Two of the participants, Jessica and Carla, said in the interview that their thoughts emerge in Spanish and were therefore asked to write their answers to one of my interview questions on a piece of paper. Their answers were later analyzed and were accompanied with a series of questions about their writing process and experiences in writing their answer. Because Shannon said her thoughts and ideas emerge only in English, she was not asked to write her answer to the question. Prior to the interviews, I made a list of a series of observations that I would look for during the interviews (see Appendix). This list was used in the interview as a reference and was used to point out each observation during each of the interviews.

Results and Discussion

Findings from this study reinforce theories from previous research indicating that Spanish facilitates English word learning. English learners with Spanish as their first language can use numerous Spanish words that are identical or similar to English words to facilitate the spelling of English words. Furthermore, they can use Spanish words to interpret the meaning or connotation of a certain word in a sentence. However, when a Spanish speaker goes beyond learning words and reaches a higher English level and is able to form sentences and phrases, a mixture of English and Spanish is almost inevitable when speaking with another Spanish bilingual because it facilitates

communication. It is in this case when “Spanglish” becomes a third language for so many bilinguals and other effects and consequences begin to show.

The findings that emerged from the study indicate that “Spanglish” is in fact affecting bilinguals’ first and second languages. This study shows that the continuous combination of both languages can prevent English learners from obtaining full fluency of the language and that it makes the English learning process more difficult. Fluency in Spanish is also affected by the constant use of “Spanglish” because it leads to formation of words. Additionally, “Spanglish” frequently breaks several grammatical rules in both languages that lead to speaking and writing errors in both Spanish and English. Furthermore, “Spanglish” makes communication with Spanish monolinguals and English monolinguals more challenging because individuals who constantly code-switch are frequently forced to use words and phrases from the non-dominant language in the conversation.

First of all, “Spanglish” tends to break many grammatical rules of Spanish and English and even more frequently when the process of translation between languages takes place. All three participants said translating from Spanish to English and vice versa is one of the most difficult tasks as a bilingual. “Spanglish,” as this combination of Spanish and English words, phrases, and sentences, leads to the creation of nonexistent words that are a combination of the word in both Spanish and English. During her interview, Shannon shared a story about how she couldn’t find the Spanish word for “gauze” when she was telling her grandmother, a monolingual Spanish speaker, about her day volunteering at a veterinarian hospital. Instead of looking up the translated word in a dictionary or on the Internet, she combined grammatical rules from both languages and substituted the letter “e” at the end of the word for an “a” creating the word “gauza.” She assumed this was the right word in Spanish because this method can be used for translating other words, but her method was not successful in this case. Shannon had to give her grandmother a detailed description of the object because her grandmother didn’t understand what she was referring to. It was then when Shannon learned that the correct translation for “gauze” is the word “gaza.” Carla gave another example when she explained how she has said “transladar” instead of “traducción” to translate the word “translation.” Both cases show how students tend to create words using similarities in the wording of both languages. Because such similarities may work in some cases with certain words, students use these “techniques” to translate unfamiliar and sporadically used words.

Similarly, “Spanglish” leads to the creation of words such as verbs and nouns that come directly from one language. Such words have become “Spanglish vocabulary words” because everyone who uses “Spanglish” or speaks Spanish can commonly understand their meaning or can find their meaning by connotation. For example, Jessica said during her interview that she uses words such as “printiar” and “textiar” instead of “imprimir” and “mandar mensajes” because the English words are “to print” and “texting.” Although such words are commonly understood among “Spanglish” users and Spanish speakers, they are not authentic words. This bilingual privilege of speaking two languages and being able to combine them to communicate with other bilinguals is clearly causing bilinguals to misuse both languages, especially Spanish.

“Spanglish” is also making communication with English and Spanish monolinguals more difficult and challenging. “Spanglish” serves as a bridge between the two languages since English is the main language used in different areas of education, employment and entertainment and Spanish is the main language among Hispanic activities. All three participants said in their interviews that when speaking with a monolingual of either language, they were forced to use words and phrases from the language that was not being spoken at the time. This difficulty arises from the common use

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of “Spanglish” because when speaking with other bilinguals, words of either language are understood. When speaking with a Spanish monolingual, all three participants seemed to have difficulties. In the case of Shannon, this might be caused by a lack of Spanish fluency, but that is not the case for Carla and Jessica since they were fluent in Spanish before being fluent in English. Jessica said that she finds herself “wanting to say things in English or making up ‘Spanglish’ words hoping they would understand what [she] means.” Carla affirmed she is forced to say a word in English because she can’t find the meaning of that word in Spanish.

Communicating with a Spanish monolingual becomes even more challenging when the topic is about something learned only in English. Carla was completely speechless when she tried to explain to her mother in Spanish about the cellular respiration cycle. She couldn’t even formulate the first sentence. Just like it’s difficult for them to fully communicate with a Spanish monolingual without saying any English words, it is difficult to communicate with an English monolingual without using any Spanish words. This is not the case for Shannon since English is her dominant language, but it certainly is the case for Jessica and Carla. “Spanglish” makes communication with monolinguals more complicated because the constant combination of languages makes “Spanglish” users want to code-switch even when the audience isn’t bilingual.

Lastly, the creation of nonexistent words and the difficulty in speaking to a Spanish or English monolingual without code-switching are both strong indicators that “Spanglish” is affecting fluency of both Spanish and English. Since “Spanglish” is this third language with a constant mixture of languages that most Spanish bilinguals are using to communicate among themselves, it makes “Spanglish” users comfortable with switching whenever is necessary. This capacity can be harmful because bilinguals are less likely to express their ideas in only one language and it can therefore diminish Spanish and English fluency. During Jessica’s interview I detected a pattern that demonstrates the problems arising in fluencies from “Spanglish.” I noticed that occasionally, after saying a phrase, thought or sentence in one language, Jessica would switch to the other language and repeat the same thought. This language switching strategy allowed her to express her thoughts and ideas more clearly, which shows how “Spanglish” users rely on the second language to better communicate with others. Furthermore, when bilinguals create their “Spanglish” words, they do not know those are nonexistent words until someone else points it out. This problem is mostly perceived in Spanish conversations because most “Spanglish” words are derived from English words and used in Spanish conversations, such as “textiar” and “printiar”. All three participants said that they don’t notice when they make pronunciation errors or say words incorrectly and that other people, such as their parents and other family members, correct them most of the time. This inability to identify nonexistent words is also a clear indication that fluency of languages, mainly Spanish, is being affected. Finally, the constant language switching that is perceived in “Spanglish” also prevents full fluency acquisition in English because “Spanglish” users are used to relying on Spanish whenever they have trouble expressing their ideas in English only. All these factors demonstrate that “Spanglish” is affecting bilinguals’ fluency in both L1 and L2.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that “Spanglish” is affecting bilinguals’ first and second languages in several ways. First, “Spanglish” is causing speakers to break grammatical rules of both languages and to create nonexistent words that emerge from the combination of Spanish and English words. Second, this constant combination of languages is making communication with monolinguals of either language more difficult because “Spanglish” users often find themselves forced to switch out of the dominant language to express their ideas and thoughts. Lastly, “Spanglish” is therefore affecting both Spanish and English fluency. These findings might explain why educators and professionals treat bilinguals’ first language as an obstacle in English learning programs and see it as a language deficiency (Genoz and Gorter 360; Urso Spina 100). Even though

it was also proven in this study that Spanish facilitates English word learning, these other factors found in the study show how the combination of English and Spanish can cause fluency to deteriorate in both languages in the long term. These effects from "Spanglish" use might be what educators and professionals are concerned about.

However, it is important to also consider that Spanish fluency might be affected by the constant use of English and the lack of use of Spanish. Even though there is not an enforced language in America, most programs and services related to education, entertainment, and employment are provided in English. This has caused most young bilinguals raised in America to speak more English than Spanish for the most part. It is also important to note that the frequency of "Spanglish" use and the effects it has on Spanish and English are related to environmental circumstances, such as the group of people an individual surrounds himself or herself with and the role Hispanic culture plays in his or her life. For instance, if a bilingual individual's friends are mostly Hispanic and are influenced by a strong Hispanic culture, it is more likely that they would engage in conversation in "Spanglish" because Spanish would be the dominant language in most situations. On the other hand, if a bilingual individual is with native English speakers (who don't speak Spanish) most of the time, there wouldn't be room for engaging in "Spanglish" conversations since they wouldn't be able to understand this combination of languages. For these same reasons, those with strong Hispanic influence using "Spanglish" more frequently are more likely to see effects in both Spanish and English, like those found in this research. Those with an Americanized lifestyle engaging in "Spanglish" only occasionally will more likely see effects in Spanish only.

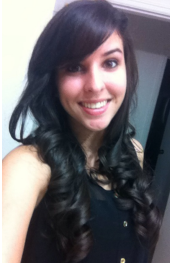
Further research can be done about this topic in different areas to (1) investigate how "Spanglish" plays a role in both the Spanish and English writing process, (2) find other factors like environment and language use that can be the cause of diminishing fluency in both languages, and (3) study how English and its frequent use affects Spanish fluency.

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APPENDIX: OBSERVATION PLAN

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Observation Plans

- 1) For each question identify if participant spoke in English, Spanish or a combination of both.
- 2) How often did the participant code-switch? (Write down every time he/she switch from one language to another one)
- 3) Observe if participant had trouble expressing her ideas and had to switch to another language to complete the idea.
- 4) Look for words the participant used in a different language from the one used in the whole phrase or idea. (Did she use that word in the other language because she didn't know the word in the language she was currently speaking?)
- 5) Look for words that they translated right after saying it in the language they were speaking. (Did she find the word in one language to be more explicit for her idea than the word in the other language?)
- 6) For a couple questions, tell participant that these questions are to be discussed in English only, and observe if they have trouble saying their ideas. (Do they try to say the same thing in different ways to make themselves more clear? Do they have trouble finding a word or formulating an idea?)