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# Navigating Survival Skills in a Predominantly Hispanic School

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## **Navigating Survival Skills in a Predominantly Hispanic School**

### **Introduction**

Ms. Jane raised her hand to get the student's attention. She announced that it was time for each student to take out their exploratory reading books and get into their reading groups. It was 9:15 am on a Friday in the fifth-grade classroom that held twenty-five students. She directed the children to begin their reading as she signaled to Xavier, who speaks no English and is only fluent in Spanish, and Zora, who had very limited English speaking ability but could piece together a few words, to come to the carpet area. Xavier and Zora sat together at the same group. Although Ms. Jane signaled the two students to come to the carpet area so that she could read out loud to them as they followed along, they looked at each other, confused. Ms. Jane had already sat in her chair on the carpet, as all the other students in the class had begun working in their groups, reading out loud with one another. Xavier and Zora, still confused, decided to do what everyone else was doing. They pulled out their books from their desk and remained seated. The teacher, continued to repeat herself and asked for them to join her on the carpet. They continued to look around the room. With a bit of a louder tone, Ms. Jane told Xavier and Zora to come to the carpet. She had begun waving her hands and using hand signals to better communicate to the two students. Eventually, one of their classmates who spoke Spanish chimed in and explained to them that they had to go sit with Ms. Jane. Xavier and Zora moved to the carpet area and opened their book. Ms. Jane started to read the chapter, in English, as the students "followed" along. As I walked closer to the carpet area, I realized that the pages that Xavier and Zora were on, were not the pages that Ms. Jane was reading. Although she was aware that the students did not

understand what she is saying, she began asking them simple questions about the book. Questions like, “What is the character's name?” She would ask these questions, but Xavier and Zora would stare at her blankly. She would continue to repeat the question, but she would receive the same response. Xavier turns to Zora, and says the word “Que?” which, with my minimum Spanish comprehension, knew that he was asking her “what?” Zora looked at him and shrugged her shoulders and both students put their heads in their books. Ms. Jane eventually stopped asking questions and continued to read and finish the chapter.

The language barrier between Ms. Jane and the students who spoke no English limited their communication as well as the students understanding of the story and what they were doing. The language barrier made it difficult for students who have a monolingual teacher, who does not speak the same language as them, to navigate through daily classroom activities. This limits a child's learning abilities and limits the student from receiving a decent education. Because of these factors, my study asks: How do teacher-student and student-student interactions and engagement vary among students with limited English proficiency in a predominantly Latin American urban school classroom?

An urban public elementary school, located in Hartford, Connecticut where more than 90% of the students are Latino, inspired me to centralize my research focus on Latin American students. I chose to focus on Latin Americans because of different incidents and stereotypes, mostly negative, of students from Latin America who solely speak Spanish, with limited or no English-speaking abilities within the classroom. I have noticed, based on work that I have done in other schools, that these student- teacher interactions were mostly negative, to the extent in which the teacher degraded the student, were harsher in language and tone, or isolated the student from the rest of the class because of their limited English speaking ability.

Reasons as to why I chose to research this group of students is because of former classes such as Latinos in Education taught by former professor at Trinity College, Andrea Dyrness. Latinos in Education really grasped my interest in this topic because this course directly focused on how Latinos are treated differently in American schooling. Many of the works which I read during this course primarily showed that Latino students were treated negatively not only due to cultural differences, but for Latino students, their lack of English speaking ability is frowned upon to some extent. The significance of doing this research and choosing this group is because of the many stereotypes that have been associated with Latin American students being labeled as lazy because they are unable to do the classroom work. Understanding that Latin American students are not lazy, but the language barrier is what is stopping them from performing to their best abilities, will potentially lead to a better understanding from teachers and other school officials. When these limited English speaking students are unable to communicate there are many obstacles that they face daily.

Based on twenty-five days of observations conducted on teacher-student and the student-student interactions in one predominantly Latino elementary school in Hartford, CT I observed that Spanish-speaking students who have limited English proficiency levels were more heavily dependent upon student-student interactions with their bilingual peers to navigate through classroom activities. Overall, there were three specific findings in my study. First, looking at the five limited proficiency students, there was a strong dependence on positive verbal and physical student-student interactions which was seen as a survival mechanism for students who did not speak the same language as their teacher. Second, when student and teacher cannot communicate in the same language, or when a Spanish-speaking student does not receive help or guidance from neither the teacher or peers, this led the student to feel embarrassed, caused them to fend

for themselves, which led to disengagement in classroom activities. Third, although English-speaking educators may perceive students speaking in their native language as a negative, these students tend to be more engaged when able to participate in their native language. This was beneficial because part of learning requires students to communicate and actively engage in activities and when students are not able to engage, then they are being deprived of an education to some extent.

## **Background**

Located in an urban community within the state of Connecticut, this predominantly Hispanic non-magnet public elementary school was open to children of all ethnicities, but served more than 90% of Latin American students. The classroom where I conducted my research was recommended to me by a bilingual teacher who taught bilingual education at that school. When I explained to her the basis of my research project, she automatically suggested a fifth-grade class. When I asked her why that classroom, she explained that there were multiple students within that class who have multiple English Language verbal and comprehension proficiency levels. The teacher of that fifth-grade class, was a Caucasian female, approximately early thirties, and monolingual in English. All names are pseudonyms in this research. I observed a fifth-grade classroom that had Latin American students who had different levels of English proficiency. The teacher, Ms. Jane, spoke no Spanish and only knew a few basic words, but not nearly enough to be considered a moderate Spanish speaker.

When I first entered the classroom, I saw about twenty-five students seated in five groups of about five students each. To my realization, Ms. Jane, purposely grouped the students in this way. I noticed that five students with limited English were scattered amongst other students who were fluent in English or those considered bilingual. Although my research design did not

include a teacher interview to confirm this, the seating arrangement strongly suggests that Ms. Jane intentionally placed her five non-English speaking students in groups so that bilingual students would be able to help the students with limited to English proficiency.

## **Research Method**

I decided to use qualitative data as my primary source. I chose this method of data collection because I focused exclusively on experiences of these Latin American students in the classroom and the way that they interacted with their teachers. During my observations, I took detailed field notes that looked at the student to student interactions, when students were speaking in Spanish, the physical and verbal reactions the teacher gave to the students as well as the physical and verbal interactions the students had with the five limited English proficiency students. Although I took very detailed notes, I do have limited Spanish speaking and comprehending capabilities which limited my understanding of what the students who spoke solely Spanish would be saying, I closely listened and detailed all that I could. I made sure that I did not use any personal information that would identify students. I did not sample participants either. Because I did observations as my primary research method, to be sure that I did not disclose any personal information in my notes about the students and teacher, I used a coding method that was recently introduced to me. I looked solely at five students within the classroom who have limited English proficiency. I used pseudonyms for each of the students and they are listed below:

**Victor-** Boy who spoke no English.

**Wilma-** Girl who spoke neither English or Spanish to the teacher, but knew moderate English and spoke fluent Spanish with peers.

**Xavier-** Boy who spoke no English.

**Yari-** Boy who spoke moderate English

**Zora-** Girl who spoke moderate English.

**Ms. Jane-** Caucasian, monolingual (English) teacher.

Xavier and Yari spoke fluent Spanish, but no English. Zora also spoke fluent Spanish, but moderate English. When I use the term “moderate English,” this refers to the Latin American students who were able to transition between Spanish and English. These students only knew a few words in English but were able to piece words together so that students and teachers understood what they were trying to say, to some extent. When I use the term “no English” I was referring to the Latin American students who did not speak English at any time in the classroom while interacting with the teacher and other students.

I also looked at the teacher’s reactions to the students with various English proficiency levels. For example, if she reacted negatively or positively in a physical manner by removing the student from the group, sending the student out of the room, helping the student get on track, or if the negative/ positive reaction was verbal. Verbal interactions included either positive or negative interactions such as, yelling at the student, using harsh or mean words, positive compliments, or allowing the student to speak with other students to receive help. Teacher reactions play a major role in student success. One study found that students’ beliefs about how much adults at school care about them is associated with higher levels academic outcomes (Riconscente, 2014). Evidence also showed that caring teachers who actively listened to their students as well as encouraged Latino students, led to these students having a more positive outcome at school.

I looked at the student- student interactions within the classroom between the five students with different English speaking proficiency levels and the students in the classroom who spoke fluent English. For example, if the fluent English speaking students in the class were

willing to help the five students follow along in the classroom I used the same codes that I used with the teacher- student interactions, where I coded either verbal positive/negative reactions or physical negative/positive reactions. Verbal positives/negatives will include: fluent English-speaking students explaining the directions to one of the four students in Spanish, I listened for positive Spanish and English compliments such as “bueno”, “excelente,” “nice work,” or vice versa. I looked at physical positives and negatives which included the fluent English students turning to the right page for the student, helping them gather their materials, and explaining directions/ working together on classroom work. Similar to the codes used with the teachers about verbal and physical negative and positive interactions, I have used the same coding method for the student-student interactions. The codes used below are the verbal and physical codes that I used in my field notes to help me identify if the interaction was positive or negative for both forms of interactions.

**V+** Verbal Positive.

**V-** Verbal Negative.

**P+** Physical Positive.

**P-** Physical Negative.

I observed how the students with limited English speaking ability reacted based on their teacher’s reactions as well as their classmates’ reactions and how they are affected by it. I looked at whether the student continued to be engaged with their classmates in the activity, or continued to engage with the teacher, or if the student becomes disengaged. By disengaged, I was referring to actions such as remaining quiet, isolated themselves from the group, did not continue to participate in the activities, or refused to engage with the teacher and other classmates.

**Engaged-** Interaction continued.

**Disengaged-** Remained silent / isolated self from group.



My research did not require IRB approval. I decided that since I did not conduct interviews of the students in the classroom, then I did not need IRB approval. After I looked at the IRB Decision Tree, I realized that I did not use personal information about the children that I observed. Because I used a specific code when taking my notes that does not use personal information of any of the persons in the room, I am fine with not having IRB approval. Although I worked with children and that makes them a vulnerable population, I did not speak to the students. Another reason why I did not require IRB approval is because although I took notes on the observations that I witnessed, because I used coding to analyze and identify the specific children, if someone were to find these notes, they would not be able to identify the student that I referred to.

### **Research Documentation**

Written field notes were the easiest and most efficient way for me to document my observations. Because I preferred to not use my laptop in the classroom, I had a notebook in which I hand wrote all my observations during the class sessions and then I transcribed those handwritten notes onto a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet included the coding that I described in the research methods, along with the notes that I wrote within the spreadsheet to help me remember the context of the interaction. I have provided a screenshot of some of the coding that I used in the spreadsheet and a screenshot of the notes that I took on the spreadsheet as well. I have pasted these below:

E	F
N/A	X, NE, SV+, Engaged
N/A	W, ME, SV+, Engaged
R, ME, TV+, Disengaged	W, ME, SV-, Disengaged
N/A	W, NE, SV-, Disengaged
U, ME, TV-, Disengaged	Y, ME, SP+, Engaged
U, ME, TV+P+, Engaged	N/A
R, Y, ME, TV-, Disengaged	Y, ME, SV+, Engaged
V, Z, ME, TV-, Disengaged	N/A
Z, ME, TV+, Engaged	Z, ME, SV+, Engaged
X, NE, TV-, Disengaged	X, NE, SV-, Disengaged

A	B	C	D
Student (R, X, Y, Z)	Action/ Scene	Teacher- Student Interaction	Student (XR, X, Y, Z) Reaction (Engaged/ Disen
Student X	Enters room, confused, Doesn't know what to do. Steers blankly until spoken too.	(TV+) go take out book for reading	Engaged- Goes to seat, but still confused. Asks d
Student X	Enters room after ELL class, has to catch up with assignment, doesn't know what to do.	(TP+) takes out students material he	Engaged- Starts following what the class is doin
Student X	Comes back from ELL class late and walks into classroom in the middle of extended learn	(TV-) teacher calls him out in front o	Disengaged- shrugs shoulders and goes to seat
Student X	Working in group with student Z on reading and drawing.	N/A	N/A
Student X	Back to group work where students have started transitioning to new activity. He sits in f	N/A	Disengaged. Only because there is no interactio
Student R	Class group work during writing.	N/A Student will not speak to teach	N/A
Student R	Carpet Time with teacher. Students taking turns to share classroom expectations.	(TV+. Asks student to share an expe	Disengaged. Student remains silent, does not m
Student X	Group work for personal essays	N/A	N/A
Student Y	During group work writing time. Is sitting in the back, doesn't really understand the assign	(TV-). Teacher tells him to figure it o	Disengaged. Student begins to roll around on t
Student Y	Reading aloud during class reading time. However he is struggling because of his limite	(TV+ P+) Teacher points with him ar	Engaged. Student tries hard and is actually fully
Student Y	Group work math time. Student is confused and needs help. Raises his hand for help. bu	(TV-) Teacher assumes that he hasn	Disengaged. Student is upset and starts standin

I created a spreadsheet that included all the codes for the observations that documented my findings. Each of the five limited English proficiency students were listed on the spreadsheet, along with notes and codes about them. I documented observations that helped me answer the research question posed. One sample of my preliminary data included some of the first set of

observations that I witnessed. For example, the coding that I used identified which student I am referring to (V, W, X, Y, Z), the teacher-student and student-student interaction verbal positive/negative or physical positive/negative (TV/P+/-, SV/P +/-), and the outcome of that interaction, (Engaged or Disengaged).

## **Literature Review**

Unlike the secondary sources, my study focused on a smaller group of students which made for a better and closer, more intimate observation. The secondary sources looked at the academic outcomes based on the relationship between limited English proficiency levels of students whereas in my study, I looked at how students relied on student-student interactions and how they navigated through classroom activities. I also focused on the ways in which different interactions between teachers and these students engaged or disengaged these students. Because my research is more intimate, I was able to get more insightful observations that I turned into analysis.

The relationship between teachers and their students plays a vital role in a student's success in the classroom. If a student feels attacked, disliked, or feels like their teacher is limiting them then they are most likely to disengage from class participation. For Spanish-dominant students in an English-dominant classroom, the teacher—student relationships are hard to develop in a positive manner due to reasons such as language barriers and cultural differences. But English-speaking teachers may have different feelings about their students using their primary language within the classroom. Some may find it as a nuisance, distraction, or offensive in their classrooms, while others may support the idea of having students using their dominant language to better understand class material and interacting with peers (Cordasco, 1975). Like the predominantly Latino population at the school where I did my research is focused on, the

teachers in the classes are white while more than 90% of the students are Hispanic.

Automatically, there is a cultural difference because of the ethnic differences. Another factor being a central reason as to why teacher student relationships among Latino students sometimes fail is due to the way in which teachers respond to these students. These cultural and language barriers were extremely evident throughout my observations. When giving instructions to the students, Ms. Jane was only able to communicate with the students who understood English. For the students in the class who had limited to no-English proficiency, they were unable to understand instructions and participate unless their peers translated for them. This was a major barrier because many of these students were disengaged in the activities, which does affect their learning. Language and cultural differences are one of multiple barriers that affect these students learning. Another is the way in which teachers react to these students, and the way in which they show their support for these students.

A teacher's reaction to a student can be the cause of a student remaining engaged in classroom activities and participating with other students, or the reason that a student disengages from classroom activity. In research done by Guadalupe Valdes, the ethnographer speaks of the first-hand experiences of immigrant students and how the behaviors of their teachers affect the way that they act. For example, Valdes relates the experience of a Hispanic student who spoke no English, but felt comfort because he could tell by the "gentleness" in the teacher's voice that she was a supportive and kind person who would be willing to help him (Valdes, 2001).

Although this student was unable to understand what the teacher was saying, her tone played a major role in his level of comfort and willingness to approach her and signal that he was confused. The tone of the teacher is highly effective of the student. My study analyzed teacher reactions as well as student reactions depending on the feeling, positive or negative, that they

received from their educator. If a student is speaking Spanish within the classroom and receives a negative reaction from their teacher for engaging in this form of communication, then they are most likely to disengage from the class. The complete opposite may occur if the teacher's reaction is more positive towards the student. Although a student may not speak the same language as their teacher, tone and body language does play a large representation within communication.

The researcher and ethnographer, Riconscente, who focuses on the treatment of students by their teachers and how the treatment by teachers affects the student's' ability to learn and feel cared. The study found that students' beliefs about how much adults at school care about them is associated with higher levels academic outcomes (Riconscente, 2014). Teacher reactions and interest levels play a major role in all students. In my study, the focus is on Latino students within a public school who are faced with various English language proficiency levels. If a teacher shows interest in her students work, then students are more likely to be engaged in the class and participate in classroom activities. In the Riconscente study, a teacher caring attitudes towards Latino students were observed and the reactions and feelings of the students were documented as well. Evidence also showed that caring teachers who actively listened to their students, as well as encouraged these Latino students, led to these students having a more positive outcome at school. These Latino students were more engaged within the classroom. In a similar study to Riconscente, according to Perez (2000), "caring teachers encourage students' identification with school and engagement in learning." This relates to Latino students and their English language proficiency level because when a teacher encourages students regardless of their ability to speak the same language, then they will witness that those students will engage in the class and socialize with other students. Another focus in the research study by Riconscente

addresses English language proficiency among Latino students. He states that Latino students who have minimal to no English language speaking ability face an additional challenge to achievement and motivation in the classroom if they do not feel cared for by their teachers. This relates to the current research because if teachers give negative reactions and are less supportive of students who speak another language then this leads to disengagement within the classroom as well as student's self-efficacy (Riconscente, 2014). Positive encouragement of the limited to non-English proficiency level students in the classroom to use their native language is seen at times and during those moments, the students are happier, are focused, and are actually accomplishing their work. The same can be said if there are negative reactions to these students using their native language. If expressed in the wrong way, students may feel embarrassed and then disengage from class activities.

In the fifth-grade class that I observed, it was evident that the reaction of the teacher does affect the limited English speaking students. If the teacher gave negative reactions to the students speaking in their native language, then those students would remain silent or become disengaged from the classroom activities. Similarly, if the students felt like the teacher was speaking to them in a gentle tone, was giving them extra help, then they were more willing to be engaged in the classroom activities.

When limited English proficiency students feel like they are outcast or that they do not meet the standards required to be a part of the school, they are more likely to disengage from trust issues as well with their teachers (Irizarry & Williams, 2013). English language proficiency affects students' engagement based on the way that their teacher responds to the students use of their native language. Teachers who react negatively to the students use of their native language causes students to feel unwelcomed within the classroom. Previous research and literature has

shown that when these students feel like they are outcast or that they do not meet the standards required to be a part of the school, they are more likely to disengage and form trust issues as well with their teachers. When a student feels like they are unable to trust their teacher due to negative responses, then the students' confidence is then affected and then begin to pull themselves away from classroom interactions. Teacher-student interactions have a vital role in Latino student's willingness to learn and engage in the classroom activities. My research focused on the way in which one teacher reacted to the Hispanic students who had various levels of English language proficiency. Based on this teacher's' reactions, I observed the way that the student reacts to the reaction received. This research is important because if teachers can understand how their actions affect Latino students, then their reactions to the use of Spanish in the classroom may change.

Overall, my study used the secondary resources as a way to support the idea that teachers plays a vital role in the teaching and engaging of Latin American students who speak limited English. Like the secondary resources, my research used qualitative data as primary source evidence. There are some differences that I found in my research that was not touched on in the secondary resources. For example, some of the secondary sources uses qualitative data as primary sources, but these included interviews as well as observations. Although other ethnographers have studied these dynamics across multiple schools, my study focuses on one classroom to give us a more intimate picture of five Spanish-speaking students and their English-speaking teacher. My study showed direct interactions between the teacher and each of the five students differently but showed how the interactions can affect them in the same way, such as disengaging or engaging in classroom activities.

### **Three Key Themes**

#### **Survival Mechanisms**

In the classroom with twenty-five students where the majority speak Spanish, who were taught by a monolingual Caucasian teacher, named Ms. Jane, a strong dependence on positive verbal and physical student- student interactions was a survival mechanism for students with limited English proficiency. Students who faced the challenge of not understanding what their teacher was communicating to them tend to rely on the other students in the class who did speak the same language. Multiple observations showed how the five limited-English students relied on their English-Spanish bilingual classmates to help them navigate through classroom work and activities.

Xavier, for example spoke no English, and his way of navigation was more dependent upon his classmates. In order for him to understand directions, communicate, and interact, this student mostly relied on student- student interactions. In one incident, Ms. Jane provided the students with instructions to take out their reading books for exploratory learning time. The students were to work in their groups, while taking turns reading out loud, as well as discussing with their group mates about what they had read. While the students worked, Ms. Jane was circling the room, as if eavesdropping on their conversations, making sure the students were on track. At this point, it is 9:45am and the English Language Learners (ELL) were returning from their bilingual class that they had once a day for one hour. Xavier returned to class from their English as a Second Language (ESL) class, but he returned late. When he entered the classroom, Ms. Jane automatically began to question him, knowing that he did not understand, or was able to respond in English. At that moment, the student blankly stared at Ms. Jane while she continued to repeat the question, “What took you so long to return to class?” Xavier then continued to stare at her until he said the word “bano,” which meant “bathroom” in Spanish. Ms. Jane, satisfied that she had now received a suitable answer, reiterated her point that he needed to



return to class right after his ESL class and make no other stops along the way. Xavier, embarrassed, walked back to his seat and remained silent. He did not speak to anyone at his group and did not take any of his materials out to participate in the class activity. At that moment, the student had disengaged himself from the class due to the embarrassment and the negative verbal reaction he had received from Ms. Jane.

After a few minutes, one of the students began to interact with Xavier and they had a conversation in Spanish. From my observations, the student explained what materials he needed and they began to look at the reading book together. Xavier began to engage in the activity due to the fact that the student-student interaction was a positive verbal. The positive verbal being that the student explained what is happening in the class at the moment and then told him which book he needed. Xavier also experienced a physical positive with this student- student interaction because Xavier's classmate, took the time to open the book and followed along with Xavier while they read together. With the support of the classmate, Xavier became highly engaged in the classroom activity. Based on the student-student interaction. It was clear that when Xavier was able to receive directions and communicate with a classmate who could understand him, he started to engage in the activity and became highly engaged with the support of his classmate. I witnessed multiple instances with students that followed this pattern.

An instance in which positive verbal and physical student- student interactions operated as a sense of survival happened when a negative teacher verbal interaction disengaged a student and then a positive verbal or physical student-student interaction became the survival mechanism for a Latino student who had limited English proficiency. As noted, Yari had limited English proficiency. He knew only a few English words, but did need to communicate in Spanish to understand instruction and classroom activities. The students were once again doing group work.

Ms. Jane provided instruction to the class where she stated that they were to work in their groups on answering a particular question about one of the characters in the novel that they were reading. As the students got to work, Yari raised his hand with a confused look on his face in order to get the teacher's attention. The teacher saw his hand raised but did not ask him what he needed, but instead, told him, in front of the class, that he needed to put his hand down and go back to doing the activity that she had instructed. Yari, although not fluent in English, understood that he had basically received a negative response from the teacher. This was evident because of the actions that preceded this interaction. Yari began to throw pieces of paper at the other students who were having discussions, he began rolling around on the floor, and was standing and jumping from classroom chairs. At this moment, the student was disengaged from the classroom activity and was being seen in a negative spotlight not only by Ms. Jane but also by his peers.

There is a change in the student's engagement when a student-student interaction occurs. A female student in Yari's group got his attention and explained to him in Spanish the instructions that were given. Yari engaged with the student in his group and they began to work together to have the discussion that was assigned to the class. Yari, who spoke moderate English, had a positive verbal student interaction with another student that led to him being engaged in classroom work. The interaction between Ms. Jane and Yari led him to feel like he was being ignored, was a nuisance, and because Ms. Jane told him to go back to doing his work in front of the entire class, knowing that he has limited English proficiency, put the student in the spotlight where he may not have felt comfortable. The positive student- student interaction led to the student feeling like he understood what he was doing and could participate in the classroom activity. The positive verbal from the student-student interaction, being that the student explains

what was happening in the class at the time and then agreed to work with Yari throughout the rest of the activity led to positive engagement for both students. The student took the initiative to help Yari because she realized that he did not understand what the instructions were.

A similar classroom situation that followed the pattern of these five students using student-student interactions as a survival mechanism, happened through my observations with Victor, who spoke no English. Ms. Jane had provided instruction for all the students to move to the carpet area so that the students could have a class discussion and take turns voicing their opinions. Victor could not understand the instructions that were provided, and he blankly stared at Ms. Jane hoping to make some form of eye contact that would help her witness the distress in his eyes. Ms. Jane, who was usually very resourceful, failed to provide some form of communication that would better help Victor to somewhat understand that he needed to move to the carpet area. Instead, she looked at him, and then turned her head back to the rest of the class. Eventually, he made his way to the carpet area and sat with his peers. While each student took a turn voicing their thoughts, when it was Victor's turn to speak, he once again stared blankly at Ms. Jane, as if he was trying to signal her that he needed help. Ms. Jane stared back at him and once again provided no assistance, but instead repeated the question in English. The student said nothing and put his head down. Victor, who spoke no English, experienced a negative physical teacher-student interaction because Ms. Jane failed to physically make the effort to find a way that can help the student understand what was happening. The role of the student-student interaction became the survival mechanism for this student. Upon witnessing Victor's difficulty, one of the students turned to another student in the class and said "[You] translate for him!" With that being said, the student translated the directions of the discussion. Victor responded to his peer, who then translated Victor's response to the class and to Ms. Jane. Based on this

observation, we can see how the teacher-student interaction was negative and caused Victor to remain silent, put his head down, and he became disengaged. With the support of the student-student interaction, Victor was able to voice his opinion and participate in the classroom discussion even though he needed to have a translator. The effort of his peers made him feel included within the classroom and made him an active participant. These interactions showed how teacher-student and student-student interactions vary among Latin American students who have limited- no English language proficiency. Another aspect that can be looked at based on these interactions is the way that these students felt when put into situations where they cannot respond or comprehend instructions from the instructor.

### **Follow the Leader**

This section is titled “Follow the Leader” because the five students whom this research was focused on became disengaged from classroom activities due to reasons beyond their control. In order to get back on track or to attempt to understand what was happening within the classroom, these students would follow what other students were doing due to their language barrier. When students and teachers are unable to communicate due to language barriers or when a Latino student who has limited English proficiency does not receive help or guidance from neither the teacher or peers, this led the student to feel embarrassed, caused them to fend for themselves, and led to disengagement in classroom activities. These situations can lead to having negative emotions and reactions. When students receive no guidance or instruction from neither their teacher or fellow classmates, these limited English proficiency students tend to partake in “following the leader.” By this, I mean, that limited English proficiency students observed the other students in the classroom and would do the same actions as their classmates who were able to understand the instructions. These actions included, movement activities, taking out specific

materials to do classroom work, and transitioning times. Although these students did not understand the reason as to why they were doing these actions, they believed that it was the right thing to do because all their peers were doing it. This observation, along with others, helped me further answer my research question that focused on how teacher- student and student- student interactions in an urban school classroom vary among Latin American students. Throughout my observations, there were multiple instances where the language barrier between student and educator, as well as receiving no guidance from teacher or peers, that limited English proficiency students felt embarrassed and were left to play “follow the leader.”

Ms. Jane gathered the students’ attention and asked them to move to the carpet area to have a class meeting on expectations. The students moved to the rug area and were provided with instructions by their teacher. She told the class that they would each go around the circle and would have a chance to express at least one of the classroom expectations and would then state how they would rate themselves on following that expectation. The students began to speak one by one. When it got to Wilma’s turn, she blankly stared at the floor. She refused to make eye contact with the teacher or with any of her peers. Ms. Jane repeated the instruction to Wilma, in English, and waited for a response. Wilma continued to look blankly at the floor. The teacher and the students continued to wait in complete silence for a response. Wilma, as stated prior, spoke moderate English and could only comprehend a few basic words in English. She did not understand English very well, and better communicated with her peers in Spanish. Ms. Jane, did not speak Spanish, so she continued to repeat the instructions in English. There was a language barrier occurring in this classroom situation. One of Wilma’s classmates turned to her and in English, told her that it was her “turn to go.” Wilma continued to stare at the carpet and refused to provide an answer. At that moment Wilma was put into a spotlight where she was the center

of attention. By the concerned look on her face and her refusal to make eye contact with Ms. Jane and her fellow classmates, she showed signs of feeling embarrassed. Although Ms. Jane did not intend to embarrass the student or make her feel like she was in a state of insecurity, because there was a language barrier between educator and student, communication was nearly impossible without a translator. Although the teacher did nothing wrong within this instance, the student did not feel comfortable. Although the teacher provided a verbal positive by repeating the instructions to Wilma, the student was disengaged because of the limited English comprehension and speaking ability. When Wilma's classmate informed her that it was her turn to speak, Wilma remained silent. If the student expressed this instruction in Spanish to Wilma, then there is a high possibility that Wilma would have responded in Spanish, but because the classmate was communicating in English with her, it was harder for her to understand what was being told of her. Wilma, who spoke moderate English, encountered a verbal positive from another student and was still disengaged. This was due to the language of communication that was used, and in this situation, it was English. The classmate, as well as the teacher, did nothing wrong, but due to the lack of English comprehension, Wilma was unable to participate and became disengaged. Lack of engagement in the classroom, especially for students who are learning in a language other than their dominant language will not help the students learn. There were other instances that prove this claim to be true.

When students are not provided with instruction as to how to participate in the next activity, it is difficult to be actively engaged regardless of any language barriers. If it is difficult to actively engage in classroom activities without any instructions, for students who do not speak the same language as their educator, it is even more difficult to comprehend classroom instruction that would allow them to actively engage. when students are unable to rely on

instruction from their teacher or peers in their native language, then these students tend to “follow the leader.” In this observation, the students had just had their classroom meeting and the teacher had instructed students to return to their seats and prepare themselves for reading. Xavier had recently entered the classroom and noticed all the students on the carpet. He waited for no instruction upon entering the classroom and sat on the carpet. Unfortunately, he entered as the class was dismissing back to their assigned seats to prepare themselves for reading. Looking extremely confused, he had begun to stare at students as they returned to their seats. Ms. Jane, who was occupied gathering her materials for the upcoming lesson, did not reiterate the instruction for Xavier, so he sat there looking around the room. Although the teacher did not purposely ignore or not acknowledge the student, if Ms. Jane did have to repeat the instruction to Xavier, he would be unable to comprehend due to the fact that he does not speak or understand English. Xavier, who spoke no English, did not receive any instruction from his teacher, which from the outside looking in, could be seen as a verbal negative, and because of this, the student was disengaged and unable to participate in the next activity.

The situation was worsened when Xavier attempted to communicate with one of his classmates in Spanish and the student walked past him and continued to gather their materials for reading. Xavier, who spoke no English attempted to communicate with one of his peers and the student walked past him and provided no help which led Xavier to remain disengaged. At this moment, Xavier was completely confused, so he decided to take matters into his own hands. He realized that all of the students were returning to their seats and taking out their reading materials. He stood up from the carpet, walked over to his desk and started taking out the materials that he saw everyone else retrieving. It was evident that he was simply progressing through this transition period by observing other students. This could be understood by the way

his eyes were looking around the classroom and specifically looking at another student's materials on their desk to see what he needed. In both of these encounters, the student could not rely on the teacher for instruction due to a language barrier, and he could not rely on his classmate because they were occupied following the instructions that were provided. Xavier had to follow what the majority of the class was doing and although he did not understand why he was taking out those materials, he did it because he saw everyone else in the class doing it.

An observation that was made that was different than the concept of "follow the leader" but was focused on a moment where a student was faced with high embarrassment and completely disengaged herself from classroom activity involved an observation that included Zora. Similar to Xavier, Zora also leaves class for one hour of English as a Second Language class (ESL). Zora returned to classroom and sat at her desk. Her classmates had just had writing time on the computers and they had begun transitioning to the next subject. She had no idea what was happening and went to her seat. She began to look around the classroom at all the commotion that was taking place. Similar to the incident with Xavier and Ms. Jane, Zora attempted to make eye contact with teacher in hopes that she provides her with instructions. Her eyes followed the teacher's every move for approximately 2 minutes. Eventually, the teacher noticed that this student had not transitioned to the next activity and she stared back at the student and said, "if you need help, you need to ask for it, not just sit there." The student, although she did not completely understand the teacher's words, she did understand moderate English and by the expression on her face, was not satisfied with the response she had received. Zora wrinkled her eyebrows and lowered her head as if to signal that she had faced some form of embarrassment. Zora did not attempt to engage in the following classroom activity, but instead disengaged and sat silently throughout the next activity. Zora, who spoke moderate English, had



a negative verbal interaction with the teacher, when she was told that she needed to ask for help instead of sitting there, and because of this, the student disengaged from classroom activity.

After that interaction with the teacher, Zora did not communicate with fellow classmates to ask for help or instructions as to what was occurring. With that observation, it was clear that when a student was signaling for help from the educator but received a negative response and disengaged from the classroom activity, if they did not ask for help from classmates or continued to not receive aid from their teacher, then they would remain disengaged from class. Similar forms of disengagement may occur when students are limited from using their native language to communicate with others.

### **Engaged Without English**

Although English-speaking educators sometimes perceive Spanish-speaking students conversing in their native language as a negative, these students tend to be more engaged when able to discuss learning in their native language. This is beneficial because part of learning requires students to communicate and actively engage in activities. When students are not able to engage, then they are being deprived of an education to some extent. During my observations, I witnessed moments where the students were more engaged in classroom discussions and activities when they were able to communicate in Spanish with their peers. This observation was different than the students relying on their peers for instruction or using their peers as a survival mechanism. In those instances, the students were laughing, speaking, and at some moments having conversations about the work they were doing. With my limited Spanish speaking and comprehending capabilities, I was able to understand words and phrases that students used throughout their conversations which was why I was able to claim that the students at times,

were using Spanish to have conversations that are related to class work as well as conversations about personal lives.

A specific encounter with Xavier and Wilma demonstrated how students were more engaged in classroom activity when able to speak Spanish with their peers. The teacher had given instruction to the class that it was time to work at centers. These centers each had a subject that the students would focus on. These subjects included reading, writing and math, however, a majority of the centers were reading and writing. Xavier and Wilma had different levels of English proficiency. Xavier spoke no English, while Wilma spoke moderate English. Wilma struggled with forming sentences and comprehending in English but knew a few words. The teacher put the two students, who also sat in the same group, to work together on the carpet to work on their reading and writing skills. As I observed these students working, I realized that they were helping each other while communicating in Spanish. Xavier and Wilma were looking at the writing sheets in front of them and were going line by line to circle the letter “o” and the letter “a.” This task was extremely beneficial to both students. Wilma used her moderate English abilities to help Xavier identify the two letters. Wilma would point to the letter on the sheet and say the name of the letter in Spanish but would then say the English version. Xavier would then repeat those letters while pointing to them on the sheet that was provided to him. The students did this for about twenty minutes and then Ms. Jane provided other instructions for all groups to stop where they were and to return to their seats. Both Xavier and Wilma, with various levels of English proficiency, were experiencing both positive verbal and physical student-student interactions which helped them remain engaged and learning in the classroom. This observation made it clear that when Spanish speaking students who have limited English ability were able to communicate and express what they knew in their native language, these students were learning

and remained engaged. Furthermore, because Ms. Jane clearly supported the students engaging in Spanish during group work time, the students had the opportunity to show what they knew to their classmates and to the teacher. Although the students may not have realized it, but they were in some sense providing bilingual education to one another.

Another observation that was made where two students were communicating in Spanish during reading time and one student who spoke no English was able to participate in the discussion with his peers. Victor spoke no English. Not only did he not speak any English, but he was also new to the school. Victor had not begun his ESL classes and was in the classroom where he was unable to communicate and comprehend in English. Ms. Jane in this aspect played no part, because she did not speak Spanish and was unable to translate for him. The teacher provided Victor with a Spanish version of the book that they were currently reading and “instructed” him to follow along. The students were in their groups and had begun to find evidence in the book that would answer the question that was provided by the teacher. Victor stared blankly into the book, flipping from page to page and finally ending up in a section of the book that the students had not yet read. Victor was unable to participate and was completely disengaged and confused. One of his classmates began to interact with Victor in Spanish and the two started to have a fruitful discussion. The student turned to the right page and was reading in Spanish to Victor. The students continued to communicate, and the conversation continued where they started to jump from page to page finding evidence that supported the answers to the teacher's questions. At one point, Victor said “¿Que?” meaning “What?” in Spanish to indicate that he did not understand something that the student was trying to explain to him. The two students continued to work together, and their conversation was occasionally interrupted by laughter and talking about their weekend, but would always refocus on the book when the

teacher gave the class a timing reminder. The students continued with this discussion in Spanish until the teacher asked for the classes attention. She then, in English, asked each pair/group what they had discussed and to prove the evidence that supported their answers. When it got to Victor and his partner, his partner was able to provide the answers that the two had worked on to the rest of the class and the teacher and guide them to the pages where they found their answers. It was evident that the students had been doing the work during the time that they were conversing in Spanish. It was interesting to observe how the students were able to complete their assignment and at the same time be able to have casual conversation about their weekend. Because Victor who spoke no English, was able to have a positive verbal interaction with one of the students in his class and was fully engaged the entire time because he was able to do so in his native language. Victor was able to show what he understood from the story and proved that although he may not have discussed in English, he was still able to fully participate and provide answers to the question using his native language. It is evident that students who are in a classroom where they do not speak the same language as their educator are facing roadblocks to their learning, but it is also clear that we need to realize that these students are not “lazy” or “are not trying as hard” because Victor proved that by using his Spanish speaking abilities, he was able to communicate with his peers and get all the work done. In both instances, Ms. Jane allowed the students to continue their communicating in Spanish. This was extremely positive because she was allowing them to learn and express themselves in the way that they best knew how. If Ms. Jane were to intentionally put a stop to the communication in Spanish, between the limited English proficiency students and their peers, there would be a different outcome.

When a student was unable to communicate in their native language or was able to engage in a conversation in their native language and was told to stop, there can be

misinterpretations of that encounter. These misinterpretations could lead to assumptions from the student that their language is not wanted in the classroom, or that they are being told to be silent and not voice opinions. These assumptions by a student could turn a positive interaction into a negative one. This was like the observation made with Yari. Ms. Jane had instructed all students that it was time to do some classroom work on the smartboard. Because of this, the students were asked to move to the carpet area so that they could see better and so that they would be able to work together as a class. Yari spoke moderate English, but still heavily depended on Spanish in some instances to understand instruction. There were multiple occasions where Yari had side conversation with his peers in Spanish while he transitioned to another activity or if the teacher allowed for classroom “brain breaks.” During that time, the teacher was speaking with the class and explaining what they were going to do on the smartboard. After she had completed her instruction, she began to pull up the activity on the smartboard. Some students saw this opportunity as a time to conversate. Ms. Jane was fully aware that the students were having their personal side conversations and was accepting of this while she prepared the activity. She returned to her seat on a chair that was placed on the carpet, that indicated she was the leader, while her students sat on the carpet below her. She instructed the students to be silent so that they may begin their activity. The students followed the instruction except for Yari who was still having a conversation with a classmate in Spanish. The teacher who was accepting of her students using Spanish in the classroom, turned to Yari and tells him that it was time to focus. Yari, understood to some extent, but continued to speak with his classmate in Spanish. Ms. Jane then took her fingers and passed them along her lips in order to signal a “mouth is zipped” signal to Yari. He clearly understood this signal and stopped talking. In a matter of one minute, Yari became very disruptive. He began to roll around on the floor, yelled at other students and the

teacher, and threw objects at his classmates. At this point, Yari was completely disengaged from the classroom activity. Because Yari had a negative verbal interaction with the teacher where she told him to stop speaking and a negative physical interaction when she signaled him to close his mouth. When Yari was able to communicate with his classmate in Spanish, he was engaged in their conversation, was laughing, and was paying attention to his classmate. However, when he was told to be silent, he disengaged from any form of communication and headed toward being disruptive and caused multiple instances of disturbance in the classroom. This observation supported the pattern represented in this analysis, that students tended to be more engaged when able to discuss in their native language. Ms. Jane, although she did not intend to express that she did not want the students to be speaking in Spanish, simply wanted to have the class be silent and focus on her. Because Yari continued to communicate with his classmate in Spanish while the remainder of the class was silent, Ms. Jane had to put all attention on Yari to get him to be silent.

In my research, Ms. Jane's reaction to her solely Spanish speaking students did affect her students. Ms. Jane, allowed her students to communicate in their Native language during group work time as long as the students remained on track and could provide an answer to the questions she posed. Ms. Jane had a very gentle tone with all of her students and would make comments such as "take your time" or "I know you can solve this." Her positivity and the supportive tone that she used with her students, did help her students be more willing to participate. There were instances in which her body language and her physical reactions to her students did cause them to disengage. For example, when she would put her finger to her lips, as a way of telling her students to be quiet, or when she closed her eyes, turned her head and pretended that she does not hear or see her students, showing that interest levels played a role in how students responded to being engaged or disengaged in classroom activities. This was similar

to the research by Valdez, a researcher who focuses on teacher tones and their effects on students, proves that positive tones that teachers use can affect their students and make them feel more comfortable.

## **Conclusion**

Student-student interactions among limited English proficiency students seemed to be a heavily reliable source for students who do not speak English but have an English educator. In order to be engaged in classroom activities, it was clear that students needed to have some form of a translator or be allowed to communicate in their native language. My study exposed that when students are in a situation where their dominant language is not spoken or understood, then they are left to discover a variety of ways to learn academic subjects. During moments of class discussions or group work, where the teacher was not leading the discussions, the five students who were the main focus within this study were more engaged, were actively learning, and appeared to be happier. They would speak with their peers and even attempt to do the assigned work to the best of their ability. As stated prior, this was because the students would speak in Spanish to their peers and interact using their dominant language. On the other hand, when the teacher led activities and students were responsible for working by themselves and presenting their answers to the group, that was where the disconnect occurred with limited English proficiency students. When singled out amongst the rest of the students, the five observed students tended to become worried because they were unable to respond in English. Even the students who spoke moderate English tend to disconnect when asked to respond to questions, or when put into the spotlight.

## **Going Forward**

My goal, now that this project is complete, is to identify the ways in which language barriers affects students from Latino backgrounds while in English instructed classrooms without bilingual education. I hope that this research not only helps identify the language barriers for Latin American students but for students who speak other languages and hopefully can bridge gaps. I hope that it will lead to follow up trainings or programs that will become more available to teachers and students that can help teachers better interact with students who speak predominantly Spanish. Bilingual programs that will be accessible to older students will also be beneficial. I was also informed by one of the bilingual teachers at the school that there are no bilingual programs for fifth graders in the school. If there is a negative treatment of Latin American students because of their language barrier that I can uncover, then hopefully programs for students in grades above the third grade will be able to have bilingual programs become available to them. Understanding that students being unable to use their native language serves as a learning barrier should help teachers create a curriculum that can accommodate these students and have them doing the same activities but in their language. This way all students remain engaged and can receive an equal learning opportunity.

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