Language Preference and Perceived Performance of Mexican-American Students Registered in Developmental Reading Courses[1]

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Abstract

Research has proven that language performance among Mexican-American college students builds a bilingual-learner identity which encompasses cognitive and cultural benefits (Keener, Gregory, Mahera, & Al-Azami, 2008). To further investigate this phenomenon, a quantitative research method was used to determine the numeric description of trends and opinions of Mexican-American students registered to take developmental reading during the academic year 2010-2011. Specifically, the purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the language preference and perceived performance of Mexican-American students registered to take developmental reading courses at a large public university in Texas. To accomplish this objective, a 25-question survey was administered to the students. Several themes related to the use primary language at home, language preference when conversing with parents, siblings, and friends were explored. Findings suggested that the majority of the participants preferred to speak English across all themes even though their parents' first language is Spanish. Recommendations for teachers of Mexican-American Students are also discussed.

Resumen

Las investigaciones han demostrado que el producción del lenguaje entre los estudiantes mexicano-americanos construye una identidad aprendizaje-bilingüe que conlleva beneficios cognitivos y culturales (Keener, Gregory, Mahera, & Al-Azami, 2008). Para investigar más sobre este fenómeno, un método de investigación cuantitativo se utilizó que determina una descripción numérica sobre las tendencias y opiniones de los estudiantes mexicano-americanos inscritos para cursar un curso básico de lectura durante el año académico 2010-2011. En particular, el propósito de este estudio cuantitativo fue el de determinar la preferencia del idioma y percibir el desempeño de los estudiantes mexicano-americanos inscritos para cursar materias de lectura a nivel básico en una universidad pública grande en Texas. Para lograr esta meta, un cuestionario de 25 preguntas se les presentó a los estudiantes. Algunos temas estaban relacionados con el idioma primario utilizado en casa, el idioma preferido al conversar con sus padres, hermanos y amigos. Los resultados indican que la mayoría de los participantes prefieren hablar inglés en todos los temas aún cuando el idioma primario de los padres sea el español. Se discuten asimismo algunas recomendaciones para los profesores de estudiantes mexicano-americanos.

Introduction

Developmental education can be seen as a catalyst in that "it forces many low-income, racial/ethnic minorities and first-generation students into community colleges where their chances of attaining a four-year degree are limited" (Russell,

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2008: 2). Due to the fact that the odds of receiving a postsecondary degree are limited for Mexican Americans, developmental education can ease the pressure (Boylan, Sutton, & Anderson, 2003). Collins (2008) argued that low-income and minority students have a lower possibility of obtaining a higher education degree because of structural hindrances.

Some of these obstacles, pertaining to Mexican-American students, are related to income, age, standardized testing, etc. (Wilmer, 2008). By looking at the Mexican-American student holistically, it can be seen that they might have trouble adjusting to an academic setting (Boylan, 2009). If Mexican-American students do not feel that they are part of their environment, the final outcome will not be favorable towards their attainment of a postsecondary degree (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002).

A claim has been made that Mexican-American college students, from rural and low socioeconomic status families, need to have faculty and other professionals that will guide them during their educational career (Smittle, 2003). To ensure their academic success, Mexican-American students also need to understand that there are other students that share the same economical and education background (Boylan, 2009). What some scholars (Burgess & Caverly, 2009; Paul & Elder, 2008; Stables, 2006) have not realized is that by allowing the student to use their native language in the classroom the student will be able to feel comfortable in their environment and therefore remain at a university.

In fact, preparing Mexican-American college students to succeed at U.S. universities has been a challenge. Recent research (Boyer, Butner, & Smith,2007; Boylan, 2009; Smittle, 2003; Wilmer, 2008) has demonstrated an increasing trend of underprepared college students; it is specified that an estimate of 2,000,000 students register to take developmental courses per year. The layer of Mexican-American college student under preparation might be related to financial conditions, employment, age, previous academic performance, family backgrounds, standardized test scores, and emotional health (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007; Boylan, 2009; Smittle, 2003; Wilmer, 2008). The aforementioned research, however, does not include language barrier as a determinant factor for Mexican-American college students' under preparedness. Based on the native speaker fallacy Phillipson (1992) and Boylan (2009) suggested the mastery of English as a native speaker as a factor of academic success for non-native English speaking college students.

In contrast to Boylan's (2009) results, Tinto's (2007) research findings highlighted that family background, individual attitudes, and secondary preparation combined with students' goals, commitment, and the institutional structure can be seen as determinant factors of the likelihood of success of underprepared students.

Given the fact that challenges have been partially addressed by some of the scholars discussed above, in regards to Mexican-American college students from rural and low socioeconomic communities, there exists an urgent need for more research aimed at exploring different strategies of scaffolding the students through their initial college years. One alternative consists of offering developmental reading courses dedicated at utilizing "authentic, engaging materials with which to implement skills and at the same time provide compatible reading selections for

student of varying reading experiences" (Fernandez, 2000: 742), since most of them presumably experience language preference when interacting with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, the central objective of this project consists of examining language preferences and performance, of Mexican-American College students enrolled in Developmental Reading courses at a minority-serving institution, when interacting with diverse people by testing the following working hypotheses:

a. Given their bilingualism, Mexican-American college students, enrolled in Developmental Reading courses, are more likely to use their native language when interacting with parents at home and within their respective communities; and

b. Given the imperative need to being highly competitive in a predominantly English speaking society, Mexican-American college students are eager to be perceived as demonstrating native-like fluency and proficiency in the mainstream language of English.

At this stage the term Mexican-American can be defined as a "student [who is] not only influenced by events related to their daily experience in the United States, but also by experiences that link them with Mexico" (Brittain, 2005: 1). Developmental reading is designed to enhance comprehension skills and vocabulary development through the use of content area reading strategies (Morris & Price, 2008; Prentice, 2009).

Literature Review

According to Stein (2005), Mexican-American college students registered to take developmental courses are underprepared. Some causes for the students' under-preparedness include the lack of preparation at the high school level, low self-esteem, and lack of competitiveness for careers (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007; Boylan, 2009). Quintessentially, the negative hindrances associated with Mexican-American students registered to take developmental reading courses overshadow the benefits. Conversely, being a bilingual-Mexican-American student has its cognitive and cultural advantages (Steiner & Hayes, 2008).

To counteract underpreparedness, researchers such as Keener, Gregory, Ruby, and Al-Azami (2008) have proven that language performance among Mexican-American college students builds a bilingual-learner identity which encompasses cognitive and cultural benefits. Nevertheless, Boylan (2009) argued that "human beings develop as a result of some interaction between themselves and their environment" (p. 15) and that due to the fact that these prior experiences are positive, students are guided to use more than one language.

Studies such as Burgess (2009), Stein (2005) and Wilmer (2008) have demonstrated that the lack of preparation at the high school level has diminished the students' ability to perform well in college-level courses. Additional researchers (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002; Boylan, 2009) have shown that one of the major causes of under-preparedness of Mexican-Americans students registered to take developmental reading is that the number of traditional and non-traditional students has increased. The above results echo Boyer, Butner & Smith's (2007) findings when they suggest that the "lack of preparation at the high

school level and returning adult status [is the cause of] re-learning" (p. 606) at the university level suggested that trained faculty, who can provide the student with a variety of methodologies to improve this underpreparedness of students, are needed.

The use of reading can neutralize under-preparedness by increasing vocabulary comprehension and develop a better understanding of what they are reading and their cultural situation (Steiner & Hayes, 2008). Generally, the more students understand what they are reading in their minority language and the more vocabulary they use, the higher the possibility of developing the skills necessary to communicate with others in English (Burgess, 2009). Abundant reading in the classroom, together with minority students' native language, is more likely to increase Mexican American students' critical thinking in English (Leslie, 2001).

Essentially, the objective of developmental education in South Texas consists of molding Mexican-American students to become independent learners (Burgess, 2009; Smittle, 2003). Cukras (2006) believes that Mexican-American college students will become independent learners if they develop metacognitive and motivational abilities. In other words, students are to be cognizant of how they are thinking or what type of skills they possess to understand what they are reading. Motivationally speaking, students need to be determined to learn. This research conclusion was previously suggested by Smittle (2003) who also believed that students need to be involved in meaningful learning in order to succeed in college.

Another major cause for the underpreparedness of Mexican-American college students can be associated with the lack of self-esteem. Some students do not believe that they are able to compete along with English-only students as they are not eligible for financial aid or they are not sure of how the debt will be repaid (Boylan, 2009). Cognitively speaking, Steiner and Hayes (2008) agree with Keener et al. (2008) in that the process of bilingual thinking is beneficial to improving self-esteem. These researchers also mentioned that the skills that were learned in one language could easily be transferred to another. By building on prior knowledge, the Mexican-American student is able to progressively enhance their reading skills in English with the use of their native language concomitant with reading strategies. Irrefutably, Stein (2005) as well as Steiner and Hayes (2008) believe that bilingualism along with multiculturalism aids the reading process.

Steiner and Hayes (2008) mentioned that performing well in reading can be considered a powerful tool. It offers language exposure and promotes positive brain development. They have also found that being bilingual improves memory and eases the pressure of learning a second or third language. By offering the student, for example, a reading passage that is at a lower rate than what s/he is reading in Spanish, the student should be able to understand what is being said and in turn boost self-esteem (Fernandez, 2000). Relating Mexican-American students' learning to real-life experiences will help to create a feeling of belonging within the classroom (Paul & Elder, 2008; Smittle, 2003).

Finally, the last obstacle includes the fact that Mexican-American students' perceptions, in regards to possessing the skills necessary to obtain a good career, is not eminent. Stein (2005) believes that mastery of English is to be achieved if students want to be productive in the economy and accepted by society. Due to this

fact, students are not comfortable in their environment. Their self-esteem clouds their abilities to compete in today's society and in turn they do not succeed (Wilmer, 2008). Steiner and Hayes (2008) think that Mexican-American students are able to compete for competitive careers due to the fact that bilinguals are apt to understand a variety of cultures. By emphasizing multiculturalism in the developmental classroom, Mexican-American students will be prepared to compete in a multicultural job market (Stein, 2005). It is important to note that without the proper faculty and assistance, this problem will only increase over time (Boylan, 2009).

Methodology

Language performance among Mexican-American college students builds a bilingual-learner identity which encompasses cognitive and cultural benefits (Keener, Gregory, Mahera, & Al-Azami, 2008). Language preference can be characterized as the language that is commonly used by an individual within a linguistic community (Caldas, 2006). Perceived language performance, also defined by Caldas (2006), is the student's linguistic ability in comparison to English-natives.

To further investigate these phenomena, a quantitative research method was used to determine the numeric description of trends and opinions of a population (Creswell, 2003). The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the language preference and perceived language performance of Mexican-American students registered for READ 0300 at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, a predominantly Hispanic-serving institution, during the academic year 2010-2011. The overall research methodology used for this project was to elaborate through the use of the following: 1) sampling procedure; 2) instrumentation/measurement; 3) data collection; and 4) data analysis.

Sampling Procedure

The convenience sampling was used to collect data from Mexican-American participants enrolled in two sections of READ 0300—developmental reading. Consequently, the sample size was comprised of 24 Mexican-American participants: 14 males and 10 females. Stratification, or specific characteristics of individuals, was necessary for this single-staged sampling. This specific sampling is a procedure in which the researcher had access to names in the population and was able to sample the people (or other elements) directly (Creswell, 2003). The following sampling criteria were used to select the developmental-bilingual students: placement in developmental courses, Mexican-American racial/ethnic background, and an exposure to a second language (English). In other words, of the 42 students enrolled in READ 0300, only 24 students met the basic participation criteria.

Instrumentation/Measurement

Given the nature of this topic of inquiry, the survey strategy was suitable to test the working hypotheses. The measurement instrument used for this project was adapted and modified based upon the work of Caldas (2006). The intent of the Language Preference Survey (LPS) was used to identify the language preference and performance of developmental reading students. This type of measurement was deemed significant to the study because of the rapid turnaround in the data collection. Simply put, the participants' responses to the surveys would be returned

in a reasonable amount of time. The assessment was mail administered (or verbal language presented visually), which was given to the students at the beginning of the fall semester of 2010 (Jenkins & Dillman, 1995). The LPS was comprised of 25 items, which took the students ten minutes to complete. Overall, it included five major sections related to: class information, demographics, parental demographics, language preference, and language performance. Language performance was analyzed with the use of a Likert Scale format. The survey scale was: Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Neutral=3, Disagree=2, and Strongly Disagree=1. The responses were cross-sectionalized, or collected at one point in time (Creswell, 2003).

The questions were adapted from a variety of surveys, such as: the Home Language Questionnaire (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2007), the Home Language Survey (Region 10: Education Service Center, 2010), Caldas' (2006) French Proficiency Survey, and the Student Support Services Application (Student Support Services, 2010). The majority of these could be easily found on the internet. First, the Home Language Questionnaire, which is filled out by the parents at elementary schools, was administered by schools to have them talk about their child's language preference at home. It is comprised of nine questions and is designed to investigate: 1) the language that the parents speak to their children; 2) the language in which the students were taught in their previous school experiences; and 3) the language that the child is currently speaking and listening to.

The other survey that was included in the LPS was the Home Language Survey (HLS), which is also filled by the parents at the beginning of their elementary schooling. This specific survey deals with schooling in other countries, if any.

Caldas' (2006) conducted research, using his own son and daughters as participants. For the duration of his family's early years, Caldas documented the language usage while the children spent time with their family member in Quebec and in Louisiana. The French Proficiency Survey asked the siblings to stipulate their language proficiency in comparison to their French counterparts. The survey consisted of ten questions, all of which dealt with the teacher and students' perception of language usage.

Finally, Texas A&M University-Kingsville is home to Special Programs. This program requires their participants to complete an application, which will determine the student's eligibility. One program in particular, Student Support Services, asked their potential students to answer questions about their parents' language and educational background. Given that Tinto (2007) mentioned the importance of family background in comparison to the success of students in post-secondary education, the information was placed in the LPS.

Due to the fact that the LPS was adapted from a variety of reliable sources, it can be implied that the responses are reliable because they are objective. Researchers estimate that the internal consistency of the LPS can be determined if the categories prove one another (Creswell, 2003). The survey was categorized to ultimately determine the preference and performance of a language.

Validity can be assumed by the straightforwardness of the responses. Explicitly, the replies, in regards to performance, were scored on a Likert Scale, with values ranging from 1= Not at All to 5=Very Well.

Data Collection

Permission for the administration of the 25-questions survey was asked from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After approval was granted, a meeting was established with the Dean of University College. Following this, the pertinent instructors for READ 0300-003 and READ 0300-004 were contacted. Immediately after the consent of the instructors, the survey was administered personally by the primary researcher. The students were briefed on the objective of the research and their voluntary consensus. The informed consent, once signed by the student, was returned to the primary researcher separately, at the beginning of data collection process.

Data Analysis

The use of a Statistical Package for Social Sciences, (SPSS, an IBM company) was used to filter and crosstab the responses to organize the data and acquire the desired results. Specifically, SPSS was used to compare language preference to language performance. Some descriptive statistics, such as mean, standard deviation, and range of scores (Creswell, 2003), were used to categorize the data.

The graph below represents the ethnicity/race of the population used for this project. Findings presented in the subsequent sections were organized to include only the responses of Mexican-Americans.
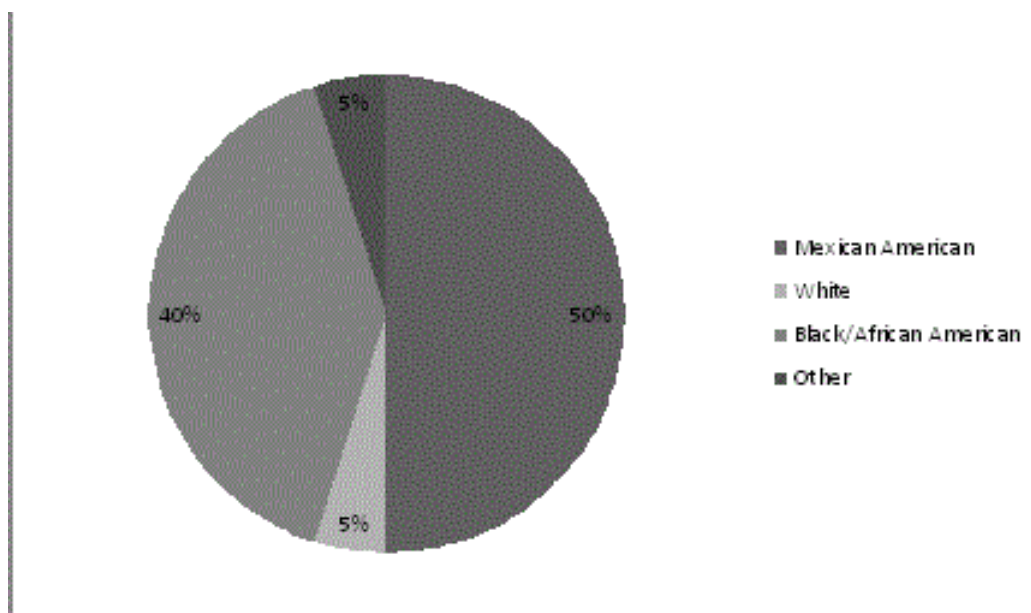
Graph 1: Demographic data of research population and sample

The survey data was separated into two sections. The first section dealt with language preference at home and the second dealt with language performance within a specific communicative skill—reading—in English and Spanish. Contrastive

analysis was derived from the two aforementioned sections to cross tabulate the responses in order to test the two working hypotheses of this research.

The results categorized/compared language preference and performance. Exclusively, the results will describe the language preference of students' reading in English and Spanish in regards to their native language, language preference at home, and language usage when communicating with their parents and siblings.

Findings

The purpose of this quantitative study was to demonstrate language preference and perceived language performance of Mexican-American students registered at Texas A&M University-Kingsville for Developmental Reading courses during the academic year 2010-2011.

Participants were asked a series of questions, which dealt with language preference at home and perceived performance in English and Spanish, specifically, concerning with reading performance in relation to specific themes. One concentrated on the primary language at home. The remaining themes were to determine language preference when conversing with parents, siblings, and friends.

First, participants were asked to specify what their native language at home was. The objective responses available to the students in the LPS were English and Spanish. Findings showed that the majority of the Mexican-American participants responded that their primary language was English. Moreover, the LPS inquired about language preference at home. When comparing the responses obtained by Mexican-American students, the majority responded that they prefer to speak English at home. Subsequently, the LPS questioned the participants about language preference when communicating with parents. The results proved that the participants prefer to speak English with their parents. Finally, the last variance compared the communication between siblings and reading in English and Spanish. The concentration of participants is predominantly comprised of Mexican-American students communicating with their siblings in English. All in all, Mexican-American students prefer to speak English at home and when conversing with parents, siblings, and friends.
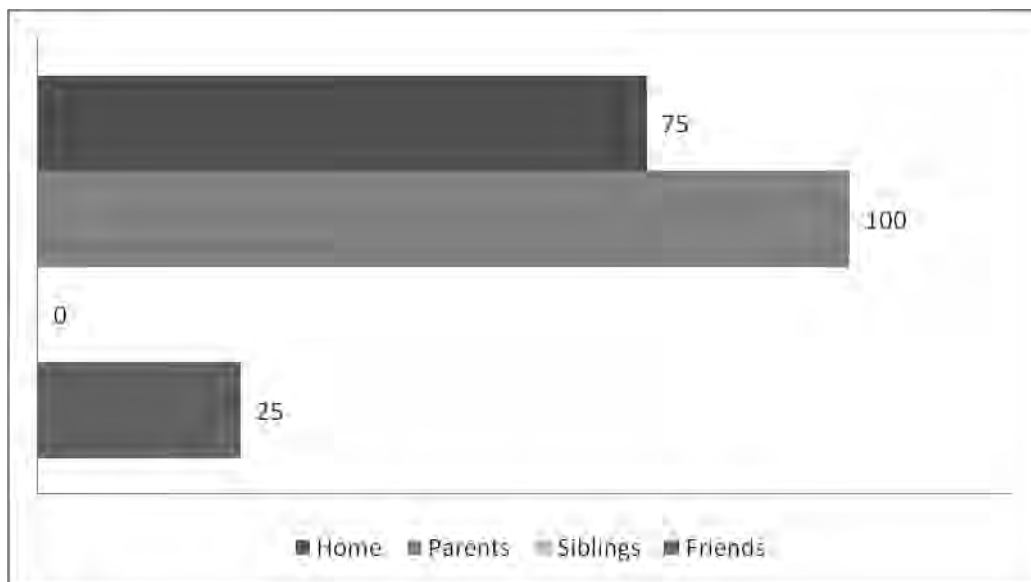
Findings show that the majority of the Mexican-American participants responded that their primary language was English. Graph 2, presented below, is the illustration of the students that responded to speaking English as their first language. Of the 83% of the participants that stated that their first language at home was English, 70% prefer to speak English when at home; 85% prefer to speak English with their parents; 95% prefer to speak English with their siblings; and 100% prefer to speak in English with their friends.
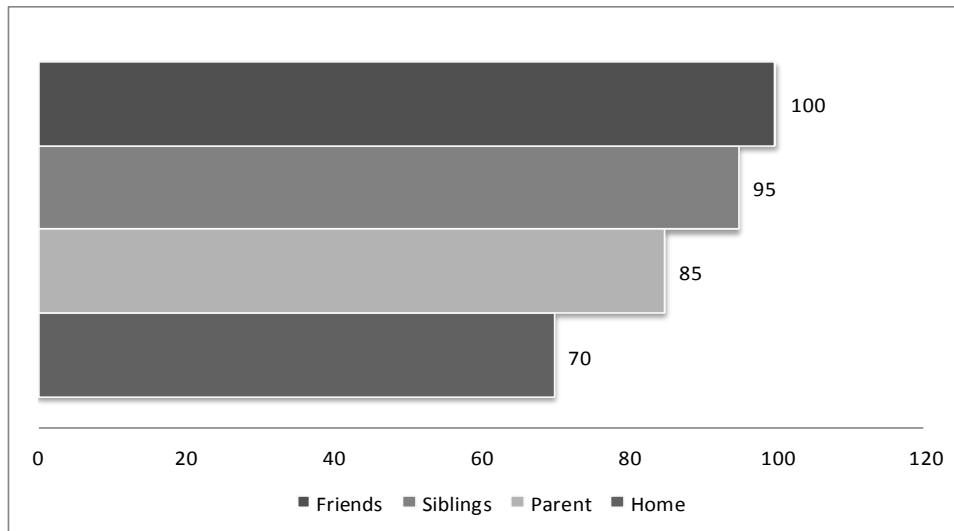
Graph 2: Perceived performance vs. reading in English

The results obtained from the remaining 17% of Mexican-American students that responded to having spoken Spanish as their first language at home are presented in Graph 3. The responses are as follows: 75% responded that they prefer to speak Spanish at home; 100% responded that they prefer to speak Spanish with their parents; and 25% of the students prefer to speak Spanish with their friends. In regards to their siblings, all of the participants that responded to Spanish as being their first language prefer to speak English amongst themselves.

Graph 3: Perceived performance vs. reading in Spanish

In regards to reading, participants were asked to specify what their native language at home was. The objective responses available to the students in the LPS were English and Spanish. Findings, shown in Table 1, demonstrate that the majority of the Mexican-American participants responded that their primary language was English. Specifically, of the 83.33% students that responded to English all believe to be able to read English very

well. Of the remaining students that responded to speaking Spanish as their first language, 4.17% of the students responded to being able to read English well while the other 12.50% of Mexican-American students responded to being able to read English very well.

	English reading	Spanish reading
Not at all	0%	0%
Somewhat	0%	0%
Neutral	0%	0%
Well	0%	4.17%
Very well	83.33%	12.50%
Total	83.33%	17.00%

Table 1: Language performance vs. reading N=24

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Recommendations for Teachers of Mexican-American Students

One of the major problems, in regards to developmental education faculty is that the majority of them are part-time or adjunct instructors with very little training (Leslie, 2001). Faculty need to realize that the amount of work that is to be dedicated to the courses they teach depends on the "the total amount of time per week faculty members devotes to teaching, conducting research, administration, and public service" (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007: 607).

Theoretically speaking, the more a faculty is dedicated to their work, the higher their students' success rate will be. Boyer, Butner, & Smith (2007) agree with this notion and state that the academic success [of Mexican-American students] is the presence of a well-trained, dedicated, and respected faculty (p. 607). Stein (2005) believes that institutional training and development of faculty is essential to the success of the Mexican-American student. After the review of the literature, and data analysis, I will provide the following recommendations for faculty of Mexican-American students:

1. They are recommended to consider their students holistically (Wilmer, 2008). In order for this mentality to surface, faculty are to attend professional development workshops and seminars which will help them modify their lessons to tailor Mexican-American student. Smittle (2003) believes that faculty should be current with professional journals, take courses, and attend professional worskshops and conferences, as well as write professional articles.

2. Due to the fact that the demographic of remedial courses calls for a language-specific instruction (i.e., for the curriculum to be taught in their native language), faculty need to have pedagogical training that supports this practice (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007). A cooperative learning environment, one in which "students and faculty actively [work] together in a non-competitive environment to achieve shared learning goals" (Wilmer, 2008: 16), needs to be implemented with Mexican-American students. Smittle (2003) believes that it is important for developmental educators to hold students to high standards of excellence and expectations. Stein (2005) conceptualizes that due to the lack of multicultural knowledge on the part of

the faculty, Mexican-American students' needs are ignored. For this reason, faculty members need to receive the proper training; one that will "allow them to celebrate, endorse, respect, and internalize that which is specific to Mexican-American students" (Stein, 2005: 85).

3. Faculty are to understand that every student is different. They have different "learning styles, personalities, characteristics, and aptitudes" (Wilmer, 2008). With this in mind, faculty need to look at Mexican-American student holistically, rather than atomistically concentrating on the material. As an example, faculty should be able to "provide technological scaffolding to accommodate time and distance demands of many developmental education students as well as provide sound instruction through a cognitive, social, and teaching presence" (Burgess & Caverly, 2009: 42). In other words, the method of delivery by faculty plays a significant role in the success of students (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007). Smittle (2003) mentions that Mexican-American students are to be taught in a variety of ways. By incorporating the use of Blackboard (WebCT), for example, in developmental reading courses, the students are able to use critical thinking skills and ultimately be more active in the classroom (Burgess & Caverly, 2009).

4. Also, subject matter needs to be presented in a variety of ways. For example, some students might need instructions to be structured, with all requirements and standards clearly stated. Other students might need more time on specific tasks. Faculty might require students to turn in rough drafts before their final product. The overall objective should be for student to have mastery skills that will allow them to perform well when placed in college-level courses (Stein, 2005). Frequent testing can be a determinant of such mastery. Faculty should remember that information is to be presented in small segments. Do not overwhelm them with specifics until they are needed. Above all, students should be able to pace themselves. By doing so, their motivation will increase (Smittle, 2003).

5. Empathy on the part of the faculty in regards to the needs of Mexican-American students is essential. Students are to be shown that they are important and that someone cares about their academic success (Wilmer, 2008). Overall, faculty need to be encouraged as educators "to continue examining this area as a critical component of developmental instruction" (Willingham & Price, 2009: 91). Specifically, Mexican-American students have trouble taking command of what they are learning, or integrating, applying, and appropriately questioning what they are learning (Bailey, 2009). For this reason, the objective of the information presented in the classroom should be to create independent learners. Smittle (2003) mentions that Mexican-American students benefit from frequent feedback.

6. Underprepared Mexican-American students are resistant to financial and moral support, they seem to come from low-income families, and they are ill prepared for college-level courses (Stein, 2005; Wilmer, 2008;). In order to eliminate this, student-faculty contact, promoting cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, giving prompt feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating higher expectations, and respecting diverse talents is essential (Smittle, 2003).

The overall objective of developmental reading is to create independent learner of Mexican-American students. The growing number of students requiring remediation necessitates faculty who are committed to students and who have various pedagogical approaches (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007). Students are motivated to contextualize what they are learning to their everyday life to ultimately create a safe environment. Full-time faculty continually need to grow professionally in order to understand their students and the material that is to be presented to them. Mexican-American students need to have a wide repertoire of pedagogy (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007). They should keep in mind that motivation can be achieved with specificity in regards to the instructions being given to the students and by presenting the material in a variety of ways. By presenting information in a variety of ways, students will achieve greater social and academic integration and will be more likely to reach their goal of graduation (Wilmer, 2008).

Limitations

One of the limitation is the low number of participants cannot yield to generalization of findings to the large population. Another limitation is the quantitative research design is not able to effectively explore some issues related to language preference among participants such as consideration of English as their first language. A mixed methods research design seems to be more suitable for this latter topic. Understanding the language preference and performance of Mexican-American students, registered to take developmental reading, is pertinent to determining language-specific instruction, however, while the present study analyzes language preference and performance, more information was needed for the results to be positively influential.

Conclusion

This quantitative study was designed to determine the language preference and perceived performance of Mexican-American students registered in two developmental reading courses at Texas A&M University-Kingsville during the academic year 2010-2011. The two hypotheses used for this study dealt with language preference while the second explored language performance in English and Spanish.

Statistical software, in this case SPSS, was used for analyzing the data. Participants' answers to the survey were categorized, correlated to compare and contrast their language performance when reading in English and Spanish, language preference at home, and language used when communicating with their parents and siblings. Data interpretation demonstrated that 83.33% of Mexican-American students participating in this study agreed that they prefer to speak English as their native (primary) language. In contrast 37.5% of them prefer to use Spanish at home.

Furthermore, quantitative data analysis suggested that the first hypothesis was not verified. Results obtained from the Language Preference Survey show that students prefer to speak more English than Spanish at home, and with their parents and siblings. Hypothesis 2 illustrated that, in regards to reading, participants believed that they are proficient in English rather than Spanish.

From the aforementioned data interpretation, it can be claimed that for the participants to succeed in college past their first year, in a predominantly English-speaking society, they need to feel that they are part of a safe environment and at the same time faculty need to incorporate multiculturalism into their curriculum (Smittle, 2003; Stein, 2005).

At the beginning of the semester, for example, faculty should, together with their students, state what is expected of them at the end of the course. This should include their professional growth and interests as Smittle (2003) suggested. Contextualization, or linkage with meaningful applications (Bailey, 2009), will give Mexican-American student a purpose for learning. However, faculty need to understand that encouragement is not enough (Smittle, 2003).

As an example, faculty might be able to create a safe environment by arranging conferences with students. Boylan (2009) mentioned that the "attitude toward learning, motivation, autonomy, willingness to seek and accept help, desire to affiliate with peers or instructors, or willingness to expend effort on academic tasks" (p. 14) is crucial when dealing with Mexican-American students. Overall, creating the feeling of belonging in the classroom is related to student's prior knowledge (Willingham & Price, 2009). If students are able to apply what they are learning with what they have experienced and relate it to everyday life and problems, they will be able to develop individual thinking (Bailey, 2009). In order for students to increase their critical thinking skills, students should be asked to "take a more active and responsible role in the learning process" (Wilmer, 2008: 16).

By accepting the idea that language is a carrier of ideas from one person or culture to another, Mexican-American students will be able to understand that it acts as a reflection of 'reality' and is the servant of the civilized mind (Stables, 2006). In other words, if students understand what they are reading, and are building their vocabulary in the process, they will be able to understand the importance of language in their lives and the role that language allows them to have in society. Ultimately, students should be allowed to use their native language in the classroom as a form of development to become independent learners (Cukras, 2006; Keener, Gregory, Mahera & Al-Azami, 2008). Mexican-American students need to feel safe in their environment and be ready to become independent learners before they can overcome their language barriers (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002).

Additionally, the data interpretation demonstrate that 83% of all participants consider English as their first language rather than Spanish. In fact, some scholars (Baker, 2009; Brown, 2004) have concluded that a student's first language is the one that was chonologically learned from birth. The demographics obtained from the LPS have shown that all participants spoke Spanish at home before they were involved in learning English as a second language. Being able to develop better oral fluency and academic proficiency in a second langauge (English), does not mean that their second language will become their first. Is this confusion related to some kind of cultural identity, conflict of problem, or the need for acceptation by the mainstream society? Perhaps more research is needed to explore this situation.

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