

Young Interpreters: The Situated as Supportive

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Abstract: Across the United States schools are largely segregated by race, creating schools that are densely Hispanic and teaching staff that is overwhelming monolingual English speakers. This has created difficulty in home communication in these schools. This study looks at ongoing design-based research efforts to engage bilingual students in helping their teachers become more capable of communicating in Spanish. Through online-delivered challenges teachers and students work together to complete a series of tasks that help teachers learn about communicating across cultures and preparing several communication-aids to help them reach out more frequently. Through a narrative profile analysis, we uncovered the types of influences the five-week intervention can have on teacher's home communication efforts, beliefs in their own ability to develop stronger language skills, and relationships with students, and we trace the implications these efforts have on teacher practice, design iterations, and scaling.

The frequency and types of interactions between teachers and parents have important implications for both students and families. When teachers and school officials reached out to parents regularly, Epstein (1991) reported that parents are more likely to help their students with projects and assignments. The same study concluded that as parent involvement increased, parents were also more likely to feel positive about their children's abilities to succeed in school. Recent meta-analyses arrived at similar conclusions (Castro et al., 2015; Jeynes, 2003).

Communication with parents becomes increasingly complex for teachers when they don't speak the same language. Gandara (2005) described this widespread problem: "Typical respondent comments cited the teacher's inability to speak the parents' language. While teachers acknowledge the value of family and community in the education of these students, many feel unable to call on this critical resource" (p. 10).

It may well be the case that increased training is requisite for making inroads in-home communication efforts with Spanish-speaking families. Gandara (2003) noted that among teachers who taught English Language learners (ELL), 23% of them reported that they had trouble communicating with the parents of ELLs. That number went up to 30% when the teacher had received no or almost no training on communicating with parents of ELLs. These numbers are likely much higher in regular education classrooms, where teachers are much less likely to receive special training for communicating with the families of ELLs.

We report on the efforts to offer online training modules that present a problem-based scenario where teachers and students use their respective skills to build bilingual communication aids designed to enhance school-home communication. In this way, the types of situated skills that students develop in their everyday lives can lend support to teachers trying to communicate with parents.

There is cursory evidence to suggest that students have the resources to help teachers navigate the tensions that can arise between wanting to communicate more with Spanish-speaking families and not having the ability to do so quickly and effectively. Both Valdés (2014) and Orellana (2009) document the social and cognitive benefits as well as particular skills developed by the children of immigrants who grow up translating and interpreting for their parents. Particularly, they highlight young interpreters' skills and abilities to translate effectively, help teachers understand community norms of effective communication, and navigate the power of student-teacher relationships in a way that is mutually enriching.

This paper presents preliminary findings from a design-based research intervention, "Spanish For Lunch" (SFL). This intervention aims to incorporate the Spanish language abilities of students, specifically by involving young interpreters as the principal facilitators of phrase-based Spanish instruction. Our research into the intervention uses qualitative, interview methods to learn about the teachers' experiences using the online resources to structure the challenges and work with their students to help them to both communicate with families and build partnerships with students.

This narrative research study (Seidman, 2013) was guided by these research questions:

1. How does participating in the SFL program aid teachers in developing positive, frequent, and supportive communication with Spanish speaking parents?

2. How does participating in the SFL program strengthen teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward their ability to communicate with Spanish speaking parents?
3. From a teacher's perspective, what type of partnerships form between teachers and students who participate in the SFL program?

In the pilot work from 2018, six 6th-8th grade teachers from both urban-public and urban-charter schools in the western United States selected two to six bilingual students from their classes to collaborate with them on the translation challenges. Student selection was solely at the discretion of the teachers.

The program consisted of five online modules for teachers and an equal number of online videos for students. These online materials guided both groups through five weekly meetings to create different communication aids for a specific home communication task each week (greeting parents, writing a get-know-you-letter, writing positive-template texts, scripting a short-positive phone call, and scripting a parent-teacher conference). After reviewing their respective online materials, the students collaborated with teachers by helping them select and translate a group of phrases that meet the requirements of the challenge each week. During their weekly meetings, teachers and students talk through the question and the guiding question, and then come up with several phrases that answer the question. The students translate these phrases as the teacher writes them down and practices saying each one. The teacher takes a picture of each completed communication aid. Figure 1 shows an example of one of the challenges.

Template texts:
 What are five positive phrases you would like to text to parents?

Example "Text"

- _____ scored 100% on his test.
- _____ sacò un cien en su examen.

1)
 2)
 3)
 4)
 5)

You may wish to use this paper to draft the texts on this paper before transferring them to a larger poster that can be hung up in your classroom.

- Some teachers have also decided to turn some of their templates into cards with compliments or a short message they can mail to parents asking them to call the front office and set up a time to meet with them and a translator.

Figure 1. Example from template text challenge.

After completing all five of the challenges the teacher receives a micro-credential, a digital portfolio certificate of completion that can be stored online, as a certificate of their completion. The schematics of the program are displayed in Figure 2.

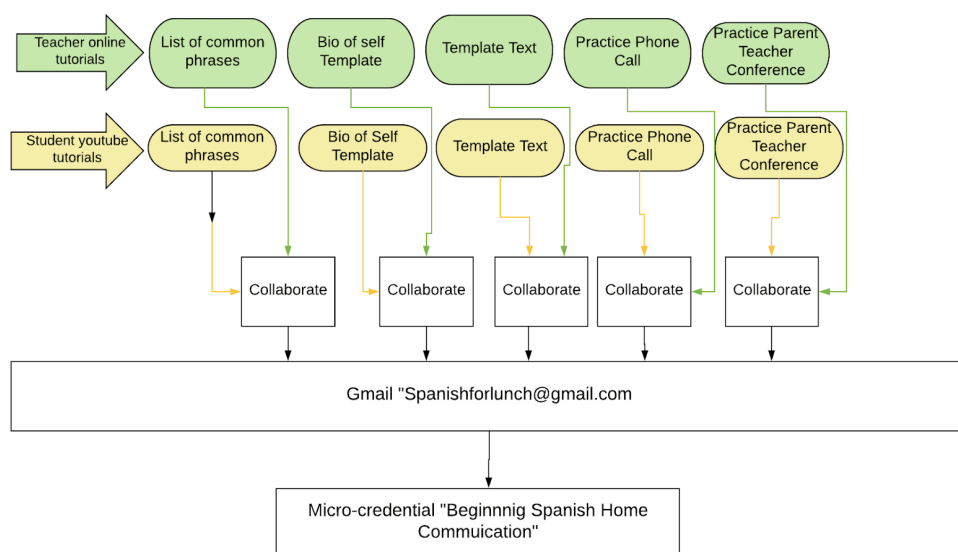


Figure 2. Program workflow.

Before we began the intervention, we held a 45-minute semi-structured interview with all six teachers. The purpose of this interview was to gather information about the teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward home communication and partnerships with students. During the second and third interviews, also semi-structured 45-minute interviews, we gathered stories and anecdotes from teacher's experiences using the program materials, meeting with students, and using their communication aids to reach out to parents. These interviews took place during week three of the intervention and within one week of the end of the training. Figure 3 shows the timeline for each of the phrases of the intervention.

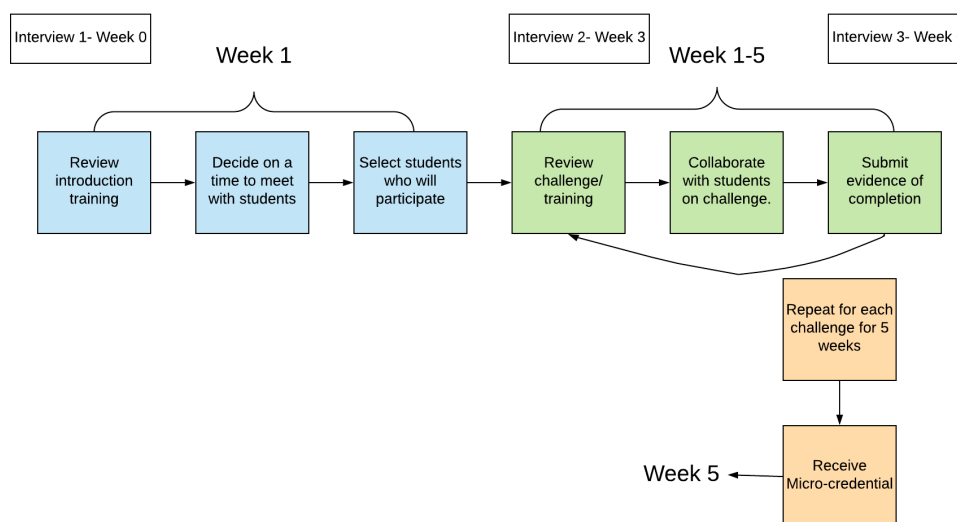


Figure 3. Timeline of interviews and challenges.

We created narrative profiles of each of the teachers' experience using the Seidman (2013) process. This included creating a transcript of all of the teacher's relevant comments related to their experience, and then eliminating experiences that seemed non-essential. This was repeated again to produce the final narratives. We sought to uncover what elements of the program helped teachers reach out more, develop the capacities they wanted to develop, and form partnerships with their students. Specifically, we looked closely at the way that the teachers describe the development of the program. For example, we wanted to see how the teacher described his/her communication with families in interviews one, two, and three to see if there is a narrative of growth to be uncovered.

We found that the program did not have a significant impact on teachers' communication attempts across all five teachers, but those teachers who reached out most, we encouraged by their growth. Additionally, we found that teachers Spanish did not improve significantly, but their belief that these kinds of activities could be very beneficial was a recurrent theme. Specifically, the teachers felt that they were able to focus on the kinds of phrases that they needed to know, and learn them in a hands-on-environment. They were also encouraged by the patience of the students as they coached them through pronunciation and spelling. Finally, we found that all of the teachers reported that working with students strengthen their relationships with them by establishing complementary roles, sharing cultural values, and sharing personal experiences.

Finally, we found that several teachers discussed changes that they were considering making to their teaching practice based on the experiences in working with students. For example teachers talked about more frequently providing places for students to act as teachers in the classroom, focusing on examples where the teachers had made mistakes, modeling making mistakes in front of students, and exemplifying life-long learning by try to develop new language skills.

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