Cross-linguistic Transfer of Reading Skills for Children Learning to Read in English and Spanish

What does the evidence tell us?

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Day 2
June 24, 2005
Objectives

- Theoretical framework
- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency and Accuracy
- Vocabulary
- Reading Strategies to develop comprehension
Cummins’s Theoretical Framework

- The threshold level hypothesis
- The developmental interdependence hypothesis
- Problems associated with both theories
  - Imprecise definition
  - Little direct empirical evidence for the threshold level hypothesis
Spanish and English are both alphabetic languages.

PA develops in stages in both languages:
- discriminate words by its sounds
- alliteration
- Syllabic awareness
- Onsets and rimes
Evidence of PA Transfer

- Strong phonological awareness (PA) skills are good predictors of reading in the first and second languages. (Durgunoglu, Nagy, and Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003).

- Ceiling effect of PA in Spanish
  - Spanish has 22-24 phonemes and 30 letters (including ll, rr, and ch).
  - English has 43-46 phonemes and 26 letters.
Phonics

- Understanding the alphabetic principle.
- Decoding nonwords in Spanish is strongly correlated with decoding nonwords in English ($r = 0.73$, $p < .01$; Bialystok, Luk, and Kwan, 2005).
Fluency and Accuracy

**Common patterns:**

- Students with reading difficulties in English may have poor accuracy and slow rate.
- Students with reading difficulties in Spanish may have high accuracy and slow rate (Jong & Leij, 1999; Wimmer & Mayringer, 2002).
Vocabulary Transfer

- Vocabulary is a strong predictor of reading comprehension in both English and Spanish (Nagy et al. 1993; Geva & Petrulis-Wright, 1999)
Cognate recognition

- Students know the word in Spanish and can identify the word as an English cognate.
- Difficult words in English are related to frequently known words in Spanish (e.g. *encounter* vs. *encuentro*).
- Cognate recognition depends on similar spelling and morphological patterns (e.g. *cafeteria* vs. *cafetería*; *respond* vs. *responder*; *but* occur vs. *ocurrir*).
- Occurs at higher levels, not lower levels of reading proficiency.
Vocabulary Strategy (cont…)  

- Definitions  
  - Informal Definitions (e.g. *A knife is sharp and we can find it in the kitchen.*)  
  - Formal Definitions (e.g. *A knife is a tool for cutting food*)
Reading Strategies

- Use orthographic, phonetic, semantic, or syntactic cues to derive word meaning.
- *Read aloud, question* what doesn’t make sense, *integrate* relevant prior knowledge
What does NOT transfer from Spanish to English?

- *Vowel Sounds* (e.g. long /e/ in eat or short /i/ in it, etc)
- *English consonant sounds* in the beginning or ending of words (e.g. /sp/, /h/, /th/, etc.)
- *Grammar Features* (e.g. definite articles, subject omission, adjective after noun, etc.)
- False cognates (e.g. realize vs. realizar, gas, etc.)
- Polysemus words (e.g. “banco,” “dirt”)

Instructional Recommendations

- Focus on English phonemes during English literacy instruction.
- Teach *explicitly* the importance of sound recognition.
- Consider that if students can decode in Spanish they probably can decode in English.
Instructional Recommendations cont. . .

- Teach cognate awareness *explicitly*. (This is found to be developmental; Nagy et al. 1993, Hancin-Bhatt & Nagy, 1994).

- Teach vocabulary *systematically and explicitly* (from concrete use of words in multiple contexts to formal definitions).

- *Integrate* relevant prior knowledge to text content.