

TEACHING SPANISH LITERACY TO ADULT LATINX LEARNERS: EXPLORING INTEREST, IMPACT, AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Non-profit organizations are frequently safe havens in the community where immigrants can find support during their transitional period of adaptation and adjustment to their new environment in the United States (Hung, 2007; Wilson, 2013). Many of these organizations have educational programs that focus on teaching English as a second language and on preparing immigrants to take the citizenship exam. However, offering literacy classes in the adult learners' native languages occurs with less frequency (Tamassia, Lennon, Yamamoto, & Kirsch, 2007). This qualitative case study explored the effectiveness of a U.S.-based pilot Spanish literacy program from the participants' experiences while developing first language (Spanish) literacy and learning some English, their second language. In addition, the implications for this program's continuance are shared and analyzed. Findings shed light on potential challenges and opportunities associated with incorporating first language literacy programs at non-profit organizations for adult learners who have experienced interruptions in formal school-based learning.

The Sunshine Center (pseudonym) is a comprehensive immigrant resource center offering hope and essential services to people who are new to the United States. As such, this Center is dedicated to providing immigrant families with support in immigration services, healthcare, and education. Currently, the Sunshine Center offers English as a second language (ESL) classes, citizenship preparation courses, and Spanish classes to non-Spanish speaking adults learning Spanish as a new language. The majority of the population served at the Sunshine

Center is Latinx¹ and, although they are learning to speak and understand spoken English, many of them do not know how to read or write in their native language (Spanish). The ESL classes taught at the Center focus on spoken literacy and oral communication. During the ESL classes, writing is only used to support pronunciation and provide a visual representation of challenging sounds. Volunteers teach some of the ESL classes and, because the target is for students to understand spoken English and communicate orally, first language (L1) literacy is rarely addressed in their sessions.

For this study, a Spanish literacy program was created specifically for the Sunshine Center's Latinx adult learners and implemented as a pilot L1 literacy program. This pilot program invited all native Spanish speakers at the Center who had received six years or less of formal schooling back in their native countries. It is important to note that some of the adult learners being served at the Center had never participated in formal schooling during their formative years in their countries of origin. The purpose of creating and incorporating a Spanish reading and writing literacy program into the Sunshine Center's services was to provide adult Latinx learners who experienced interruptions in formal school-based learning with the basic skills they need in their L1 to successfully build English literacy (Jiang & Kuehn, 2001; Ortega, 2009). The Spanish literacy program's curriculum was designed to be sensitive to the adult learners' social and personal needs in the United States and to provide relevant information they could use when learning English (see Appendix). The idea behind incorporating such an interdisciplinary literacy program was to promote L1 literacy while cultivating literacy in English and developing content knowledge that impacted the adult learners' lives. The Spanish literacy program was created to empower adult learners and expedite English language learning.

¹ In this manuscript, I use the term Latinx over Latino or Latina to "be inclusive of all genders and sexual orientation as well as to embrace a term generated and deployed by new generations of Latinx in the US" (Aldama, & González, 2019, p. viii)

Literature Review

Extensive research and publications on second language acquisition agree on the importance of strengthening L1 literacy to be successful in learning and acquiring a new language (Fitzgerald, 2006; Guo, 2018; Robinson & Altarriba, 2018). When learning a new language, individuals—consciously or unconsciously—compare second language (L2) content with information from their L1 in an attempt to find similarities and making learning easier. It is natural for English learners (ELs) to make mistakes when learning English, but, oftentimes, these mistakes can be clarified when similar concepts or ideologies are explained in the L1 (Rebuck, 2011). However, when students have not received formal schooling in their L1, it is difficult for them to make connections between the two languages, and learning English becomes an even more difficult process (Wojtowicz, 2006). Furthermore, learners who have emerging literacy in their L1 are likely to mainly learn English that is necessary for social communication.

The Latinx adult population served at the Sunshine Center mostly fall under the literacy education and second language learning for adults (LESLLA) umbrella. As such, these students are emergent readers and writers in both English and Spanish due to experiencing interruptions in formal school-based learning. Such interruptions can, in many instances, shape their access to 21st-century literacy skills, such as technology for educational and professional purposes specifically. Research by Campos Morán and Orantes (2010) explains the impact technology and other social factors are having on adolescent and adult learners in developing countries. As technology becomes more advanced globally, individuals in developing countries experience growing challenges to fully participate in highly print-literate societies because they have to learn (alphabetic) print literacy, numeracy, and also technology.

A consequence of increasing inequality surrounding access to education in developing countries is that adult learners do not have many choices of employment and cannot afford the increasingly higher demands of accessing reading and writing instruction in the 21st century. In a sense, Campos Morán and Orantes' (2010) idea of educational inequality aligns with what Freire (2014) calls oppression. For the majority of these LESLLA learners, technology, print-dependent societies, and learning the host country's language(s) as

adults are obstacles that can result in permanent exclusion from full participation in their new communities. For this reason, the Spanish literacy program was created in an initial attempt to prevent permanent social exclusion (due to inequitable access to literacy instruction) in this community.

The benefits associated with the program align with the extensive publications and seminal work on L2 acquisition that agree on the importance of strengthening L1 literacy to be successful in learning a new language (i.e., Fitzgerald, 2006; Guo, 2018; Krashen, 1984). Although oral English proficiency is critical for newcomers in the U.S., the demands placed by the text-driven American society requires these learners to also develop print literacy skills. For this reason, the Spanish literacy program focuses on developing and improving writing and reading abilities in the learners' L1 while promoting language skills transference in English. Importantly, this inquiry's primary concern was to explore the effectiveness of the Spanish literacy program from the participants' experiences while developing L1 literacy and learning some English, as well as the opportunities of this program in the future. Thus, two research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do participants describe their L1 development and L2 language acquisition in the Spanish literacy program?
2. How does the learning community (students and facilitator) describe their experiences in the Spanish literacy program?

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the effectiveness of the Spanish literacy program implemented at the Sunshine Center from the participants' perspectives and identify opportunities for the future. In this study, the literacy teaching practices were defined as the didactic approaches focused on providing this population of students with the ability to read and write in their L1 (Spanish) with the vision of better preparing them with the skills needed to learn English as a second language. The creation and implementation of this program sought to improve Spanish literacy and enhance English language learning among this vulnerable population of adult learners. In addition, this program and study had the vision of allowing interdisciplinary efforts among the Spanish and ESL instructors teaching Latinx LESLLA learners.

Design

According to Baxter and Jack (2008), the qualitative case study approach facilitates the examination of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. In this inquiry, a variety of data sources included the triangulation of three data sources: face-to-face interviews, observations, and a focus group, which also increases the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This contextually-based, diverse design and data collection process maximize the chances of exploring the issue through a variety of lenses allowing for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood. Thus, the goal of case study inquiries is to conduct “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., the activity or event, the process, amount of time, and/or individuals) based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, 2015, p. 469). In this specific research inquiry, a case study was used to conduct an in-depth exploration of the implementation of the Spanish literacy program (event and process) as well as its impact on participants and the organization.

Researcher’s Positionality

In this inquiry, my roles shifted between researcher and class instructor/volunteer. As a qualitative researcher, doctoral candidate, and volunteer at this organization, I understood the potential ethical concerns these roles could raise. As such, I took three steps to minimize those ethical concerns as much as possible. First, I met with all the participants before the study began and explained to them that their participation or withdrawal would not affect them in any way. Second, while grappling with the hopes of wanting this program to be helpful and successful for the organization and the participants, I decided to keep a researcher’s journal to reflect on my experiences. Last, I also maintained continuous communication and debriefings with the Sunshine Center’s Director of Education and my university professor to ensure my interpretations and actions remained as unbiased as possible throughout the study. All of the steps I took to minimize bias in the study complied with Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016)’ recommendations to minimize potential ethical conflicts or concerns in qualitative research.

This research project received ethical approval by the Sunshine Center’s ethics review board, and the agency approved, in its totality, the implementation of this study. In addition, all the participants in this

study signed a consent form (in Spanish) stating they understood the study, acknowledging they had the option to withdraw at any time without repercussions, and that it was their choice to participate. I provided a copy of the findings to the agency for future use and to be shared, at the agency’s discretion, with the participants. Furthermore, this study was conducted as part of one of my courses in my doctoral studies. My university institutional review board (IRB) also approved of this research project.

Context

This inquiry was conducted in a non-profit organization in the state of Maryland. The Sunshine Center is located in a highly populated urban setting in Baltimore. The Sunshine Center serves a large number of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—mainly from Spanish-speaking countries—in the Baltimore area and its surroundings. During weekdays, the first floor of its three-story building is divided into two spaces for teaching. The smallest space is an enclosed classroom used by a paid instructor who teaches advanced ESL students. The largest space is an open area for newcomers and beginners, where volunteers are assigned to different learners to primarily teach them conversational English. For this study, the cafeteria was offered as a space for implementing the Spanish literacy program and gathering data from the participants. The cafeteria, a small space located next to the open area, had a table, six chairs, and a standard-size whiteboard.

The Spanish literacy program’s curriculum follows the principles and linguistics foundations of an adult literacy program named ¡Yo, sí puedo! (Yes, I can!). The ¡Yo, sí puedo! methodology teaches knowledge about Spanish linguistics and print literacy according to the students’ learning needs using visual support and sound systems that promote self-discovery (Relys Díaz, 2005). Theoretical concepts are introduced in practical and meaningful ways to ensure that learners can access the information through their L1 and apply them in English. At this level, it is important to pay attention to common misunderstandings and misuses in the learners’ L1 through interactive activities that present real challenges where students can use that knowledge in a real-life context. In addition, each class introduces new topics of interest that motivate students and raise expectations about new relevant topics to come in future classes (Relys Díaz, 2005). The

continuous goal of the Spanish literacy curriculum, which aligns with the ¡Yo, sí puedo! program is to promote literacy through motivation, active engagement, and self-realization.

The Spanish literacy program was designed to meet the literacy demands of this population using cultural elements with the vision of making learning a relevant process. Parlakian and Sánchez (2006) explain in their study the importance of using culture in programs promoting early language and literacy learning and acquisition. According to them, teaching strategies for introducing language and literacy skills must “take into account issues of culture” (Parlakian & Sánchez, 2006, p. 55). As such, the components of this program are tailored-made for Latinx LESLLA learners and incorporate different activities focusing on proficiency demands as these pertains to reading and writing in the L1. At the same time, this program was also designed with the vision of teaching necessary skills required to be successful in the American society that go beyond language learning. Thus, materials were created to integrate topics such as American customs and traditions, politeness norms, the educational system in the United States, and content related to government and geography, to give learners necessary information they will need in the United States. The ideas of cultural and linguistic literacy are present in this program and align with the UNESCO’s vision of educating literate and global adults and societies (UNESCO, 2019) around the world.

Participants

The number of students in the Spanish literacy program fluctuated throughout the eight weeks because the tutoring services offered in The Sunshine Center are cataloged as “drop-in” services where students attend whenever they have time throughout the week. Although different students participated in the Spanish class at different times, only four adult learners (two females and two males), who attended consistently, agreed to participate in the study. All participants were adults who spoke Spanish as their L1 and were also ELs from El Salvador or Honduras. All names used in this study are pseudonyms; see Table 1 for more information about the participants, the levels of proficiency in their L1 and English, and their formal schooling background.

Table 1
Participants’ Information

Name	Age	Country of Origin	Proficiency in Spanish	Proficiency in English	Formal schooling background
Telma	30	El Salvador	Proficient in listening and speaking. Emergent proficiency in reading and writing.	Emergent proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	Six years of formal school in native country.
Tomás	32	El Salvador	Proficient in listening and speaking. Cannot read or write.	Newcomer, little to no proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	Did not attend formal school in native country.
Miguel	23	Honduras	Proficient in listening and speaking. Emergent proficiency in reading and writing.	Emergent proficiency in listening, speaking. Cannot read or write.	Three years of formal school in native country.
Elena	52	Honduras	Proficient in listening and speaking. Emergent proficiency in reading and writing.	Newcomer, little to no proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	Six years of formal school in native country.

Data Collection

The data were collected through one face-to-face interview (30-40 minutes), classroom observations (two hours each week for eight weeks, which equals to a total of 16 hours), and a focus group activity (two hours). All interactions and data-gathering processes in this study were conducted in Spanish. Observations took place throughout the

course and were guided by Levine, Gallimore, Weisner, and Turner's (1980) strategies for participant-observers, which will be further discussed in the observations section below. Questions for the interviews and the focus group activity focused on how relevant participants found this program and how they are going to use these skills in their future personal and professional lives. During the interviews and the focus group activity, data (audio) were recorded in the researcher's cellphone, and additional information, including observations, was written down in the researcher's journal.

Interviews

For this inquiry, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted consisting of five open-ended questions in Spanish. Semi-structured interview questions were used because they offered more flexibility and provided the researcher opportunities to explore the topic at a greater depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was interviewed individually for a duration of 30-40 minutes with the vision of exploring their views, experiences, and motivations while participating in the Spanish literacy program. In addition, these five questions sought to gain knowledge of how meaningful this program was for students and their personal perception of the impact this program had on their lives.

Observations

As my roles in the study include both researcher and instructor, I conducted participant observations in this study. According to Levine, Gallimore, Weisner, and Turner (1980), the term participant observation "refers to naturalistic, qualitative research in which the investigator obtains information through relatively intense, prolonged interaction with those being studied and firsthand involvement in the relevant activities of their lives" (p. 38). In this research, participant observations allowed me to be the researcher while also participating and volunteering at the Sunshine Center during registration week and as an instructor in the Spanish literacy program project.

Focus Group Activity

In this research study, the final class (two hours) for the Spanish literacy program took the form of a final activity consisting of an open discussion where participants shared their comments to five questions

(different from the interview questions). The focus group activity was audio-recorded using the researcher's cellphone. The focus group activity generated information on collective views of the participants' experiences and beliefs about the Spanish literacy program. Thus, the focus group was used as a supplementary source of data maximizing information gathered during observations and individual interviews (Morgan, 1997).

Data Analysis

Inductive analysis was used to identify frequent patterns across participants' responses (Mitton-Kukner, 2015) from observations, interviews, and the focus group to extrapolate unknown concepts from the phenomenon studied. These patterns provided an insight into the participants' realities as they pertain to how important they consider literacy in their L1, the applicability of skills learned in this course to L2 acquisition, and the information they found to be the most relevant in the entire program. The steps used in the analysis followed Yin's (2018) construct validity approach where multiple sources of evidence are used, chain of evidence is established, specific key concepts about the research are defined, and operational measures that match the concepts were identified. Following this logic, multiple sources of evidence took the form of interviews, participant observations, and focus group activity. Chain of evidence was established and defined by connecting the findings or themes identified to valid sources of data acquired from the study. Lastly, emerging concepts from the data were identified by citing published works with similar findings to maximize the chances of validity, measurability, and trustworthiness (Yin, 2018).

During the data analysis, the three steps for conducting inductive analysis were followed: (1) data reduction, (2) establishing clear links, (3) share findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, on the first step raw data was examined individually to identify relevant patterns, themes, or trends and condense text into brief, summary formats. During the second step, links were established in the data by following the five features guiding the categorization of inductive coding: (a) category label, (b) category description, (c) text or data associated with the category, (d) links found among categories, and (d) type of model in which the category is embedded (Thomas, 2006). The three categories of interest, impact, and sustainability described in the

findings section, emerged during the second step of the inductive coding. Lastly, on the third step, findings are shared.

Findings

For the purpose of this study, findings were divided into three sections: (1) interest, (2) impact, and (3) sustainability. These three emerging themes were identified through inductive analysis from the data collected and also answer the study's research questions.

Interest

During this study, participants did not want to initially participate or be part of the Spanish literacy program because they did not understand the implications of L1 literacy when learning an L2. The majority of the students felt initially apprehensive about being part of the Spanish literacy program because they did not think print literacy in Spanish was important or necessary for their immediate lives in the United States. However, I took the time to explain that learning to read and write in Spanish could impact their abilities to learn English, and that part of our classes would have a Spanish-English component. After listening to my explanation, students became interested in the program. In my explanation, I purposefully placed the biggest emphasis on the Spanish-English component of our program and on how print literacy in Spanish would help them learn English and in their lives in the United States. To appeal to the participants' interest, I found that it was important to incorporate in this L1 literacy program opportunities where they could connect the knowledge learned in Spanish to concepts in the English language. For example, in one of our classes, we went over the difference between *ala* [wing] and *a la* [to the]. I explained this concept in Spanish, and I gave examples in English: (1) *El pájaro tiene dos alas* [The bird has two wings] and (2) *Yo voy a la tienda* [I go to the store]. Activities and examples like the one shared above—explained in Spanish, but integrating English—kept participants engaged and motivated to continue learning reading and writing in Spanish.

Tomás, one of the participants, explained in his response during our interview the reason why he decided to join this program after learning how it could also benefit English language learning:

“Yo he tratado de aprender inglés en diferentes programas pero es difícil. Cuando me dijo que el programa de español podría ayudarme a aprender inglés empecé a venir porque yo nunca pude ir a la escuela en El Salvador. Me da tristeza que no puedo escribir ni leer mi idioma. Aquí [en Estados Unidos] muchas veces trato de escribir cosas, pero me doy cuenta que no puedo, pero no me interesa mucho porque es que tengo que aprender inglés para trabajar.”

[I have tried to learn English in different programs (institutions), but it is difficult. When you told me that the Spanish program could help me learn English I started coming because I could never go to school in El Salvador. I feel sad that I cannot write or read in my language. Here (in the United States) I often try to write things but I realize that I am not able to, but I do not care very much about it (learning how to read or write in Spanish) because I have to learn English to (be able to) work].

Tomás was a very quiet participant for most of the program; he was always observant and smiling. He came to the program not knowing how to write his own name but, throughout the weeks, he became more confident and would participate when asked to. For Tomás, learning Spanish was important at a personal level because he wanted to be able to read and write in his L1. When sharing his reflections and comments, Tomás showed sadness in his eyes when he talked about not being able to read nor write in Spanish. However, due to life circumstances, since he arrived in the United States, he had to focus on working and keeping his family in the United States and in El Salvador financially stable. In addition, as shared above, he has tried several times to learn English at other institutions, but not knowing how to read or write has become a barrier to understanding/learning. As a result, Tomás keeps dropping from ESL programs and keeps enrolling in new ones hoping one of these programs will help him learn English. Tomás felt the Spanish literacy program was important because it helped him read and write in his L1, but also because it gave him the opportunity to learn English while learning Spanish.

Another participant, Miguel, felt that Spanish reading and writing was not important to his immediate reality in the United States and only chose to join our study after his mother shared with him that he would also be learning some English while learning Spanish. In Miguel's words:

“Bueno, yo empecé a venir a las clases de español porque mi mamá (Elena) me dijo que viniera; que era bueno para aprender cosas de Estados Unidos y un poco de inglés. Leer y escribir es un poco difícil para mí y entonces pensé que era bueno aprender un poco más de español. Yo estoy trabajando en la construcción y de verdad que no necesito leer y escribir en español allá porque sólo hablamos en español, pero si me gustaría aprender inglés porque aquí en Estados Unidos el inglés es más importante que el español”.

[Well, I started coming to the Spanish classes because my mom (Elena) told me to come here; that it was a good opportunity for me to learn things about the United States and a little English. Reading and writing (in Spanish) is a bit difficult for me [so] I thought it was good to learn a little more Spanish. I am working in construction, and I really do not need to read and write in Spanish there because we only speak in Spanish there, but I would like to learn English because here in the United States English is more important than Spanish].

Elena is another participant in the study and Miguel is her son. Initially, Miguel was skeptical about the Spanish literacy program because he did not think it would help him meaningfully or be impactful for his immediate life in the United States. However, because of Elena’s advice, Miguel joined our group during our second week and completed the program with perfect attendance. In class, Miguel was enthusiastic and active in answering questions and participating. He was the youngest amongst the four participants, but that fact did not seem to matter when working together in the class. His mother, Elena, would often correct his writing before he showed it to me and would also correct his oral projection when we were practicing presentations/speeches. Similarly, Elena would also make side notes for Miguel when we were talking about English and how they could use their proficiency in Spanish to learn English. Elena and Miguel’s interaction throughout the class evidenced that mothers’ educational self-improvement and involvement in their children’s educational career—regardless of age—have an impact on the overall literacy development of both (Pentón Herrera & Toledo-López, 2017).

Similar to Miguel, Elena was not interested in joining the program initially. Elena shared:

“Le voy a ser sincera profesor, yo no estaba interesada en la clase de español porque para trabajar aquí lo que necesito es aprender inglés, pero cuando usted

me dijo que podía aprender algo de inglés en esta clase entonces vine. Yo sé que mi español no es muy bueno porque solo recibí 6 años en mi país, pero me puedo comunicar en español, pero en inglés no puedo comunicarme y me hace falta. Cuando vi que estábamos aprendiendo también información de aquí de Estados Unidos me gustó mucho porque había cosas que no sabía. También me gustó que mi hijo Miguel pudo aprender más español. Allá en Honduras él nada más pudo ir a la escuela hasta el grado 3 y pienso que es importante que aprenda a leer y a escribir, pero es que no hemos tenido oportunidad de aprender más español”.

[I am going to be truthful to you, teacher. I was not interested in the Spanish class because to work here (in the United States) what I need is to learn English, but when you told me that I could learn some English in this class I decided to come. I know my Spanish is not very good because I only received (went to school for) 6 years in my country but I can communicate in Spanish, but in English I cannot communicate and I need it. When I saw that we were also learning information about here (the United States), I liked it a lot because there were things that I did not know. I also liked that my son Miguel could learn more Spanish. In Honduras, he was only able to go to school until 3rd grade, and I think it is important that he learns to read and write (better in Spanish), but (the problem is that) we have not had the opportunity to learn more Spanish].

Elena’s confessions were insightful and heartbreaking. During our conversations and classes, it became apparent she has had to endure many hardships throughout her life in Honduras and here in the United States. Although she was thankful to attend the Spanish program, mostly because she had the opportunity to learn different topics relevant to her life in the United States (i.e., traditions in the United States, states and capitals, hobbies in the United States), she confessed she would not attend another Spanish class in the future because *“yo necesito aprender inglés, es muy importante para mi trabajo”* [I need to learn English, it is very important (that I learn English) for my job]. Since her arrival in the United States, English has become a form of currency for Elena, one that provides job security and ensures economic income. As such, Spanish reading and writing are not immediately relevant for Elena because her L1 does not offer many opportunities for her or her son Miguel beyond being able to use it

orally on their daily activities within the Spanish-speaking community and in their household.

After further analyzing the data, it became apparent other participants were also primarily interested in the Spanish literacy program because they were learning relevant information about the United States (i.e., states in the United States, places around Baltimore, among others) as well as some English (as explained in the activity for “*ald*” and “*a la*” above). However, beyond learning English and information about the United States, participants identified being interested in learning Spanish as a personal goal but did not think of it as an immediate need for their lives. Instead, students explained the urgency to learn English and associated the English language with more (and better) professional opportunities and economic stability. In a way, participants experienced native language nostalgia—although spoken Spanish remains a vital entity for their daily lives within their families and communities, knowing how to read or write in Spanish has more of a sentimental and nostalgic, rather than practical, value. For participants, being fully literate in Spanish represents, above all, a nostalgic, sentimental connection to their native country and culture.

According to Akhter (2017), for immigrants, feelings of nostalgia are thought of as “a debilitating form of escapism and as an inability to adapt to change and mobility” (p. 23). In other published works, immigrants’ feelings of nostalgia are associated with “immigrant memories and imagined returns to the ‘homeland’” (Mannur, 2007, p. 11) or with past-present negotiations and the “loss of something meaningful in another time and, possibly, another place” (Hadžibulić & Manić, 2016, p. 99). In this particular study, the participants’ feelings of native language nostalgia were directly connected with feelings of loss, exchange, and survival. Participants understood that, due to life situations beyond their control, they lost the opportunity to develop L1 literacy during their developmental years. Although L1 literacy may have been vital in their native countries, participants are now faced with the decision of having to shift, or exchange, priorities in which language to learn. In their present reality, the English language is essential for work opportunities, economic security, and survival in the United States. On the other hand, Spanish is only used as medium of communication within their family and friends, which represents sentimental wealth, but does not produce income.

An additional finding emerging under the theme of interest from this study was that participants unconsciously participated in native language depreciation practices. In the United States, Spanish is a language with little cultural and intellectual legitimacy because of its link to immigration and poverty (Bruzos Moro, 2016; Pentón Herrera, 2019). As such, Spanish speakers—especially Spanish-speaking immigrants—are commonly depicted as illiterate, poor, and uneducated (Pentón Herrera, 2020). Through observations and classroom interactions, it became apparent participants believed Spanish to be an inferior language (in comparison to English), and this was one of the elements contributing to prioritizing English over Spanish. Similarly, acquiring reading and writing skills in English was considered more important over acquiring reading and writing competencies in Spanish because of professional opportunities connected with English in their community. One last point is that, data was not sufficient to determine the relationship, if any, between native language nostalgia and native language depreciation.

Impact

In this program, participants had the opportunity to reflect and come to the realization that as their knowledge in Spanish grammar increased, they started to understand better some elements of the English grammar. Furthermore, participants found the Spanish-English grammar activities useful and stated they felt there was a connection between their improvement in their L1 print skills and how they understood and learned English. Tomás stated, “*conociendo mejor la escritura aprendo mejor inglés. Si sé como se escribe correctamente en español se me hace más fácil entender y escribir en inglés*”. [Knowing how to write better (in Spanish) allows me to learn English better. If I know how to write correctly in Spanish, it will be easier to understand and write in English]. Tomás made a follow-up comment stating the importance of knowing how to correctly spell words in Spanish when using Google translations to get the correct English translation words.

Other participants had similar responses making reference to the importance learning how to read and write in Spanish impacts their English language learning experience as well as their personal lives. For example, as shared by Telma:

‘Esta clase es importante para mi porque no tomé mis estudios en mi país. Yo ahora tengo una niña y necesito aprender inglés para poder comunicarme en la

escuela y poder ayudarla a mi niña con sus tareas; el inglés es muy importante. Pero también el programa de español me ayudó mucho porque aprendí diferentes cosas que también puedo enseñarle a mi niña y para mí también. Por ejemplo, aprendí del sistema de educación de Estados Unidos, los diferentes estados de Estados Unidos, y las comparaciones entre inglés y español, eso es importante también.”

[This class is important for me because I did not study in my country. I now have a daughter and I need to learn English to be able to communicate at school and be able to help my child with her homework; English is very important. But also, the Spanish program helped me a lot because I learned different things that I can also teach my daughter and for me too. For example, I learned about the education system of the United States, the different states in the United States, and comparing English and Spanish, that is important too].

Telma’s excerpt above makes a direct reference to the impact language education (both in English and Spanish) has for Latinx immigrant women in the United States. Telma is a single mother who is attending The Sunshine Center to learn English with the purpose of helping her daughter in school and communicating with her daughter’s teachers. Telma’s comments and reality agree with Toledo-López and Pentón Herrera’s (2016) conclusion that Latinx immigrant women find in bilingualism (English-Spanish) an empowering tool for social and cultural integration in the United States, as well as a bridge for more opportunities. “This integration formally occurs through education and acquisition of language skills. Communication, thus, becomes a valued tool without which integration will not occur. It is a source of empowerment that creates new spaces for women to participate” (Toledo-López & Pentón Herrera, 2016, p. 45). Hence, for Telma, the Spanish literacy program became an opportunity to learn information in her L1 that she can teach her daughter. Furthermore, learning Spanish literacy gave Telma the opportunity to use her L1 to learn information about the United States’ educational system and also using Spanish as a bridge to learning English.

Telma’s response also refers to the impact the topics included in the Spanish literacy program had for her and fellow classmates, which motivated them to continue coming every week. One of the most well-received aspects of the Spanish literacy program was the topics

discussed every week. As discussed above, the Spanish literacy program was divided into eight relevant topics where students learned Spanish (and some English) while also learning about other important topics such as civics, community, geography, politics, and education. Students shared they did not have many opportunities to learn about these important topics in their daily lives and were thankful the Spanish literacy program included this type of information. The information shared under this category speaks to the importance of including relevant topics for the adult learners’ lives in the curriculum. The relevant, readily-applicable information participants learned in our program is what kept them engaged, motivated, and using language as a vehicle to learn social, cultural, political, geographical (among others) information about the United States and their community.

Sustainability

Encouraging participation from students to initially join the Spanish literacy program was difficult in the beginning and, although participants enjoyed the experience, they shared they would not be returning for future offerings. In our focus group activity, Elena candidly shared, “*Profesor yo le voy a decir la verdad, yo y mi hijo (Miguel) no regresaremos a otras clases de español en el futuro porque tenemos que enfocarnos en aprender inglés.*” [Teacher, I will tell you the truth, my son (Miguel) and I will not return to future Spanish classes because we have to focus on learning English.] When Elena shared this message with the group, the other students nodded in agreement, “*El inglés es muy importante*” (English is very important), stated Miguel as a follow up to Elena’s comment. In response to Elena’s comment, Telma shared, “*Lo único que quisiera es no tener que haber escogido entre la clase de inglés y la de español. Me gustaría que las ofrecieran en horas o días diferentes.*” [The only thing that I would not want to do (in the future) is to have to choose between the English and Spanish classes. I would like for these classes to be offered at different times or days.]

After sharing Elena’s and Telma’s comments with the Center’s Director of Education, she explained the only available days and times in the future for the Spanish literacy program would be the same times and days they offer their ESL classes as space is an issue. In other words, future students would have to choose between the Spanish literacy program and ESL classes, as the Center could only offer them at the same time and place; this was conflicting for many students, and

most would gravitate towards ESL classes. The Director shared she had talked to the participants to learn about their experience, and they shared they enjoyed the program, but they will like to focus on attending ESL classes in the future instead.

Another challenge to program sustainability the Director of Education shared was recruiting volunteers to teach in the Spanish program. The Director of Education and I had reached out to different organizations and universities around the area, but it was difficult to find anyone interested in volunteering to teach Spanish literacy. As a result, the Director of Education made the decision to add the Spanish literacy program as remedial support ESL volunteers could use with their adult learners who had experienced interruptions in formal, school-based learning, but not as an individual program offered at their Center. In other words, the Spanish literacy program was consolidated into a folder, and the volunteers and students had the option of using it in their practices as desired.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest L1 literacy programs at non-profit organizations have the potential to empower adult Latinx LESLLA learners—and potentially other immigrant populations in similar positions—and support them in learning English. There are some L1 literacy programs already in place throughout the United States with a solid and growing population of literate-emergent Latinx immigrants like California (Masatani, 2013) and Boston, Massachusetts (Smoke, 1998). Although limited data exist about how these or similar programs are designed to be successful, some of the common components that can be found in the literature are the focus on teaching L1 literacy while focusing on the development of life skills. In other words, some of the similarities addressed in the programs shared by Masatani (2013) and Smoke (1998) lie on the need to approach L1 literacy instruction through a lens of equipping adult learners with functional skills they can use in their daily lives by introducing relevant topics such as financial literacy, communicating with teachers in school (for parents), and using technology.

For this reason, it is important for non-profit organizations offering ESL classes to consider the impact L1 literacy programs can have for their adult learners and those learners' family members. Importantly,

as seen in this study's findings, to successfully implement and maintain an L1 literacy program, learners' interest is of utmost importance. To increase participant motivation in this type of program, organizations should educate learners about the benefits associated with learning to read and write in their L1 and also incorporate relevant topics in the L1 literacy program that LESLLA learners can use in their daily lives. At the same time, L1 literacy programs should consider an instructional approach where the focus is to teach L1 literacy by incorporating meaningful, pressing topics learners deal with on a daily basis instead of focusing on teaching L1 literacy by solely focusing on grammar. Similarly, keeping in mind the adult learners' strong desire and necessity to learn English, L1 literacy programs should also dedicate a portion of their classes to explain how the skills learned in the L1 can be used or transferred to English.

As a final note, findings revealed sustaining L1 literacy programs might be a challenge for non-profit organizations with limited resources. In this study, participants were not interested in joining a similar L1 literacy program in the future as their priority is to acquire English as fast as possible. Similarly, because the Sunshine Center relies on volunteers to teach most of their classes, finding a volunteer to teach Spanish literacy classes was an additional obstacle. Thus, organizations considering the implementation of similar programs must take into consideration learners' participation, having a consistent volunteer/instructor for the program, as well as offering L1 literacy programs on times and days where ESL classes are not offered to avoid schedule conflicts.

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Appendix

Spanish Literacy Program

Program Objective: To help Latinx LESLLA learners achieve intermediate reading and writing literacy skills in their L1 (Spanish) so they can use that knowledge to learn English.

Topics: The program is divided into eight different sessions and each session introduces new information using diverse topics.

1. Week #1: Introduction to the alphabet. Basic grammatical rules and personal identification.
2. Week #2: Daily life and community. Introduction to *diptongos* (diphthongs), *hiatos* (hiatus), *sujeto* (subject), and *predicado* (predicate).
3. Week #3: Free time and hobbies. Introduction to regular hobbies in the United States. Review of present tense verb conjugations in Spanish.
4. Week #4: Travel. Introduction to all the states in the United States. Review of past tense (preterit and imperfect) verb conjugations in Spanish.
5. Week #5: Education. Introduction to the education system in the United States.
6. Week #6: Foods and drinks. Introduction to American food and drinks traditions.
7. Week #7: The English language. Compare and contrast English and Spanish languages.
8. Week #8: Future plans. Review future tense verbs in Spanish.