Spanish for Native Speakers: A Look at Bidialectalism and Code-switching in the Spanish for Native Speakers Classroom

Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) has existed for many years and in that time it has gone through many changes and has seen both growth and decline. Concern about the teaching of Spanish to native speakers arose as early as the 1930’s. Recently, however there has been a resurgence of interest in SNS due to the ever-increasing number of immigrants and the ever-increasing numbers of Hispanic bilinguals in our high schools and in our universities (Lewelling and Peyton, 1). According to the 1990 census, the number of Spanish-speaking age school children grew 41.4% from the 1980 census. This drastic increase has called for more of a focus on materials and methods for teaching these students, but they have been neglected especially at the university level (Pino, 1). This influx of students has caused many schools and universities to implement new programs to more adequately place these students who do not fit into the “typical” Spanish as a second language classroom. Due to the implementation of these programs, many techniques and textbooks have been written and tried in order to attempt to develop a curriculum for these students. The goals of these programs is similar to those of foreign language education for English speakers and that is to generate speakers who can produce the language of other educated Spanish speakers found in Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico, Spain, Columbia, etc. (Hidalgo, 87).

Many problems have resulted from these attempts and there are still today many different theories as to the most effective way to educate these bilinguals in the Spanish. A common problem that results in a SNS class is the diversity that one finds between speakers who have almost native-like abilities and those who fall into the category of transitional or receptive bilinguals whose ability is much more limited (Pino, 1). Trying to appeal to this variety of a student base has perplexed many educators who struggle to teach these classes with limited materials and training. Also, arises the problem of dialect in that there is much indecisiveness as to which dialect to teach these students many of whom come from different parts of the world such as Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc. The election of a “standard” variety can also prove troublesome to teachers of these classes and thus many teachers have chosen to teach the students a more universal formal dialect. The practice of code-switching is also very common in the SNS classroom and educators have different ways of responding to this practice. The notion of code-switching has always been a part of the SNS classroom and in this paper, the author will address the current responses and theories behind this idea. The pros and cons of the practice of teaching a second dialect (bidialectalism) to students will also be addressed. A summary of the literature that has been written about code-switching and bidialectalism in the classroom will be presented in the following pages.

Code switching

Code-switching (often times used interchangeably with words such as code mixing, language switching, language alteration, etc.) is defined as the alternating, or switching, of two different languages at the word, phrase, clause, or sentence level (Timm, 94). There are three different types of code switches that exist according to Appel and Muysken,
(a) Tag-switches involve an exclamation, a tag, or a parenthetical in another language than the rest of the sentence. An example is ‘OYE, when . . . ’ at the beginning of the text. The tags etc. serve as an emblem of the bilingual character of an otherwise monolingual sentence.

(b) Intra-sentential switches occur in the middle of a sentence, as in ‘I started acting real CURIOUSA.’ This type of intimate switching is often called code mixing.

(c) Inter-sentential switches occur between sentences, as their name indicates. (Appel and Muysken, 118)

With all of these different switches occurring among many bilinguals, the question arises as to what is being done in the SNS classroom in response to this. The original response to code-switching in the classroom, that is still common today in many of the SNS classroom, is the represented in the text Español para el bilingüe (1972). In a chapter dedicated to the study of “barbarismos,” the following was stated:

Barbarismo es el vicio o defecto del lenguaje que consiste en pronunciar o escribir mal las palabras, o en emplear vocablos impropios. Aquí vamos a tratar de los “barbarismos” que caracterizan el habla del hispano en la región suroeste de nuestro país. (Marrone, 72).

This text and many other texts of the 1960's and 1970's were eager to point out to students that their Spanish was full of “barbarismos, arcaísmos, anglicismos, and other bad forms to be extirpated like cancer before progress could be made in the reading and writing of Spanish” (Foster, 72). This approach of eradication of the student’s “familial” style battered away at a very sensitive area—self esteem. Successful application of the normative approach was thus analogous to the clinical situation wherein the “disease” is contained but the patient turns comatose. (Foster, 72)

Still others stated that these bilinguals were alingual, that is, that they have no native language, no language at all (Sánchez, 92). This initial approach in the elimination of the “informal” style of Spanish amongst the bilinguals was shown to be detrimental in the classroom and thus the idea of building on the abilities that the students have and then taking them from an informal to a more formal dialect thus creating students who are bidialectal.

Teachers may find it more useful to accept code-switching in the classroom because this may help to relax the students and thus create an environment where the students will be better able to learn (Timm, 107). While this appears to be quite simplistic, it must be understood that several factors need to be taken into account before the decision to code switch or not to code switch is taken by the teacher, and also whether or not the teacher will be willing to accept code-switching among the students in the class. First, it is important that the teacher become informed as to what is code-switching and some of the research that has been done to explain this phenomenon. Many teachers still view code-switching as “random or chaotic” and yet other see it as “interference” from another language which in this case is English (Timm, 94). Educators should be cognizant that the more informal and casual the role relationship, the more common code-switching is and that these switches may be either conscious or subconscious. Often times when the switches are conscious, they are added for a humorous or dramatic effect (Barkin, 107, 1981). Teachers need to also take into account their own personal attitudes. If a teacher regards code-switching in low esteem or looks at it as being wrong, they should not promote it in the classroom because their personal opinion may come through and thus negatively influence the students by leading them to believe that their Spanish is wrong. Another important factor for a teacher is the way that the community and parents look upon code-switching, even if the parents and community itself code switches. If the parents were against this then they “would be horrified to know that their children were also being exposed to it at school” (Timm, 107). Teachers should take into account the position of Spanish and English in the community and if they feel as though there is a shift toward English then it might be a wiser pedagogical decision to use Spanish exclusively in the classroom with very little English or code-switching.

One of the problems that tends to arise in
the classroom is that the choice of a language by the
teacher. The choice of one language over another by
the teacher in certain situations can stigmatize or
cause the other language spoken to be seen as a
subordinate language. Studies have shown that
English is the language that is most often used to
take control of the class in which code-switching is
permitted. So if the teachers always chooses English
to take control or say things that are important, they
consciously or subconsciously downplay the role of
Spanish and its' importance. Code-switching in the
classroom shares many of the same features as in
conversational switches such as to clarify, to
emphasize, to attract attention, to refer to a concept
specific to one particular culture, or to bid for a
conversational turn (Timm, 107).

Other authors have pointed out additional
questions that also must be asked by those teaching
in the SNS classroom. It is important to be aware of
the fact that in regards to error correction with
bilingual natives that sometimes that the dialect
variants that are used in one community cannot be
distinguished from the type of developmental errors
that all learners of a language will make (Merino
and Samaniego, 117). Such variants as fuītes or
fuīstes for the standard fuīste have been shown to
exist in monolingual communities and are quite
common in rural Spanish speaking communities
around the world. The questions of where one’s
speech variant comes from, whether it be from one’s
family, from one’s community, or whether it is an
interim stage in Spanish acquisition, should be
asked by the teacher before deciding whether or not
to correct a speaker’s oral production (Merino and
Samaniego, 117). The present pedagogical literature
on error correction presents many different
approaches and points of view on the
appropriateness of error correction in the classroom.

Aparicio has stated that forms that are not in
the standard dialect should not be repeated rather
students should be provided with different
possibilities for some words that might be stigmas-
tized in certain settings. He continues saying that
guachear (to watch or to take care of) is common in
certain communities. Teachers should be aware of
this variety and teach the students the more standard
variety of cuidar, which is appropriate in many
other communities where guachear may be
stigmatized or not understood (Merino and
Samaniego, 117). Marrone also includes, as part of
her course, a segment on code-switching. She lets
her students code switch for the first part of the
course and even allows them to use a minimal
amount of English if they cannot get an idea across
in Spanish. During this time, she has them focus on
what they are saying and what forms they are using
to express themselves. After this, she tells them that
both languages are self-sufficient and has them put
forth an effort to use just Spanish in the classroom.
Another activity that is done with this same group is
that they are to listen to the Spanish on the radio, on
the television, in their neighborhoods and in their
homes for examples of code-switching and then
write them down and identify them as loan words,
calques, etc. They share this list with their
classmates and talk about why this occurs and the
reason behind switching (Marrone, 77). This helps
to promote understanding of the process first that
can in turn be used in helping the student become
more cognizant as to their speech patterns.

Magaña (a high school teacher) and Valdés
(a university professor) have found that instead of
focusing on correction of the oral skills of during
the class that they have had more success focusing
on reading and writing skills. Merino found that
when she worked as a Berlitz teacher that as she
worked with the students to eliminate certain non-
standard forms from their speech that even though
they could use the standard forms during their
speech, once in an informal setting they would
revert back to the nonstandard variety (Merino and
Samaniego, 117-8). The question thus arises as to
whether or not a standard dialect can be taught.

Bidialectalism

The idea of bidialectalism is closely related
with the idea of code-switching in the classroom.
The current methodology among many of the SNS
instructors is the thought that instead of the
eradication of the informal dialect that the
instructors can present and teach the students a
second dialect. This second dialect would be a more
formal one that can be used in different situations
than the informal home one. Many SNS instructors
have embraced this concept and yet there are others
who are dubious as to whether this can be achieved.
Valdés states that many Spanish departments are
under the following delusions:

1. That bidialectalism is a desirable end in itself, in that, in order to be truly quality Spanish-speaking persons, U.S. Hispanos must speak like Spaniards or Latin Americans who have both power and social prestige in their own countries. (In other words, they must sound like upper-class Madrileños or Bonairenses.
2. That it is possible to “teach” a second dialect in a classroom setting, and,
3. That dialect differences are numerous and serious (50).

Valdés goes on to say that it has not been proven as to whether or not a standard dialect can be taught in the classroom, even though she is quick to state that it can be learned. There is also the idea that even though teachers go to great lengths to let the students know that their dialect is not bad; there is still the presumption that something is wrong with what they are saying and that this needs to be corrected. “We may have to admit that we are simply eradicators in disguise and that we do believe that there is a right and a wrong kind of Spanish (Lozano, 94). There are also many educators who spend the whole class trying to instill in the students the standard forms and Valdés states that this adds very little to the overall growth of the student’s abilities in the language. The realization by the students that they are committing an error is not enough to change their speech and as stated by Solé “resultaría igualmente limitado e insatisfactorio” (25).

Valdés proposes several different approaches to the idea of teaching a standard dialect. One of which is the idea that of where attention is devoted to increasing oral command in the language, to writing, to composition, to creative use of the language, to reading skills, and to expand a student’s domain where one normally would use their dominant language (in this case English) and teach them these skills in those areas in Spanish (Valdés, 58). Such teaching would be difficult because of the fact that the course would have to be tailored to the individual needs of the students because of the aforementioned problem of the many different levels of speakers in the classroom.

Other teachers do not share this view that bidialectalism cannot be taught rather using some of the same teaching techniques they believe that it can effectively be taught and help the students to have both a formal and an informal dialect. “Teaching bilingual students is a clear-cut case of informal language versus standard language” (Fernández, 105). Even though Fernández states this, she also points out that a teacher is not going to teach a student much due to the fact that there is a lot of interference from the first dialect and the fact that they do not have very many opportunities to use the formal dialect outside the classroom. If the teacher is able to help the students accept their dialect and convince them that they can learn another dialect then the teacher has been successful (Fernández, 105). It is also important to note that people who are bilingual or multilingual are able to manipulate a number of varieties of one or more languages ranging from formal to informal usage. If this is the case then the acquisition of a second dialect is very plausible, and if it can be learned, it can be taught (Lozano, 94). Marrone gives the idea for a course in which the study of different dialects is one of the major focuses of the course.

Se da énfasis a los siguientes puntos: a) todo idioma está formado por un número de dialectos o variedades; b) ninguna de estas variedades tiene valor intrínsecamente superior a otras, pero la variedad aceptada como la “estándar” sí es la más útil desde el punto de vista de la posibilidad de establecer comunicación con el mayor número de hablantes de ese idioma, ya que la variedad codificada del idioma que se utiliza para la impresión de libros, revistas, periódicos, y otros medios de comunicación escrita; c) no existe una sola variedad “correcta” sino que cada variedad tiene una aplicación distinta y por eso es muy útil tener un repertorio de más de una variedad y saber utilizar cada una donde sea conveniente; d) las normas sobre el tipo de variedad dialectal considerado apropiado para determinada situación forman parte de las reglas de conducta de una comunidad (al igual que la vestimenta, los modales, etc.) y se deben tener en cuenta—su infracción resulta en consecuencias negativas; e) existen prejuicios sociolingüísticos muy profundos que forman parte de la realidad lingüística de una comunidad y estos prejuicios se basan en aspectos extra-lingüísticos, como las clases sociales, el
poder político y económico. (Marrone, 73-4)

The above mentioned are important in order to help the students understand what some of the circumstances are surrounding the idea of dialectal differences and why it is important to have command of a number of different dialects. There is also the idea that the goal of the teacher is simply to facilitate the acquisition of a second or third grammar and this must be done for very practical reasons such as future employment and assignments in the schools and universities (Sánchez, 94). Some have even suggested that using non-standard Spanish to teach standard Spanish is a possibility as long as the idea that both dialects are valuable is addressed and the non-standard is not down-graded (Lozano, 94). It is even possible to think of a bilingual who is English dominant who decides to use the standard variety that is learned in school in order to learn the local variety that is present in the community in which he lives. There exists the idea that bidialectalism can be taught and many teachers are engaged in trying to get their students to become aware of the fact that having two varieties of Spanish will be very useful to them.

Conclusion

In the teaching of Spanish for native speakers, the teachers must take into account the diversity of the backgrounds of their students and the abilities that they have. Students should be made conscious of the language that they are using and how language changes in different situations. Helping the students to understand their speech seems to help them to have a more positive outlook on their own abilities and the usefulness of knowing more than one dialect. Code-switching does take place in SNS classroom and the teacher must decide as to how they are going to deal with it. Teachers need to become informed as to the current research and this will in the end greatly improve their ability to teach native speakers and help them to understand their students better. Teacher education is important in being better able to resolve the issues of bidialectalism and code-switching in the classroom and be better able to educate the Hispanic bilingual.

Cited Works


