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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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FROM WOMB TO FLUENCY: NURTURING BILINGUALISM IN A SPANISH-SPEAKING HOME IN COLOMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism has become increasingly necessary in today's globalized society. However, English learning in Colombia, a Spanish-speaking country, suffers from cultural challenges. This case study focuses on the bilingual development of two Colombian children whose father, an English teacher, exposed them to English from birth. Beginning prenatally, the father used the Natural Approach and Total Physical Response methods to encourage natural and meaningful language acquisition. Despite growing up in a largely Spanish-speaking country, the children learned English fluently. This study emphasizes the value of early, consistent exposure, contextualized learning, and family participation in bilingual education. It provides practical insights and recommendations for families and educators seeking to promote bilingualism in similar contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in our interconnected global landscape, bilingualism, especially mastering English, is crucial for communication, cultural exchange, and job opportunities as English has become the most influential language in the world, serving as a lingua franca that closes communication barriers across borders, and is key in research, international diplomacy, global trade, and higher education. Colombia, however, ranks 74th out of 116 countries in English proficiency (Education First, 2024), reflecting systemic and cultural barriers to English learning. This case study examines two siblings, Juan Pablo and Mariana Márquez Calderón, raised bilingually from birth by their English-teaching father. It documents their bilingual journey, pedagogical strategies, challenges, and outcomes, providing a model for early bilingual education in Spanish-speaking contexts. Both Juan Pablo and Mariana were born and raised in the city of Bucaramanga, Colombia. Their father, a Spanish speaker also from Colombia, is an English teacher who decided to expose his children to a second language prenatally by speaking exclusively to them in English. This decision not only marked the first time he spoke English at home but also helped him prepare for future interactions with his kids. Moreover, after their birth, he applied the Natural Approach, prioritizing comprehension and interaction to facilitate their English language acquisition. The natural approach promotes meaningful conversation and understanding, allowing learners to acquire a language rather than studying it.

It focuses on interaction and contextualized information (Krashen, S., & Terrell, T., 2020). He started by teaching them to name objects around the house and in the street. He showed them objects and simultaneously described them using utterances typical of the first language. In other words, using English every day (Fitriani, 2024) emphasizes the benefits of teaching English in familiar settings and suggests using commonplace items and real-world situations to make language acquisition more interesting and relevant, for example, describing vocabulary related to daily routines, such as getting dressed, etc. Then he introduced Total Physical Response (TPR) to reinforce language learning through physical movement and the use of real objects (realia), due to the benefits this method offers. By integrating speech with movement, lowering stress levels, and fostering a fun learning environment that enhances motivation and retention, Total Physical Response assists language learners in developing fluency more quickly (Asher, 2021, p. 347). For instance, he gave commands such as "touch the wall," "touch the floor," or asked his kids to touch some parts of the body like "touch your tongue," "touch your ears," or touch your eyes." Etc. This strategy was employed to make sure they were learning. To put it differently, it was the way to assess their process. Additionally, both Juan Pablo and Mariana were encouraged to point to objects or people in response to questions like "Where is your grandma?" or "Where is your sister or brother, etc. This method actively engages students through physical movement, allowing them to memorize words and directives by linking language with appropriate movements. Such kinesthetic participation has been demonstrated to promote understanding and long-term retention while reducing the immediate

demand for verbal production, which lowers learner anxiety and develops natural language learning (Asher, 2021; Liu & Zhang, 2023; Thompson, 2022). Furthermore, it is relevant to state that the two kids were exclusively exposed to videos and TV shows in this foreign language from infancy, rather than Spanish. They began with videos tailored for infants, covering topics such as numbers and colors, among others. As they grew older, they progressed to educational TV programs designed for children, for instance, Team Umizoomi. Over time, they made their own choices about which types of TV shows to watch. Subsequently, communication in English began when the children were able to produce utterances. They were guided to ask and answer questions to interact. Juan Pablo and Mariana have always been encouraged to repeat words and sentences and respond to questions, which has helped them pick up English. Additionally, the interaction in English has not been limited to only at home but has extended everywhere. Whether at the mall, park, or during gatherings with relatives. While the kids consistently interact with their father in a foreign language, their conversations with their mother and others have always been in Spanish. Importantly, whenever they have met citizens from English-speaking countries, the children have interacted with them in English. Foreigners have constantly remarked on Juan Pablo and Mariana's excellent English proficiency. Throughout this bilingual process, Juan Pablo and Mariana have mentioned words or sentences in their mother tongue, Spanish, while speaking the second language. Each instance has been treated as an opportunity to teach and have them repeat the equivalent in the second language. These corrections have been made promptly and as often as needed until they have been able to use the correct terms. This strategy has proven effective, as the kids have shown consistent progress over time.

On the other hand, the father only occasionally read to his children in English. Similarly, he used flashcards sparingly to teach them vocabulary. Instead, he focused on using real-life objects, interactions, videos, and TV shows. Currently, Juan Pablo is fourteen, and my daughter Mariana is eleven years old. The outcome of this process has been incredible. Both of the children are not only able to speak English fluently but can also read naturally, pronouncing words correctly and understanding information easily. Juan Pablo achieved fluency by the age of three, while Mariana followed at four and a half years old. This difference likely stems from the father's work schedule, as he had more time to immerse Juan Pablo in English during his early years. Both kids have been praised by native English speakers for their remarkable pronunciation, despite never having been abroad. It has been possible due to the consistent input they have received over the years, making reading straightforward for them. In addition, their listening skills are extraordinary. For instance, when watching a movie, they can catch every single utterance. Sometimes, when his dad misses a word or phrase, he asks them what was said, and they immediately provide the correct term or sentence, which has always impressed him. He has also often asked whether they understand entire speeches in videos, TV shows, or movies, and their response is always, "Yes, it is easy." Moreover, they use native expressions and vocabulary that they have picked up by been exposed to the media such as "My stress level is through the roof", "this is stressing me out", "I was born ready", "a lot of stuff", "that's ridiculous", "literally", "shout-outs", "bequeath", "lore", "hardcore", "bond", "prop", "it's a scam", "to pound", and "that's cringe" among others. Nowadays, the two children prefer watching videos on YouTube rather than TV. They do this every day, which helps them familiarize themselves with different English varieties or accents while picking up words and expressions used by native English speakers. They have also had the opportunity to interact with people from various countries, including the United States, Canada, the U.K., Australia, and Lebanon. Foreigners often express admiration for the remarkable job the father has done. Currently, Juan Pablo does not use words in Spanish when communicating in English. However, Mariana, who is eleven, still occasionally needs some support as she sometimes uses a few terms while speaking English. Finally, the kids have not shown confusion when switching between languages. They speak both Spanish and English correctly. It is worth noting, however, that sometimes they have said phrases like "mi favorita amiga, mi favorito color, or es mandatorio" instead of mi

amiga favorita, mi color favorito, or es obligatorio. It is also worth mentioning that the father's English level has improved significantly since he uses English both at work and at home. This practice has helped him to enhance my accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary. Importantly, starting the language acquisition process from birth is highly recommended, as the early exposure allows children to acclimate to the new language. This approach prevents any resistance or confusion, as infants are more likely to accept the language without questioning their understanding. Nevertheless, if the process begins later, it should be introduced to help children adjust to the new linguistic environment. There are several advantages to learning English at an early age. One significant benefit is the development of accurate pronunciation. According to Shobikah (2019), children have a remarkable ability to imitate sounds and words, driven by their natural curiosity. This ability allows them to develop pronunciation that closely mirrors that of native speakers. In Juan Pablo and Mariana's case, their exposure to American English has led them to adopt an American accent due to the consistent input they have received. Furthermore, Fitriani (2024) states that immersion and natural exposure are more effective ways for young children to acquire a language than intentional learning. This natural process enables them to develop more accurate pronunciation and a deeper cultural understanding compared to adults who rely on explicit instruction.

It should be emphasized that it is normal for children to experience interference between languages in this process, especially when they have been exposed to English from a very young age. Such interference is a natural part of language acquisition, similar to how children make mistakes when learning their mother tongue. It is important to correct these errors promptly, encouraging the child to repeat the correct form and explaining why the correction was made. This helps reinforce proper language use and aids in their learning process. For parents or caregivers leading this English language instruction at home, there are significant personal benefits as well. Regular use of a second language in everyday interactions can improve the parent's fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary. However, this improvement doesn't happen automatically; it requires effort and active learning. Parents should look up unfamiliar terms, either in real-time or later, if internet access isn't available at the moment. This practice, which I follow when I encounter unknown terms while speaking with my children, helps maintain a high standard of language input. Additionally, self-correction is essential. Parents should be mindful of any grammatical errors they make and strive to correct them in future interactions. Over time, this deliberate practice will make speaking in English easier and more natural, ensuring that the language input provided to the children is both accurate and beneficial. This process has been documented through parental observations, video recordings, and informal proficiency analyses conducted over several years. Language use was recorded across multiple naturalistic contexts, including the home environment, social interactions, and media exposure.

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