

CULTIVATING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG EDUCATORS THROUGH SOCIAL BOOK CLUB INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

The high demands of the Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test (BTLPT) have affected passing rates and bilingual teacher shortages. In this paper, we present an exploratory study that delves into the experiences of bilingual teacher candidates after participating in Club Leo, a book club designed to enhance academic Spanish proficiency to help them succeed in the BTLPT state exam. Through qualitative phenomenological analysis of teacher candidates' experiences, this research uncovers bilingual teacher candidates' experiences from Club Leo on their Spanish language proficiency. Results from an open-ended questionnaire revealed that participants had positive experiences and perceived improvements in their academic Spanish proficiency. We concluded that book clubs could serve as an avenue for supporting bilingual teacher candidates' academic Spanish proficiency.

Keywords: bilingual teacher candidates, BTLPT, academic Spanish proficiency, pre-service bilingual teachers, book club

In 2020 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) reported that emergent bilinguals (EBs) or also known as English learners (ELs), referring to students who are non-native English speakers and are in the process of acquiring proficiency in the English language, represented 5 million of the student population in the United States public schools. In the U.S. Texas has the largest percentage of EBs (20%) representing 1 million EBs (NCES, 2023). Of the 5 million EBs about 3.7 million have Spanish as their home language (NCES, 2023). Unfortunately, for decades, Texas has experienced teacher shortages in various areas, including English as a Second Language and bilingual education (Bland et al., 2023). As a result, a significant number of EBs have not had the opportunity to receive instruction from highly qualified, bilingual, and biliterate teachers. This deficit in specialized teaching resources has implications for the quality of education EBs can access, potentially impacting their language development and academic success.

In Texas, highly qualified bilingual and biliterate teachers must take two additional professional examinations to become eligible to teach in a bilingual classroom. The first exam, TExES Bilingual Education Supplemental, assesses pedagogical knowledge related to bilingual education. The second exam, the TExES Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test (BTLPT), assesses an individual's Spanish

proficiency in an educational setting across four domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Bland et al., 2023). The high demands of these exams, specifically the BTLPT, have affected the shortage of bilingual teachers. According to TEA (2022), the number and passing rates of individuals taking the BTLPT have dropped. In the 2020-2021 year of the 2,161 test takers, 62% passed, and in the 2021-2022 year of the 1,818 test takers, 53% passed the exam. One of the most significant challenges is supporting bilingual teacher candidates in academic Spanish proficiency to pass the BTLPT. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to: support bilingual teacher candidates, also known as pre-service bilingual teachers, in enhancing their academic Spanish proficiency in speaking, listening, and reading through book clubs to support teachers in passing their BTLPT.

Literature Review

The theory and concepts underlying this study focus on the interconnectedness between a theory (social interaction) and several concepts (reading experiences via book clubs within pedagogical content knowledge) to support bilingual teacher candidates' Spanish language proficiency. Book clubs were used to encourage social interactions to improve students' Spanish language skills. Furthermore, the book club discussions touched on the relevance of the book's content to the bilingual teacher candidates' lives and their future EBs, with the intent of increasing their Spanish language proficiency. Therefore, this study presents how the social interaction theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky in 1978 supports our book club reading experiences and language development.

Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory, presented by Vygotsky (1978), allows for a deeper understanding of social interactions' role in language development. According to Vygotsky, social interactions serve as a source of learning, allowing individuals to engage with more knowledgeable peers or those with higher language proficiency to enhance their language skills. It is through dialogue, collaboration, and shared experiences that individuals actively support their language acquisition (McCaughey, 2017; Ro, 2021; Sert, 2017). Moreover, Vygotsky acknowledges the influence of cultural and social contexts on language development within a sociocultural frame. Consequently, in the following section, we explore how book clubs, approached from a sociocultural theoretical lens, promote language and cultural development among bilingual teacher candidates.

Reading Book Clubs

Reading book clubs has emerged as a promising approach to enhancing language skills (McCaughey, 2017; Ro, 2021; Sert, 2017) and fostering cultural competence among students (Ro, 2021; Sert, 2017). According to Coldwell et al. (2018) and McCaughey (2017), reading clubs provide a safe and inclusive space for learners, heritage speakers, and native speakers to come together and engage in language practice. In McCaughey's (2017) study, the researcher created a safe learning environment in her book club that was "explicitly informal and 'not a class'" to create a group of readers versus the instructor taking over the conversations. Moreover, McCaughey (2017) realized that students improved their conversational skills and cultural values. McCaughey (2017) concluded that facilitators should work hard "at creating a community in which participants feel respected and empowered to speak and even argue" (p. 25).

Reading clubs hold promise for teacher candidates in Spanish language education, facilitating the improvement of language skills while fostering cultural competence. Through engagement with literature and culture from Spanish-speaking countries, students can enhance their analytical and interpretive abilities, gain a nuanced understanding of the social and historical contexts associated with the language, and develop a deeper appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives, thus supporting language and cultural competence (Pandey et al., 2023). In a study conducted by Pandey et al. (2023), the researchers found that individuals participating in a Spanish club improved their Spanish language proficiency through meaningful interactions and discussions. Implementing reading clubs to support language proficiency can be a valuable pedagogical approach to cultivating interculturality and enhancing students' overall language learning experience (Pandey et al., 2023; Ro, 2021, 2023). Collaborative social interactions, such as book clubs, enhance linguistic skills and intercultural understanding (Coldwell et al., 2018). Participants negotiate meanings, discuss diverse topics, and engage in language discourse, ultimately improving the learning experience (Pandey et al., 2023; Ro, 2021, 2023).

There is a relatively small body of literature on book clubs in higher education to support students' language proficiency and even non-existent literature on book clubs in teaching education programs to support bilingual teacher candidates' Spanish language proficiency. Nonetheless, these studies collectively suggest the benefits of book clubs in developing language skills, indicating that reading clubs can offer a practical avenue for students to engage with different cultural perspectives while simultaneously improving their language skills (Ro, 2021; Sert, 2017).

Method

The purpose of this exploratory research was to pilot a book club with a small group of bilingual teacher candidates to enhance their academic Spanish proficiency in listening, speaking, and reading.

Research Design and Questions

We utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design (Groenewald, 2004) to explore the participants' experiences in the book study to understand their motives in joining the book club and the benefits to their academic Spanish language proficiency. The phenomenological research approach further helped the authors understand what participants gained from the setting Club Leo provided for them to practice their academic Spanish proficiency and areas of improvement for Club Leo based on their experiences. Therefore, we proposed the following research question:

1. How did bilingual teacher candidates perceive Club Leo on their academic Spanish proficiency?

Context of the Study

The researchers, professors at a regional university in the southwestern U.S., developed Club Leo to support bilingual teacher candidates in preparing for the BTLPT Spanish proficiency exam. The book club focused on enhancing participants' academic Spanish proficiency across listening, speaking, and reading, as many were struggling to pass the BTLPT state exam required to become certified as a bilingual teacher in Texas. Therefore, in mid-Spring 2023 the researchers recruited bilingual teacher candidates interested in improving their academic Spanish proficiency via a book club community.

Sample

A voluntary response sampling method was used to recruit bilingual teacher candidates. The researchers emailed all students classified as bilingual teacher candidates and held an online informational meeting for those interested in joining. These teacher candidates were at different stages in their degree plans, but all shared the goal of improving their academic Spanish proficiency. There were thirteen participants in this pilot study consisting of 91% female. We sent out an open-ended questionnaire via email twice to all thirteen participants; however, we only received seven.

Club Leo

Three different genres were selected for the book club: fiction, memoir, and a self-help book. This provided students with various books that could align with their reading interests. The three books were *Grit* by Angela Duckworth, *No somos de aquí* by Jenny Torres-Sanchez, and *Solito: Memoir* by Javier Zamora. In addition to selecting different genres, these books were purposely selected because of their academic Spanish and relevance to cultural identity. During the registration, participants ranked their top three choices, one meaning their first choice. Participants were then assigned to a book based on their ranking, with priority given to their first choice.

The book club was conducted via videoconference, with one professor assigned to one book to guide the book club sessions. Five to six sessions of 30 minutes each were held at a time convenient for all. During these sessions, the assigned readings were discussed, and emphasis was placed on sharing their diverse perspectives and relevance to bilingual classrooms.

Data Collection

Data was collected from a professor-developed five open-ended questionnaire. We administered the questionnaire to all participants after the last Club Leo reading session.

Instrument

The instrument was a five open-ended questionnaire. The goal of the questionnaire was to analyze participants' experiences of Club Leo so that the researchers could make any needed adjustments for future book clubs. The questionnaire consisted of five questions about the participants' experience and included no identifying information. The following were the questions:

1. What was your goal when joining Club Leo? Did you accomplish this goal? Please explain.
2. Was joining Club Leo beneficial to your Spanish proficiency? If so, how?
3. What do you wish would have been done differently to help you improve your Spanish proficiency?
4. What did you enjoy about Club Leo?
5. Describe the structure of the sessions. Did you enjoy this structure or would you have liked a different type of structure?

Data Analysis

Participants voluntarily completed the anonymous questionnaire via Google Forms. The researchers analyzed the data separately, examining recurring themes or topics related to the participants' perceptions of the book club (Krippendorff, 2018). After the initial analysis, the researchers met to corroborate the initial codings and develop final interpretations.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness is an essential element of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, in our study, low inference descriptors (verbatim comments), peer coder, and member checks helped increase credibility, contributing to our study's trustworthiness. Verbatim comments from the collected data were used to describe the participants' experiences more accurately to increase the interpretive validity (Johnson, 1997). As mentioned, the researchers conducted an independent analysis and corroborated to refine and define themes. Lastly, the third component used to establish trustworthiness occurred when the researchers presented the participants with a thematic summary for member checking. All participants were asked to read the thematic summary and comment on whether they wanted to make any changes to help complete the analysis to develop interpretations.

Results

Two themes emerged from the data: (1) participants were self-motivated to improve their academic Spanish proficiency, and (2) participants enjoyed exploring diverse perspectives in authentic Spanish conversations.

Reviewing preliminary data, the researchers noticed that all participants volunteered to be a part of Club Leo to help them improve their academic Spanish proficiency. Participants were asked, What was your goal when joining Club Leo? Did you accomplish this goal? Please explain. Responses included, *"To improve my overall Spanish comprehension"* and *"To become more comfortable talking Spanish. I did enjoyed logging in and being able to talk the best that I could."* Another participant wrote, *"To practice reading in Spanish."* Overall, participants wanted additional opportunities to practice and improve their academic Spanish to help them better prepare for their future careers as bilingual teachers.

The second question asked, Was joining Club Leo beneficial to your Spanish proficiency? If so, how? All participants wrote that being part of Club Leo was beneficial. One participant stated, *"Yes, I was able to feel more comfortable talking in Spanish as well as learning new words in Spanish."* Another wrote, *"Yes, I read aloud in Spanish and I frequently came across tier 3 vocabulary that I wouldn't normally come across."* A third participant wrote, *"Yes because I learned to read unknown words and their meanings. I would also read it out loud to hear myself."* Participants gained more confidence when reading and discussing in Spanish and acquired new vocabulary words through Club Leo.

The third question asked, What do you wish would have been done differently to help you improve your Spanish proficiency? Participants suggested adding a writing component to help them practice this skill in addition to the other language domains. Participants wrote, *"A written response would have helped me. And answer prompts to help me discuss what I want to talk about. The response would not be for a grade, but a jumping off point to start a better dialogue."* Another participant wrote, *"Maybe take notes (personally) so I can practice writing."* Although the participants were continuously practicing their

reading, speaking, and listening skills in Spanish, writing was not practiced during the pilot study of Club Leo.

The second theme from the preliminary data was how participants enjoyed authentic Spanish conversations unrelated to their coursework. In the fourth question, What did you enjoy about Club Leo? Some responses included, “*I enjoyed reading something else other than are assignments for class*” and “*Learning different culture and diversity. Discussing our perspective in the reading.*” As participants were grouped according to their number one book choice, they were grouped with others with similar interests and motivations to share about this book. Moreover, as commented by one participant, “*The book and the club was friendly as well as welcoming*” which allowed them to take risks and make mistakes while learning about the book and practicing their academic Spanish proficiency.

The fifth question asked, Describe the structure of the sessions. Did you enjoy this structure or would you have liked a different type of structure? All participants liked the structure of their book club as they expressed satisfaction with the flexibility. Two participants wrote, “*I enjoy having it on Saturday due to our crazy schedule,*” and “*We had Saturday meeting I like it because I was unable on the week.*” As this book club was optional, participants had to balance their schedules with school and work. Allowing some flexibility in the schedule allowed some of these participants to attend the book club meetings.

Discussion

We were interested in analyzing the overall arching research question of how bilingual teacher candidates perceive Club Leo on their academic Spanish proficiency. The following discussion is based on our findings of bilingual teacher candidates' experiences of the book club.

Teachers' Experiences

Researchers have found that book clubs effectively support individuals' language proficiency (McCaughy, 2017; Pandey et al., 2023). For example, Pandey et al. (2023), found that participants had positive experiences and improved their academic language proficiency after participating in a book club. Similarly, in our study, we found that participants were self-motivated to join a book club to improve their academic Spanish proficiency. According to their experiences, many perceived they improved their academic Spanish proficiency. Based on participants' experiences and perceptions, it can be assumed that Club Leo allowed them the opportunity to improve their academic Spanish proficiency in a safe and welcoming environment. However, it is essential to note that although participants shared positive comments about the structure of the sessions when asked about structure, some pointed out in a different question related to suggestions for improvements that more writing practices would have supported them in improving their Spanish writing skills.

Conclusions and Implications

In this exploratory study, the goal was to explore bilingual teacher candidates' experiences participating in a Spanish book club intended to improve their academic Spanish proficiency in listening, speaking, and reading. Based on these qualitative findings, the participants' experiences confirmed participants' perceived improvements in academic Spanish proficiency; therefore, one can conclude that participants had positive experiences from Club Leo regarding perceived improved academic Spanish

proficiency and exploring diverse perspectives within authentic Spanish conversations. Despite the exploratory nature of this study, the insights gained from this study may assist education preparation programs for bilingual teacher candidates to implement a book club community to support students' academic Spanish proficiency in preparation for the BTLPT. The evidence from this study suggests that bilingual teacher candidates are interested in joining Spanish book clubs intended to support their academic Spanish language proficiency in efforts to support their BTLPT preparation. Therefore, institutions preparing bilingual teacher candidates should implement Spanish book clubs outside of formal school work to support teacher candidates' academic Spanish proficiency and BTLPT preparation. Further research could be conducted to determine the impact of a Spanish book club on teachers' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities and their cultural competence. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that book clubs can be valuable in supporting bilingual teacher candidates' academic Spanish proficiency.

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