

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION PROCESS OF A  
YOUNG SPANISH-SPEAKING NEWCOMER

by

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## DEDICATION

To all those who have left everything in search of hope.

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*Gracias Borinquen* for my cultural heritage and the memories. Thanks to my family and friends for believing in my ability to make a difference. And to Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi; thank you for teaching me the way of love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	vii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	viii
ABSTRACT .....	ix
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	11
3. METHODOLOGY .....	25
4. RESULTS .....	32
5. DISCUSSION .....	81
APPENDIX SECTION .....	95
REFERENCES .....	101

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<b>Illustration</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. TELPAS writing sample from the ninth classroom visit .....	46
2. TELPAS writing sample from the tenth classroom visit .....	47

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
ELL	English Language Learner
TELPAS	Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System
TEKS	Texas Essential Knowledge Skills
STAAR	State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness
CLD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse



## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the challenges that a young Spanish-speaking, newcomer student from Puerto Rico encountered in her schooling journey during her first year in a school in Central Texas and the instructional approaches that supported her academic success. A qualitative case study approach was used. The themes that emerged from the data analysis included English language proficiency, academic background knowledge, perceptions from home about U.S. schools, teacher ideology, and peers as a support system. The findings of the study bring into focus issues of historical practices of discrimination and exclusion. The results of the study indicated that emergent bilinguals require systematic support in the academic content areas and in the acquisition of English as a second language. The findings also showed that the inclusion of the family in the education process allows students to develop to their full potential.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I remember going from Girls' High to Erasmus Hall

I remember going from smart to borderline in one day

I remember the bio teacher, Miss Nash, calling me stupid because I didn't know how to use a microscope

I remember Mr. and Mrs. Hamberger

I remember how I laughed when I heard I was getting one for political science and the other for economics

I remember being amazed when they made learning a wonder-filled adventure

I remember working hard for them both and the faith each had in me

I remember the A's I got in their classes

I remember being Puerto Rican in Erasmus Hall High School because I was the only one.

The previous is an excerpt from the poem "I Remember" by Lydia Cortés (as cited in Nieto, 2000). This poem depicts the experiences lived by countless Puerto Rican students who have embarked with their families in search of hope in lands which are not foreign but are unfamiliar, unwelcoming, and distant mainly because of culture, language, and values.

Over a century after the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican children continue to struggle as they adapt to schools in mainland as if they arrived from a different country. Statistically, it is difficult to measure the achievement gap between Puerto Ricans and their mainland-born counterparts as these statistics get lost among those reported along with other Hispanic children. Nevertheless, the differences are portrayed in the stories, many still untold, of children who have faced the challenges of

adapting to schooling in U.S. mainland. This study tells the story of a young Puerto Rican girl who voluntarily left the island so that she could be with her mother and siblings.

Griselda could have stayed with her grandmother in her hometown where she enjoyed all the glories of being at the top of her class. Instead, she followed her heart and made the decision of growing up and being raised with her siblings. This decision came along with frustration, disappointment, and an emotional rollercoaster.

The following section outlines the historical events that triggered the migration waves of Puerto Ricans to U.S. mainland and served as precursors for the present situation.

### **Puerto Rico and the United States**

Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since 1898 when Spain ceded the island under the terms of the Treaty of Paris which ended the Spanish-American War. The imperialism brought by the United States to the island caused several changes that impacted the culture, language, values, modes of schooling, politics, and the economy.

The significant impact to the economy was that the Puerto Rican peso was outlawed in 1899 and superseded by the U.S. dollar. In the exchange, Puerto Ricans lost 40% of the value of their money. Then, there was a shift on the island principal economy livelihood. Before the invasion by the United States, the Puerto Rican economy depended mostly on the production and exportation of coffee (Levine, 1987; Rodriguez Centeno, 2001). The United States halted the enterprises associated with these activities. This was expressed by Brigadier General George W. Davis on 1900 in the “Report of Military Governor of Porto Rico on Civil Affairs” (Davis, 1902) which states,

In the United States, which consumes more coffee per capita than any other

country, the coffee of Porto Rico is unknown, and as it is very strong and has a peculiar flavor or aroma, it is not liked by our people... It is a production in which invested capital has no such interest as it has in cane (p. 190).

In addition, the United States already had agreements with countries like Brazil and Mexico for their coffee supplies (Rodriguez Centeno, 2001). Consequently, according to Rodriguez Centeno, Puerto Rico began focusing on the production of sugar in order to satisfy the needs of the United States demand of sugar. With this change, Puerto Rican families were not in charge of such production anymore and instead large sugarcane plantations were controlled by U.S. corporations (Levine, 1987; Ayala, 1996; Grosfoguel, 2003).

The situation for Puerto Rican farmers worsened even more when in 1901 the U.S. government introduced the Hollander Bill, which imposed a 1% property tax on the assessed values of farms (Hollander, 1901; Ayala, 1999). Ayala also reported that This bill forced many farmers to sell their farms, which resulted in higher appraisal values for tax purposes in contrast to the set lower selling prices (Ayala, 1996). These changes over time contributed to an excess in workforce (Ayala, 1999), lower wages (Ayala, 1999), and the beginning of a massive exodus of Puerto Ricans from the island (Dietz, 1979).

### **The Puerto Rican Exodus**

Puerto Rican communities on the mainland grew largely due to the recruitment efforts of industrial and agricultural laborers. In the early years of the U.S. occupation, there was an excess of labor mainly due to the decline of the coffee industry. Workers from the highlands began moving to the coast in search of jobs in the sugar industry. Despite the growth of the sugar industry, there were never enough jobs (Ayala, 1999). At

this time the island began exporting labor to other islands in the Caribbean, Central America, and the United States. According to Ayala, Puerto Ricans were recruited to work in the cane fields in Hawaii and later in the cotton fields in Arizona.

Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens under the Jones Act of 1917. This allowed Puerto Ricans to travel freely to and from mainland. This happened shortly before World War I. Consequently, those eligible were expected to serve in the United States armed forces. Further, due to its central location, Puerto Rico became of strategic importance for the U.S. armed forces for which 20,000 Puerto Rican soldiers were trained (Castellanos & Leggio, 1983). It is estimated that 17,716 served in World War I (Franqui-Rivera, 2013) and 65,034 Puerto Ricans served in World War II (Duany, 2002).

The Puerto Rican population in mainland continued growing. In 1910 the number of Puerto Ricans living in mainland was about 1,500 whereas by 1940 there were 70,000 (Levine, 1987). Further, Maldonado (1979) reported that in 1942 Everett B. Wilson, director of the Puerto Rican Trade Council, suggested that the employment of Puerto Ricans in wartime jobs would alleviate the unemployment crisis on the island. The Recruitment of skilled workers followed by unskilled workers began. The workers quickly found that their living conditions and the pay were poor and not in accordance with what the Trade Council had offered.

The recruitment efforts intensified after World War II (Maldonado, 1979). By 1946 there were 135,000 Puerto Rican residing on the mainland (Levine, 1987). Although New York had the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans (Levine, 1987; Maldonado, 1979), they were also recruited to perform industrial, domestic, and agricultural work in states like Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Delaware, Indiana,

Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Washington as well. Maldonado reported that at the end of their contracts many Puerto Ricans opted to stay, giving way to the growth of existing Puerto Rican communities and the creation of new ones. Only 15% of this population returned to the island. Levine also reported that the influx of Puerto Ricans continued at the rate of over 30,000 per year in the 1940s and an average of 40,000 per year during the 1950s. By 1980, 40% of Puerto Ricans were living in mainland if we take into account those born in the island and their descendants. However, while more Puerto Ricans were moving to mainland some were returning to the island. Combined, this research literature indicates that this practice of circular migration has since become very common particularly in times when the economy in the United States is uninviting (Levine, 1987; Duany, 2002).

The global economic crisis in 2008, has caused Puerto Ricans to leave the island in record numbers. On March 24, 2016, the Pew Research Center published a study regarding the population losses in Puerto Rico (Krogstad, 2016). The study indicates that between 2000 and 2015 the island population declined by 334,000 which represented a 9% of the total population. In addition, the 3.47 million population reported in 2015 is lower than the 1990 population reports. According to the study, the Census Bureau also reports that the two major reasons for the Puerto Rican migration are job and family-related at a rate of 40% and 39% respectively. It is estimated that the trend will continue. Projections from the United States Census Bureau estimate that by 2050 the population in Puerto Rico will be 2.98 million.

Regardless of their legal status as U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans internal migration involves many of the same cultural conflicts and emotional adjustments that most

immigrants face. Moving has cultural, linguistic, and educational consequences for Puerto Ricans. Duany (2002) explains, “as they move between the island and the U.S. mainland, Puerto Ricans need not carry travel documents nor apply for visa permits; the frontier between the two places is more cultural than juridical” (p. 359).

### **The Colonization and Education**

The U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico imposed changes on the educational system (Dobles & Segarra, 1998). At the time of the colonization, Puerto Rico was overwhelmingly monolingual Spanish-speaking, the result of four centuries of Spanish colonial rule. The language of schooling changed, however, once the U.S. government imposed its policies, English became the language of instruction (Castellanos et al., 1983; Crawford, 2004). Other changes included the required textbooks to support the compulsory curriculum and the inclusion of U.S. patriotic rituals that included the celebration of U.S. holidays (Castellanos et al., 1983) and pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag (Nieto, 1998).

These and countless other initiatives were imposed by colonization with the goal of Americanizing the Puerto Rican students. Nonetheless, none proved to be successful (Castellanos et al., 1983). Crawford (2004) indicates that according to a report by Teachers College at Columbia University the imposition of political and cultural changes caused 85% of students to drop out of school before completing the third grade. Variations of the English-only policy remained in effect until 1949 when Spanish was reinstated as the language of instruction for all levels of schooling (Castellanos et al., 1983; Crawford, 2004). Since then, English has been taught as a second language but in a very poor manner.

As changes were made to the Puerto Rico educational system, those who migrated were about to encounter numerous political, social, and cultural issues. It was New York City that received the highest number of Puerto Ricans, and soon after World War II, the number of Puerto Rican students started to grow rapidly. By 1947 there were about 25,000 Puerto Rican students in the city. Yet, the New York school system did not have the resources to educate these Puerto Rican children who were newcomers (Garcia, 2011). In addition, the students that arrived after World War II were product of a failing educational system back in the island due to the changes in language policies, the lack of schools, and the lack of compulsory schooling policies. Castellanos et al. (1983) explained that:

When they migrated, Puerto Rican students discovered that the English they have been taught on the Island schools bore little similarity to the brand of English spoken in the States. Written English what's essentially the same, but the pronunciation, inflection, and cadence of spoken English here came as an unpleasant surprise – indeed a shock. The situation was exacerbated by the pressure of the speed at which “real” conversations normally flow. Learning techniques (isolating each word heard, decoding it, and quickly rearranging the syntax to figure out the meanings) did not work here. Anglophones did not wait for each phrase to sink in and be understood by Puerto Ricans before proceeding with the next. Neither did impatient listeners tolerate English miss pronounce haltingly one...word... at...a... time. Television was not yet available to provide a nonthreatening model. The frequent encounters with slang dialects, and other such lingo exacerbated the problem. Students who had learned to say “I am not



doing anything” slowly would be devastated by the rapidly “Ah ain’t doin’ nut’n” (pp. 64-65).

Students soon began to fall behind as they were unable to comprehend the instruction only taught in English or to retain the academic content. Their home language remained Spanish, and their lack of English language proficiency along with their cultural practices, low-socioeconomic background challenged any academic achievement (Nieto, 1998). Since a common practice was to administer IQ tests, which were only provided in English, a majority of Puerto Ricans (and other Spanish-speakers as well) were identified as being cognitively handicapped (Castellanos et al., 1983) and most dropped out of school (Castellanos et al., 1983; Garcia, 2011).

In response to this circumstance, the schools in New York tried different approaches, including a subtractive approach to teaching Puerto Rican students. This instructional approach proceeded to place Spanish-speaking students with English-speaking students while providing them with limited language assistance other than through another Spanish-speaking student; or, in other cases there was no instructional or language support provided at all. As a consequence, students were placed one or two grade levels below and in low achievement groups (Castellanos et al., 1983). None of these approaches proved to be effective educational or pedagogical methods to support the academic achievement of Puerto Rican students.

In 1967 the need for the school system to meet the educational needs of the Puerto Rican students and other language minority students became evident not only in New York City but in other parts of the nation as well. This can be substantiated by the laws concerning education at the time, including The Bilingual Education Act of 1968.

## **Mending Efforts**

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's led the way for legislation that would improve the quality of education of non-English-speaking students. Until the Bilingual Education Act became law in 1968, there had been numerous efforts to eliminate the use of languages other than English in schools within the United States. By 1919, 34 states had passed laws requiring English-only instruction (Crawford, 2004). Moreover, Crawford offered that in the state of Texas the use of a language other than English for instruction was a criminal offense. The Bilingual Education Act provided federal funding to assist students with limited English skills (Crawford, 2004; Garcia, 2011); however, as Crawford indicates, it did not require the use of other languages as a mean of instruction.

Following the Bilingual Education Act there were various court cases that further influenced bilingual education in the United States. The 1974 Supreme Court decision in the *Lau v. Nichols* civil rights case saw its effects at the national level. In this federal case, the parents of Non-English-Speaking Chinese students claimed that their children were denied equal opportunities by receiving all-English instruction. In the same year, the Puerto Rican community educational organization ASPIRA file a lawsuit against the Board of Education of the city of New York. The court decision ruled and decreed the implementation of the ASPIRA Consent Decree, which mandated New York City public schools to provide transitional bilingual education to limited English proficiency students (Travieso, 1975; Reyes, 2006). These two cases brought changes to the curriculum and teacher preparation (Travieso, 1975).

While these federal cases surged to provide equitable access to educational opportunities for marginalized language minority students, Latinos continued to face

numerous challenges in education. Reyes (2006) examined the aftermath of the ASPIRA Consent Decree. Thirty years later the low academic performance and high dropout rates of Latino English language learners continue to be a major issue in New York City. The situation is similar in other parts of the Country.

Across the United States Latinos are the fastest growing group. A significant part of these students are English language learners. According to the Department of Education, (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011) there is a significant achievement gap between Latinos and White students, which has remained unchanged for the last two decades. Research indicates that this is mostly due to the language differences of the group and inconsistent access to the curriculum (Lindholm-Leary & Hernández 2011; Madrid, 2011; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2002). This concerns issues of equity.

### **Statement of Problem**

To examine the current educational opportunities of Puerto Rican students who recently migrated to the United States, a qualitative study approach was chosen. The research design is a case study of a fifth-grade girl from Puerto Rico, Griselda, who is a Spanish-speaker and a newcomer to a rural city located in central Texas along with her mother and two siblings. The study was guided by the following research questions,

1. What are the challenges that young Spanish-speaking, newcomer students encounter in their schooling journey as they adapt to U.S. schooling processes and the instructional approaches used?
2. What are the effective educational practices that support the academic success of young Spanish-speaking newcomer students?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Latino populations across the country are becoming more diversified. Although Latinos share some of the same experiences grouping all Latinos under the same term doesn't do justice to the historic, regional, linguistic, racial, social, and class differences among others (Nieto, 1998). The Hispanic population has their origins in 22 different Spanish-speaking countries and there exist dissimilarities among the groups that include variances in cultural, linguistic, and political beliefs, values, and practices (Castellano & Frazier, 2011). Nieto explains that such dissimilarities could bring light in explaining issues like academic achievement and socioeconomic difficulties.

The Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968 was the first legislation directed to meet the needs of language minority students in the United States. Its purpose was to provide federal funding for the creation of programs that could help students with limited English proficiency. It came after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which banned discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex or national origin and also outlawed racial segregation in schools and other facilities. The Bilingual Education Act recognized diverse languages and cultures as a positive contribution to the United States and intended to use bilingual education as a mean to preserve this. Moreover, in the document U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe II explained the lack of activity by schools. In Perkins (1967) Commissioner Howe stated that:

These groups have suffered all the problems of deprived minority groups in our society - the problems of poverty, prejudice, and economic exploitation, have all been lumped together to make total problems of the minority groups. This kind of

group has a difficult time bringing influence to bear in its own interest on its local school board, or its State legislature, or, indeed, on any representative body. I think there has been what you might describe as a certain awakening among some of these groups, and a greater exercise of political influence in very recent years, but I think that their interests have not been paid sufficient attention by local school authorities in many places (p. 2).

Although the Bilingual Education Act and later its amendments aimed to procure for language minority students best interests, regrettably it fell short in its execution. Almost half a century later language minority students still do not have equal access to education. This suggests that the ideas behind it need to be revisited in order to create policy that will guide educators along with other school officials in achieving the so much needed changes in our education system. We will begin by examining the theoretical framework used for this study.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

This study draws from critical pedagogy which is rooted in the critical theory. Like the other perspectives of the critical theory, critical pedagogy focuses on the idea of empowerment and emancipation. It intends to develop learning environments. Kanpol (1994) defined critical pedagogy as follows:

Critical pedagogy refers to the means and methods that test and hope to change the structures of schools that allow inequalities and social injustices. Critical pedagogy is a cultural-political tool that takes seriously the notion of human differences, particularly as these differences relate to race, class, and gender. In its most radical sense, critical pedagogy seeks to unoppress the oppressed and unite

people in a shared language of critique, struggle, and hope to end various forms of human suffering (p.27).

The term critical pedagogy was first described by Paulo Freire in rejection to the banking approach to education. Freire refers to the banking system of education as a system where the teacher is considered the knowledgeable one and thus, imparting (depositing) the knowledge on the students, and the students are considered to have no knowledge and consequently the ones who receive, memorize, and repeat such knowledge (Freire, 2005). According to Freire the banking approach to education mirrors the oppressive system of society. Among other practices which characterize the banking system, Freire points out that in such a system the teacher is the one who decides what the students are to learn and how without giving the students any participation in this process. In addition, the students are expected to submissively comply with the teacher's directives.

Freire proposes the problem-posing education as the antidote to the banking model of education. In problem-posing education, both students and teachers are co-constructors of knowledge. Not only the students learn from the teacher but also the teacher learns from the students. Teacher and students engage in a dynamic exchange, building on each other's reflections about the content. Consequently, education becomes a mean of 'liberation' as opposed to a mean of oppression like in the banking system. One critical component of problem-posing education and hence of critical pedagogy is dialogue as it is a mean for critical thinking. However, according to Freire, dialogue cannot exist without love, humility, faith in humankind, and critical thinking itself. Phipps and Guiherme (2004) add that critical dialogue is fundamental in language/culture

education as it is the link between critical reflection and critical action.

The concept of critical pedagogy was further developed by others including Henry A. Giroux who added the concept of border pedagogy which further develops the cultural, social, and political prospects of critical pedagogy (Phipps & Guiherme, 2004).

### **Assessments**

One of the biggest challenges for language minority students is assessments and more specifically standardized assessments. With the enactment of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 standardized assessments became the focus of education in the United States. Students in grades 3 to 8 were required to test every year in reading and math. Each state was responsible for designing and testing standards that would challenge the students and ensure that they would make adequate progress. Each year test results were made public and would constitute the schools' report cards. Results were disaggregated by groups (poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency) in order to show any achievement gaps. Schools and districts were required to show adequate yearly progress. It was expected for all students to become proficient within 12 years. In cases where there was not enough adequate yearly progress, schools had to come up with a plan to correct. Every two years, state results would be compared to NAEP results to ensure that state standards were challenging enough. NCLB put pressure on schools to attend the necessities of traditionally marginalized groups (Abedi & Gándara, 2006). However, data show that Language minority students, as well as other minority groups, did not benefit from these measures. Tests required students to have mastered reading skills in order to demonstrate their knowledge in the content areas.

There are various accommodations that are given to ELLs in order to compensate

for the lack of English proficiency. Such accommodations can include extra time, small group testing, the use of a dictionary, and administering tests in the native language when available. However, these accommodations did not necessarily meet their purpose. Abedi (2009) argued that “some of language-based accommodations may alter the construct being measured and therefore may not provide valid assessment outcomes for these students” (p. 196). In the case of native language assessment, these might only provide a good representation of student knowledge when the student has received instruction in the native language. Taking an assessment in a language other than the language of instruction might cause additional difficulties to the student as students might not have been exposed to content vocabulary in the native language (Abedi et al., 2004).

### **Teacher’s ideology**

A challenge that is often underestimated but is the underlying reason for other challenges faced by newcomer students and ELLs is the teacher’s ideology. Bartolomé (2010) explored the concept of teachers’ ideology and how it influences the perceptions teachers have on minority students and how this affects their teaching practices and students’ outcomes. She indicates that teachers who have separated themselves from traditional ideologies are able to identify discrimination in schools. She proposes that teacher preparation programs should include the study of critical pedagogy. This will give teachers opportunity to examine their own ideas and values as they see current minority education issues from their students’ perspective and develop solutions that do not jeopardize students’ identities.

In a similar manner, Gonsalves (2008) proposed the inclusion of multicultural education in all courses’ curriculum in teacher preparation programs along with courses



dedicated to address psychology of racism and multicultural education with a focus on critical pedagogy. Gonsalves also indicated that there is a prevalent opposition towards multicultural education that is rooted in hegemonic ideologies. Eradicating these ideologies would imply challenging deeply ingrained ideas that are very close to individuals own values and awakening feelings that would provoke defensiveness such as self-reproach. To avoid questioning their values, individuals tend to perpetuate archaic beliefs and hinder their own understanding of issues. Reinforcing critical pedagogy in pre-service teacher preparation programs will give teachers the opportunity to take affirmative action towards empowerment of minority students.

### **Second Language Acquisition**

**Early bilingual development.** The number of children learning two or more languages has grown dramatically in recent years. This has come with questions as well as skepticism about the implications of bilingualism. As a result, researchers have been studying bilingual acquisition. Byers-Heinlein, Fennell, and Werker, (2013) investigated monolingual and bilingual infants' development of associative word learning. The participants in their study were tested on their ability to learn dissimilar-sounding words at 12 and 14 months. The researchers argued that monolinguals and bilinguals timetable to establish associative word learning is equivalent. They observed that fourteen-month-old bilinguals and monolingual peers employ associative word learning to enhance their cognitive repertoire, which contributes to their languages acquisition. The results of their study suggest that the development of associative word learning is not affected by bilingualism. In fact, children growing up bilingual show cognitive advantages in tasks like those that involve working with two sets of information simultaneously. On the other

hand, according to Brown (2014), the rate of acquisition of both languages in bilinguals is somewhat delayed compared to the normal schedule for first language acquisition; however, he reaffirms that early childhood bilingualism shows a considerable cognitive benefit. Brown has also reported that bilinguals develop concepts easier and have more cognitive flexibility.

Additionally, Smithson, Paradis, and Nicoladis (2014) investigated the receptive vocabulary achievement among French-English bilinguals in a French minority/English majority environment in Canada. The children in the study were enrolled in a program where French was the medium of instruction and English Language Arts is introduced in grade 3. The participants' standardized test scores of receptive vocabulary in English and French were compared to standardized norms. They concluded that vocabulary acquisition might only be temporarily delayed when the input of English is reduced at the beginning of elementary school. But even so, bilinguals' performance in receptive vocabulary assessments is comparable to their monolingual counterparts. Similarly, Byers-Heinlein et al. (2013) stated that bilingual children's receptive and expressive vocabularies are comparable or even greater than their monolingual counterparts considering their entire linguistic repertoire.

**Sociocultural aspects.** Culture is another complex factor that plays an important role in the way bilingual children acquire and make use of their languages. Haworth et al. (2006) explored the factors that enrich the bilingual development of young children from a sociocultural perspective. To conduct their study, they observed 30 bilingual children during three research cycles. Each cycle took a deeper look into how learning could be increased for all students. The findings reported challenged Krashen's (1981) position

that young children acquire another language subconsciously. According to their findings, children develop awareness of language and concepts as they consistently participate in significant interactions. The findings also indicated that in order to use language for the development of thinking skills children need to be able to play both the lead and follower roles. They concluded that the input of language mediates the development of bilingualism in young children. This finding echoes those reported by Lantolf and Thorne in 2007 and Lantolf in 2011 (as cited in Brown, 2014), who stated that the language mediation as a way to communication regulation is fundamental to the sociocultural aspect of second language acquisition. Piaget (1972) described language development in stages where children gradually transition from a direct perception of the world to abstract thinking. Piaget's work indicated that it is the child's cognitive development triggered by social interaction that leads the development of language.

Also crucial to bilingual children linguistic development is the home and school interaction. Drury (2013) explored the learning experience of a British-Pakistani four-year-old girl attending an English nursery school. Central to this study was the dynamics between the school and community contexts and their effects on the enculturation, socialization, and language learning processes of the child. According to Drury, like Cummins (1982), the native language is the foundation for cognitive and linguistic development. Moreover, the four-year-old child's engagement at school seemed to be a product of her experiences at home. Therefore, the bilingual staff at the nursery school was found to be key in the mediation of the cultural and linguistic goals of both home and school. Moreover, Brisk and Harrington (2007) reported that literacy development in the native language promotes bilingualism and provides a foundation for literacy knowledge

that is fundamental for literacy in other languages. They also indicate that the native language enables thinking and problem solving better when children are on early stages of English language development.

Given that the mother tongue is fundamental in early bilingual development, it is imperative to examine the instructional methods associated with its use in classroom instruction. Potts and Moran (2013) explored the use of home language mediation in a mainstream, multi-grade classroom that combined grades 6 and 7, and its influence on students' texts, and how home language supports students' academic development. Student writings that included the use of the home language were assessed to identify the role performed by the home language. The circumstances in which the written texts were produced were also analyzed in order to determine the pedagogical practices associated with the texts. This study suggests that the home language performs a variety of functions in students' writings. Consequently, the mediating role of classroom practices is crucial for students' use of home language. Also, as students increase their awareness of language as a tool, their capacity for developing mediational tools that are tailored to their individual needs seem to increase as well. In that order, Brisk and Harrington (2007) explain that the use of the home language has pedagogical and psychological connotations. The native language allows students to learn the academic content, provides for meaningful exchanges, and is inherent to the linguistic and literacy competence of students. They also indicate that since language is necessary to transmit ideas, the language used in the classroom should be a tool that would facilitate the way these ideas are communicated.

**Code-switching.** In order to effectively use the home language as a tool in the

classroom, it is imperative to understand the different language practices. Children growing up bilingual use their linguistic resources in a variety of ways, and one of these many ways is code-switching. Code-switching is the practice of alternating between two languages. While children's use of code-switching might be due to lexical gaps, this is not the sole reason for children to make use of more than one language.

In their study, Vu, Bailey and Howes (2010) examined the code-switching patterns in Mexican heritage children at a preschool. The young children were presented with two narrative stems and asked to complete the stories. The children's code-switches during narratives were coded to determine what motivated them to alternate between languages. While most code-switches were code-mixings or single-word borrowings, the study results suggest that children could sense the language preferences of their interviewer. The findings indicated that the frequency and type of code-switching are triggered by the context. Brisk and Harrington (2007) have reported that "children have a very pragmatic view of the choice of language, and that they will use the language that the interlocutor knows" (p. 24).

Conversely, Gort (2012), explained that children use code-switching in their writing to complement their ideas, to emphasize vocabulary, and to add context. This study examined the code-switching patterns of emergent first grade Spanish-English bilingual students' writing. The findings indicated that children use code-switching to portray their experiences. The findings also suggest that children's sociocultural perspectives have influence over their biliteracy development.

Similarly, Brisk and Harrington (2007) explained that code-switching might occur because changing the language would emphasize meaning. Frederique (2008), further

reported that one's connection with a language could strongly motivate the choice of language. This study investigated the motivations for the situational code-switching of a four-year-old English-French bilingual boy. The boy was observed in a variety of settings and interacting with different people. The data were analyzed to understand the child's choice of language. The findings indicated that when playing, the person leading the play would influence the language used by the child. Moreover, other factors such as topic, leadership, and emotions also influenced the use of one language over the other. These findings concur with Brisk and Harrington (2007) who explain that a bilingual might have a language preference for a given topic. Furthermore, simultaneous emergent bilinguals, make strategic use of their linguistic, communicative, and cultural repertoire, according to the context and the positioning of the two languages with respect to the context (Gort, 2012).

As has been noted by multiple research findings, bilingual children make deliberate use of code-switching to satisfy their communication needs. However, often code-switching occurs subconsciously between two advanced learners with a common first language, who are not necessarily compensating for language weaknesses. Brown (2014) and Martinez (2014) examined this topic. Martinez's study explored the awareness of Spanish-English code-switching among bilingual Latina/o students in a sixth-grade English language arts classroom in a public school in Los Angeles, California where the students were observed in the classroom and on the playground. Subsequently, students were asked to reflect on their code-switching in order to find evidence of language awareness. The results indicate that awareness of code-switching varies between students and within a student. That is, one student's awareness of code-

switching is not fixed. According to Martinez, students' awareness of code-switching leaned towards being less explicit. Although, the findings further indicated that less explicit awareness is not an indicative of less linguistic proficiency.

### **Background Knowledge**

Closely related to (and sometimes mistaken by) the challenges associated with second language acquisition is the lack of background or prior knowledge. Children acquire knowledge both formally and informally. Research shows that background knowledge is necessary to comprehend instruction, make connections, and build new knowledge. Chamot (2009) explains that when learning content, children need to be able to connect concepts to what they already know including the knowledge acquired in another language or context. Similarly, Brisk and Harrington (2007) indicated that in learning vocabulary, students are able to assimilate new words once they have been able to link these to their own lives.

Students with more prior knowledge are not only readier to learn. According to Lee and Chen (2014), higher prior knowledge is associated with the attitude students have towards learning. In their quasi-experimental study, they pre-tested and post-tested a group of eight grade students to determine the relationship between the degree of prior knowledge and the assimilation of concepts and the disposition students had towards mathematics. The students with higher prior knowledge outperformed the ones with lower prior knowledge in the post-test and were more enthusiastic to learn and less intimidated.

Similar to second language acquisition, learning background knowledge has socio-cultural implications. In their study, Martiniello and Wolf (2012) conducted

mathematic interviews with English language learners to analyze their comprehension of word problems in mathematics assessment. They pointed out the lack of background knowledge as a factor influencing English language learners' scores. Even when students are able to decode a math problem they might be unfamiliar with the sociocultural context of the words in the problem. The lack of background knowledge impedes students from understanding math word problems and consequently solving them correctly. The authors suggest checking and building on students' background knowledge, allowing students to practice discussing math word problems, and allowing students to use the native language and non-verbal forms to express their mathematical thinking.

Another determinant of background knowledge is the socioeconomic status. Kaefer, Neuman, and Pinkham (2015) conducted a tri-fold study to explore the differences in background knowledge among children from low-SES and middle-SES and how this affects their comprehension and learning abilities. To conduct the study, they presented children with stories and asked them questions to determine if socioeconomic status affected background knowledge, whether learning words and text comprehension were a function of socioeconomic status, and whether children's ability to learn is dependent on socioeconomic status. The findings suggest that middle-SES children possess more background knowledge than low-SES children regardless of language proficiency and that they are more adept at learning words and comprehension due to the resources and experiences that are accessible and part of their cultural practices. In addition, socioeconomic status does not affect children's ability to learn if background knowledge is the same. The authors concluded that developing background



knowledge in children should be done in a systematic manner.

This chapter covered some of the published information relevant the issues investigated in this case study. In the next chapter the methodology and the reasoning behind the selected approach for this study is explained.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

To examine the research questions, 1) What are the challenges that young Spanish-Speaking newcomer students encounter in their schooling Journey as they adapt to schooling in U.S. mainland? 2) What are the effective educational practices that support the academic success of young Spanish-speaking newcomers? a qualitative case study approach was selected as the research design. Qualitative research approaches begin with a theoretical framework, take place in the subject(s) natural environment(s) and use flexible methods in order to adapt to the outcomes of the study. The case study approach involves collecting a variety of data from sources by conducting open-ended interviews, observations, personal communication, and analysis of the data collected. Yin (2014) indicates that this unique feature of case studies provides latitude when collecting information from participants when the objective is to gather robust data to examine the research questions. The use of multiple sources allows for corroboration of the data collected. Case studies give insight to researchers on entangled, factual, current social issues (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Additionally, a qualitative case study approach enables researchers to view issues with depth from the participants' point of view (Greig & Taylor, 1999).

Once the data are collected, it is read multiple times and categorized into themes in order to find patterns. By coding the data and identifying patterns, the analysis process brings together the different points of view by analyzing the relationships and the interactions among these data enabling the researcher to construct a broad view of the issue under study. Creswell (2013) further indicates that:

We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study (p. 48).

### **Sampling**

A purposeful sample was used to conduct this case study. To identify the participant, the researcher asked for referrals at different schools. Eligible participants needed to be elementary school students in grades 4-5 who were recent immigrants or newcomers, Spanish speakers learning English at school, and willing to participate. The sample consisted of one student, one parent, and the student's classroom teacher. Once the participant was identified, the researcher met with the parent to provide her with information about the research. During this meeting the parent also signed the consent form agreeing to voluntarily participate in the study and also allow her child to be observed and interview at school and at home. A separate meeting was conducted with the teacher to provide information about the research as well and obtain approval to participate in the study and provide information about the student's academic performance.

**Student participant.** The student participant, Griselda, was a Spanish-speaking newcomer from Puerto Rico. When the study began, she was 10 years old and had been in Texas for five months. She is the second of four children. Prior to moving to Texas she lived with her grandmother and went to school in a coastal town on the west side of Puerto Rico. According to her mother, Mrs. Matos, she had always been an honor roll student. In Puerto Rico, Griselda went to one public school from kinder to fourth grade. There she received all content area instruction in Spanish and one period of English a

day. Griselda has one older brother who is 19 years old and two younger siblings who are 8 years old. Mrs. Matos described Griselda as well behaved, very enthusiastic, self-motivated learner, and avid reader. Mrs. Matos also indicated that by the time Griselda started first grade she already knew how to read and write. Griselda came to live in Texas because she wanted to live with her mother and younger siblings who were already living there. Upon her arrival, Griselda had difficulties understanding her Spanish-speaking peers due to the language variation of Spanish in Texas.

**Parent.** Griselda's mother, Mrs. Matos is a single parent. At the beginning of the study she had been in Texas for two years. She moved to Texas due to the lack of opportunities in Puerto Rico. She went to school up to high school and indicated being able to understand about 50% of conversations in English, but being unable to speak more than a few words. She is able to read in English. However, was unable to understand her children's homework not only due to language but also because of lack of background knowledge.

**Teacher.** Griselda's homeroom teacher, Ms. Henriquez, is a veteran, experienced teacher certified in bilingual education by the state of Texas since 1998. She also held additional certifications in the areas of Secondary English Language arts and elementary reading. In addition, she was the sponsor of the campus student council. At the end of the school year when this study concluded, Ms. Henriquez retired.

### **Research Site**

The study was conducted in a school district in Central Texas with approximately 7,736 students of which 72.5% were Hispanic and where 71.6% of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged. The student body of the school consisted of

748 students from which 78.6% were Hispanic, 17.6% White, 2.8% African American, 0.1% Asian, 0.3% Pacific Islander, and 0.5% multi-racial. At this research site, 73.3% of the students had been identified as economically disadvantaged, 15.5% were classified as English language learners, and 8.6% were identified as needing a special education program. In the classroom where the research was conducted, there were 24 students ten of them were classified as bilinguals and were enrolled in the bilingual education program.

### **Role of the Researcher**

During the course of this study, the researcher took various roles. Through open-ended interviews, the researcher sought to explore the school as a way to understand the context, including the learning environment in the classroom. As data collection progressed, the researcher shared the interview transcriptions with the participants to confirm, clarify, or revise the data collected during observations.

Another approach to collecting data entailed observing the student-participant during regular class hours taking field notes but with minimum interaction with the subject. Additionally, the researcher, as a participant observer, conducted tutoring sessions at the student-participant's home, and this rendered critical insights regarding the sociocultural dynamics of the home, including the cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and affective characteristics exhibited by the child during homework time.

### **Procedure**

This study consisted of four phases. During the first phase, the researcher met separately with each one of the participants, which included the student, the homeroom teacher, and one parent, to introduce the purpose of the study and to also obtain written

consent from each. Also, during this phase the researcher learned about the student's background, motivations, and attitudes towards school.

The second phase of the study consisted of classroom observations during the language arts and social studies periods and individual interviews with the student. As part of the observation protocol the researcher visited the classroom and took field notes to describe the classroom environment, the instructional practices, the lessons designed and taught by the teacher, the student-participant's behavior, and her interactions with other students. The researcher also photographed the student-participant's work and the resources and materials used in class. Also, during lunch time or recess the researcher met with the student-participant to clarify or confirm some of the observations, collect additional background information, and to ask general questions about school such as testing, challenges, and school activities. A total of ten observations were conducted. After some time, the classroom observations were redundant and stop providing any new insights.

The third phase of the study consisted of home visits two times per week. In order to work with the student on math problems. The fourth and final phase consisted of closing interviews with the student and the parent. Due to scheduling limitations, no final interview was conducted with the teacher.

### **Data Sources**

In order to collect rich data from each participant, the learning environment, and the different contexts where this study was conducted, the researcher used various data collection methods.

**Direct observations.** Observations were guided by the research questions and the

purpose of this case study. According to Yin (2014), it is vital that the researcher collects information about the behaviors and the different social and academic interactions between the student-participant and her teachers as well as her peers. The varying contexts were also vital to this case study, and these included the learning environment at the school common areas. During these observations, audio recordings were obtained as well as pictures of student work and material samples. Yin (2014) offered that such artifacts could further inform the case study.

**Participant-observation: the home.** The researcher conducted a series of home visits. Similar to the classroom observations, the sessions were audio-recorded and pictures of the student work and materials were taken. During the home visits, the researcher helped the student complete math homework. Besides giving the researcher a broader idea of the student's thinking, this gave the researcher an inside view (Yin 2014; Kawulich, 2005) of the student's daily routines, family interactions, and challenges as well as providing additional information regarding the student's background through more casual conversations than the interviews.

**Interviews.** All three participants were interviewed at different stages of the study. Interviews included debriefing interviews with each participant to corroborate or clarify some of the observations made during the classroom visits. Open-ended questions as well as questions to obtain specific information were asked during the interviews. Decisions about the research questions were made based on observations, information previously provided, and the participants' background. Additionally, interviews were recorded and transcribed, as these offered rich data.

**Physical artifacts.** Physical artifacts were collected or observed during classroom

and home visits. These artifacts included pictures of materials and student work and observations of items for academic support in the classroom. Physical artifacts support the data collected during observations and interviews.



#### 4. RESULTS

Through a case study approach, data were generated and analyzed. The themes that emerged from the analysis included Griselda's proficiency in English, her academic background knowledge, perceptions from home about U.S. schools, the teachers' ideology, and peers as a support system. The results aligned with each theme are reported in this section. These data provide a rich description of the young Puerto Rican fifth-grader newly arrived in central Texas from Puerto Rico and enrolled in a school here.

##### **English Language Proficiency**

Classroom observations began early in the spring semester. At this time there were 24 students in the classroom, ten of them were enrolled in the Bilingual Education Program. Whole group instruction was conducted entirely in English. The anchor charts posted on the walls were all in English as well. The date was written on the board in both Spanish and English. The classroom teacher, Ms. Henriquez, was certified in bilingual education.

Griselda's early stages of English language development played a central role in her ability to acculturate to schooling in central Texas. During the first classroom visit, Ms. Henriquez talked about timelines and guided discussion questions based on a text about Helen Keller. Griselda was not paying attention to Ms. Henriquez and instead she was looking at a text written in English on Martin Luther King Jr., which was the next task the students needed to complete. As Ms. Henriquez talked throughout the morning, Griselda seemed to understand some of her instructions such as putting materials away. On the other hand, on occasions, she would observe other students first, depending on her peers to serve as visual cues and mimicked their actions to see what they were doing. On

the same day, during recess, the researcher asked Griselda if she was able to understand the lesson.

Researcher: ¿Pudiste entender de lo que la maestra estaba explicando?

*Were you able to understand what the teacher was talking about?*

Griselda: La maestra habla muy rápido porque todos [en el salón] hablan inglés.

*The teacher speaks too fast because all [in the classroom] speak English.*

In addition, she expressed that reading in English takes her more time. Griselda explained that this was the reason for jumping ahead to the next reading task, the text on Martin Luther King Jr. At this point of the year, it was visible that Griselda had already excluded herself from the classroom activities and did not rely on classroom discussions to learn content.

After whole group instruction, Ms. Henriquez called a group of students to the carpet for small group instruction. Griselda was part of this group; however, it took her some time to realize that she needed to join the others on the carpet. It was not until she saw the others that Griselda understood to join the group. Once on the carpet, Ms. Henriquez began her lesson completely in English. For small group instruction Griselda would read a Spanish version of the book the others were reading in English. Ms. Henriquez asked Griselda where she was in her reading. Before Griselda was able to reply, Ms. Henriquez asked her to step out of the classroom to have a word with her and asked the researcher to also join them. In the hallway, Ms. Henriquez informed the researcher that Griselda was not doing her daily reading. She asked the researcher to intervene with the parent. Griselda stood there looking at both talking in English without saying anything. When Ms. Henriquez finished speaking, all returned to the classroom

and she and Griselda continued with the small group instructional activity.

This was opposite to what Griselda's mother, Mrs. Matos, had told the researcher a few weeks earlier during the initial interview. On this occasion, Mrs. Matos described Griselda as an avid reader who comes home and immediately begins doing homework. So the researcher asked Griselda later during recess why she was not doing her homework. She told her that she did but when the teacher asked her she was trying to think of the words to say and before she was able to put the words together the teacher had already assumed that she had not read.

Griselda had entered school in August. By the end of January when this first observation was conducted, Griselda had developed her own strategies to get by and to also understand the instruction provided, including reading and comparing texts written in both languages when available and asking other students outside of class for additional information. Griselda also asked her younger siblings, who had been in Texas longer than her, for help in understanding her assignments and the information that she read in English.

Occasionally, Griselda was able to figure out what to do by assembling random words she could comprehend by listening and/or reading and by observing what other students were doing. For example, for one assignment the students had written biographies of celebrities. Griselda wrote hers in Spanish. While conducting a separate classroom observation, Ms. Henriquez modeled how to create and add a title to the paper. The researcher noticed that Griselda followed exactly Ms. Henriquez's instructions; however, she did not begin writing until she had observed how the students had written theirs. After having conducted the classroom observation, Griselda and the researcher

debriefed.

Researcher: ¿Cómo supiste lo que había que hacer si el papel de la otra niña estaba en inglés?

*How did you figure out what to do if the other girl's paper was in English?*

Griselda: Más o menos entendí lo que había escrito y traté de hacer lo mismo en mi papel.

*I kind of understood what she wrote on her paper and tried to do the same on my paper.*

On this occasion, the researcher also asked Griselda about her experiences in the classroom and how she was managing without understanding everything the others were saying.

Researcher: ¿Cómo te sientes en el salón?

*How do you feel in the classroom?*

Griselda: A veces como que no puedo decir lo que quiero porque como solo le puedo hablar a las maestras en inglés.

*Sometimes I can't say what I want because I can only speak to the teachers in English.*

Researcher: ¿Cómo sabes lo que tienes que hacer?

*How do you know what you need to do?*

Griselda: Pues veo lo que los otros estudiantes están haciendo y trato de hacer lo mismo, pero no siempre sé lo que están haciendo.

*I look at what other students are doing and I try to do the same but I don't*

*always know what they are doing.*

This corroborates what Ms. Henriquez shared with the researcher during the teacher interview. She indicated that given an assignment to research a selected celebrity, her students went to the library. The assignment was to have the students write the biography of the celebrity they had chosen to read about. Ms. Henriquez reported that Griselda followed the other students but did not write any notes. She simply did not understand what she was supposed to do. It is evident that merely imitating other students was allowing Griselda to look like the other students. While she was able to make connections and draw from her prior knowledge, it was not enough to fully access the lesson objectives associated with the curriculum due to a language barrier and a lack of systematic instructional approaches that focused on ensuring her comprehension of the learning activities. It was not until the teacher eventually provided Griselda with assistance and resources in Spanish that Griselda was able to successfully complete the task.

Based on her observations of having listened to Griselda interact with other students in English in informal settings, Ms. Henriquez expected Griselda to talk to her in English. Griselda's attempts to speak English with her classmates during informal conversations demonstrated her agency in using her developing language; however, this influenced her teacher's perception that Griselda was pretending not to know English for class purposes. This perception guided Ms. Henriquez's approach to instruction, and she did not systematically provide instruction that was comprehensible to her.

The interview data indicate that Griselda's mother knew that she was still not able to speak in complete sentences even though Griselda was very persistent in learning

English. A third set of data regarding Griselda's second language proficiency indicated that her English proficiency was in the beginning stages of acquisition, and consequently, she was also unable to fully communicate her ideas or ask questions about the academic content that she was studying. Her use of English conformed with Griselda's language assessment results.

The lack of English proficiency was not only affecting Griselda's access to the curriculum but was also greatly changing her attitude towards school. Griselda's mother, Mrs. Matos, had indicated that being unable to understand and express herself in English was causing Griselda great frustration and making her lose interest in school. This was illustrated in the initial interview when the researcher asked the parent about Griselda's attitude towards school.

Researcher: ¿Qué actitud tiene ella con respecto a la escuela?

*What is her attitude towards school?*

Mrs. Matos: Le gusta. Lo que pasa es que como no se puede expresarse, no le explican bien, se siente como perdida, como que se frustra y a veces no quiere ir a la escuela. Le digo – ¡No! tú tienes que ir a la escuela. Tú tienes que aprender. Tú vas a ser una niña bilingüe. Y eso te va a ayudar mucho en un futuro. Pero a veces como que se estresa un poco porque quisiera hablarlo, entenderlo, tú sabes como independiente. Ella es bien independizada, todo lo hace por su cuenta, pero ella quiere aprender más y yo le digo – ¡No! Tú tienes que seguir, seguir y seguir. Pero a veces se frustra porque imagínate [estar] en un sitio donde todo el mundo está hablando inglés que ella no entiende. Ella quiere hacer sus cosas por ella

misma y no puede. ¿Entiendes? Y como no hay nadie que la ayude.

*She likes it. What happens is that since she cannot express herself, they don't explain to her well, she feels like lost, like frustrated and sometimes she doesn't want to go to school. I tell her – No! You have to go to school. You are going to learn. You are going to be a bilingual girl. And that is going to help you in the future. But sometimes she like stresses out a bit because she would like to speak it, understand it, you know like independently. She is very independent, she does everything on her own but she wants to learn more and I tell her – No! You have to keep going, keep going, and keep going. But sometimes she gets frustrated because imagine [being] in a place where everybody is speaking English that she doesn't understand. She wants to do her things on her own and she can't. You understand? And since there is no one to help her.*

During the second classroom observation, Griselda was being taught by a substitute teacher. The teacher was explaining to the students how to construct a timeline. Students needed to complete a timeline about themselves. The teacher modeled how to design timeline as an example for students to use. As she was telling the students what to do, Griselda understood some of the instructions. Once the teacher had finished explaining to the class, she came to Griselda's desk to make sure she was clear about the task. She reviewed the instructions step by step, she incorporated a few words in Spanish, and used another student as a translator. This helped Griselda understand the task clearly and successfully complete it. The substitute teacher, later shared that she did not know more than a few words in Spanish. However, the combination of strategies that she had

used helped Griselda understand more and feel better about interacting with the teacher. During her lunch break, Griselda and the researcher talked about having a substitute teacher that day. The positive impact this had on Griselda is illustrated in the following excerpt.

Researcher: ¿Que te ayudó para poder hacer el trabajo?

*What helped you so you could do the work?*

Griselda: Más o menos, pero, cuando fue a la mesa y me explicó más pues entonces ahí fue que lo entendí y lo hice.

*More or less but, when she came to the table and explained more to me, then I understood and I did it.*

Researcher: Pero entonces, ¿cuándo ella te lo explicó que te ayudó?

*But then, when she explained it to you, what helped you?*

Griselda: Mmm... algunas palabras que ella dijo en inglés sí las entendí. Por eso así más o menos sí me dejé llevar y así...

*Mmm... some of the words she said in English I did understand. That's how, more or less I guided myself and like that...*

Researcher: Y entonces, ¿con esta maestra se te hace más fácil que con Ms.

Henríquez?

*So then, is it easier with this teacher than with Ms. Henriquez?*

Griselda: Ella es más buena. Me habla un poco más despacio.

*She is nicer. She speaks to me a little bit slower.*

The data for this excerpt indicate that the teacher's rate of speech reappears as an important factor in Griselda's ability to understand a lesson and complete work. The



contrast between the first classroom observation and the second is clearly marked by Griselda's qualifying the teacher as 'being effective', enabling her to comprehend instruction, and thus, to learn. In the first classroom observation, the teacher was speaking too quickly hence, impeding Griselda from keeping up with lessons and also making her lose interest. Whereas in the second classroom observation Griselda, not only completed the task as instructed but was more enthusiastic about having completed it.

During the fourth classroom observation, the researcher noticed that Griselda's notebook had incomplete work and sometimes only the date. That day the students were tasked with describing the plot of the story they were reading. The teacher made a story plot anchor chart for the students to use as a reference. The anchor chart was in English. Since Griselda had not started the task, the researcher asked her later during lunch if she was understanding the lessons and what were the assignments.

Researcher: ¿No sabías de qué estaban hablando?

*You didn't know what they were talking about?*

Griselda: Sí sabía, pero nada más como más o menos.

*I did know but just so-so.*

Being unclear of the assigned tasks was keeping Griselda from completing them. The researcher also noticed that in the classroom all the anchor charts were in English. Anchor charts are used in the classroom to support students' learning. If the information had been made comprehensible for Griselda, perhaps it would have helped her complete her assignments. Since Griselda focuses on comprehension during instruction, she needs additional guided support to ensure that she can complete the instructional objective successfully.

The following day, after the fourth classroom observation, the researcher met with Ms. Henriquez and asked her about the scaffolding Griselda was receiving during instruction in the classroom and on the campus. She indicated that, “in the public areas there isn’t really anything in written Spanish.” When the researcher asked specifically about how the anchor charts in the classroom could support Griselda’s comprehension while she is at the beginning stages of English language development, she explained to her that since Griselda was not in her class at the beginning of the school year, she had not posted anything in Spanish on the walls but typically when there is a Spanish speaker in the class she has a word wall in Spanish. Thereafter, Ms. Henriquez added a Spanish word wall. However, all the anchor charts continued to be written only in English.

During the debriefing following the eighth classroom observation, Griselda shared the scores that she had received on the benchmark tests. She earned a passing score in reading but did not meet the benchmark scores in math and science. Since the researcher observed Griselda only during language arts and social studies she was not aware of the instructional practices or language dynamics when math and science were taught in the classroom. Griselda explained to the researcher that this year all her assessments were in Spanish but that all instruction was provided in English. Some of Griselda’s difficulties with the tests were language-related and caused her increased stress and anxiety. During their time together, the researcher also asked her about the support she was receiving from her math teacher, Ms. Correa, to understand what was being taught.

Researcher: ¿La maestra de matemáticas te ayuda con el español?

*Does the math teacher help you with the Spanish?*

Griselda: Bueno, antes sí me ayudaba, pero ella dice... ella ahora dice que le hable

inglés para... porque ella dice que cuando yo le hablo español ella dice que no entiende porque ella quiere que yo aprenda inglés so ella... necesito hablar inglés. Hay veces no le hablo. Tengo dudas, pero no le hablo porque tengo que decírselo en inglés.

*Well, she used to but she says... she now asks me to talk to her in English to... because she says that when I talk to her in Spanish she doesn't understand because she wants me to learn English so she... I need to speak English. Sometimes I don't talk to her. I have doubts but I don't talk to her because I have to tell her in English.*

This excerpt is drawn from data collected in February and it indicates how Griselda must do her best to understand academic content in her weaker, developing language. In this way, her emergent English language proficiency continued to impede Griselda's access to the curriculum even toward the middle of the school year. Furthermore, the teacher's eagerness for Griselda to learn English places the burden on the student to learn English faster. This 'sink or swim' approach to teaching English as a second language only excludes the student from adequately learning the grade level academic content. In addition, there seemed to be a mismatch between teaching and learning when the academic concepts are only taught in English and tested in Spanish since it is up to the student to connect concepts and their labels across each language and then be able to apply them correctly.

One of the tasks that the students completed during the ninth visit to the classroom was to write a paper for the TELPAS. The TELPAS is an assessment program for English language learners in Texas. It assesses the English language proficiency of

the students in four language domains – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The test domains and criteria evaluate English language learners progress in academic English proficiency.

The TELPAS writing prompt was: “Write about something that made you proud.” Ms. Henriquez instructed Griselda and the other Spanish-speaking student to write as much as they could in English. Griselda was able to use a significant amount of English words in her paper. She wrote about her kindergarten graduation and how she celebrated with her family. Ms. Henriquez approached the researcher because she was not expecting Griselda to write as much English as she did. The researcher explained to her that students are able to use more English when the topic is familiar. Ms. Henriquez indicated that this was not her experience. Later that day at the cafeteria, the researcher asked Griselda about this paper.

Researcher: El papel que tuviste que escribir, ¿Cómo lo encontraste? ¿T'u entendiste lo que ella pidió que escribieran?

*The paper that you had to write, how was it? Did you understand what you had to write?*

Griselda: Está más fácil porque ella dijo que podíamos escribir las palabras en español “so” las que no entendía las escribí en español.

*It was easier because she said that we could write the words in Spanish so, I wrote in Spanish the ones I did not understand.*

This excerpt illustrates how having the flexibility of using Spanish in writing was giving Griselda more opportunities to express her ideas fully. However, this was not the only factor that allowed Griselda to complete the task. As observed in the following visit

the nature of the topic and the first language proficiency also played important roles.

During the tenth classroom observation, the students again wrote a paper for TELPAS. On this occasion, they were required to write a persuasive text convincing the teacher of giving them an Oreo cookie. This time Griselda wrote a short paper mostly in Spanish. The researcher asked her if this paper was more difficult than the previous one.

Researcher: Entonces, ¿ese se te hizo más difícil escribirlo en inglés?

*So, was this one more difficult to write in English?*

Griselda: Más o menos porque yo sí sé algunas palabras en inglés y otras no.

*So-so because I do know some words in English and others not.*

This excerpt shows that Griselda was aware of her lack of English vocabulary. Since she began school in Texas she has focused on learning vocabulary either on her own or with the help of her peers and siblings. Nevertheless, some of the words and expressions she intended to use in this paper were more complex. For example, she wrote, “no te faltamos el respeto” (we don’t disrespect you). The expression “faltamos el respeto” can be literally translated to ‘disrespect’, which is not the same as the culturally-bound expression that means ‘with all due respect’. Learning about how cultural expressions are different in each language requires teacher support.

Based on previous classroom observations and student interviews, the data indicate that throughout this study the researcher was unable to identify evidence that effective use of second language acquisition methods and strategies were part of the daily instruction. In addition, while the lack of vocabulary in English was one of the factors that impeded Griselda from developing her paper, it was not the only one. The length of the paper and the repetition of the student’s ideas suggest that the topic was unfamiliar

and too complex to develop even in Spanish. On repeated occasions, Griselda indicated being unable to complete work because she did not learn a particular skill in Puerto Rico. It appears that she has been relying more on her background knowledge than on classroom instruction to meet the fifth-grade expectations. Writing a persuasive text might be a skill that she did not learn in her previous schooling in Spanish and was unable to adequately apply in English, leaving Griselda to work at a level beyond her current competencies in her second language.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are the two writing samples that Griselda generated. Both show that Griselda is in the early stages of second language writing proficiency which is characterized by Griselda's developing English vocabulary, spelling approximations, and her unconventional use of English language structures. The writing samples show that Griselda used mostly high-frequency words and she relied on cues using the word wall. The sentences are simple and occasionally she used Spanish language features such as word order, and she included words in Spanish. Griselda's writing sample, despite the unconventional characteristics, communicates a coherent and cohesive composition.

February 18, 2016

## My Experienced in my life

When I was 5 years old me gradue de Kindergarten. That experienced for me fue muy grande because my parents estaban in my graduation. An then my mom give to me something special and my dad give to me one hundredths dolars.

When salimos my mom me llevo a comer a un restaurant call Los Chinos. Despues fuimos a el Mall and I sale muchas things for me for my mom and for my brothers twins. That day was my experienced for me and all my family. And that was in Puerto Rico. An the other day my family give to my a Cup Cakes with chocplates muy deliciosos. Yo comparti with my family and I give to my amiga que vivia al frente de mi. Ella y su family fuimos a las piscinas. fue muy divertido celebrar con ella y su family in las piscinas. Despues fuimos a comer sarruchos a un restaurant.

Illustration 1. TELPAS writing sample from the ninth classroom visit

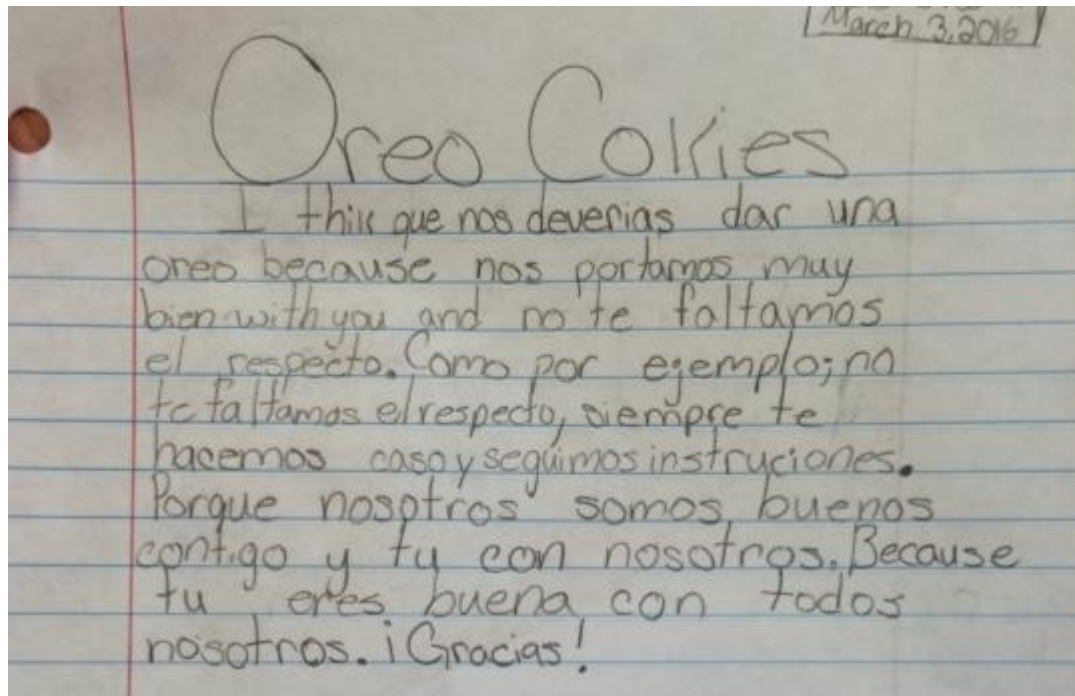


Illustration 2. TELPAS writing sample from the tenth classroom visit

**Homework at home.** After the tenth classroom observation, the researcher began conducting home visits. During the home visits, the researcher was able to have longer conversations with Griselda in a more relaxed atmosphere. Through the home visits, the researcher was able to get a broader insight of Griselda's thinking, obtain an inside view of her daily routines, family interactions, and challenges at school as well as gathering additional information regarding her background. The researcher also got to talk to the parent and learn about their current situation. The language spoken at home was Spanish. The family members that spoke English were Griselda and her 8-year-old twin brothers. Her mother, Mrs. Matos, indicated during the initial interview being able to understand about a 50%. However, she did not understand much of the school materials unless Griselda explained it to her or she had a sample of the work to be done.

As part of the home visits the researcher assisted Griselda in completing math



homework and noticed that the language of the homework was inconsistent. The homework assignments were sometimes in Spanish, others in English and on one occasion she received assignments in each language. Griselda's mother did not have the English proficiency or the educational level or the resources necessary to help her with homework. In order to complete homework, Griselda and her mother would use a dictionary, a translator or seek the help of Griselda's younger siblings who were in first grade. On occasions, they would use the internet but to do so they had to use their phones since there was no computer in the home. Despite all their efforts, Griselda was consistently unable to complete her homework.

On this first visit to her home, Griselda talked about school before starting her with her homework. One of the things Griselda shared with the researcher was that during math if she had questions about the assignment, the teacher would go to her desk and explain the lesson in English and if she did not understand, the teacher would then repeat it to her in Spanish. This seemed to be helping Griselda to understand the math processes better. However, as she began her homework assignment, it became evident that the strategy had certain limitations. The first problem Griselda and the researcher worked on contained a graph and two questions requiring using the information in the graph. Although this homework was in Spanish, Griselda was still unable to work the problems independently. This is illustrated in the following excerpt.

Researcher: ¿Qué entiendes?

*What do you understand?*

Griselda: Yo no entiendo nada.

*I don't understand anything.*

In a further attempt to assist Griselda in solving the problem, the researcher asked her additional questions.

Researcher: ¿Qué usa la maestra en la clase? ¿diagrama o gráfica?

*What does the teacher use in class? Diagram or graph?*

Griselda: Yo no sé por qué todos mis papeles siempre me los han dado en español.

*I don't know because I have always gotten all my handouts in Spanish.*

Part of the difficulty Griselda was having was that she did not know the math terms in Spanish and she could not recall the English terms from class either. It is evident that vocabulary was key for solving the problems. However, from the conversation with Griselda, there was no system in place to help Griselda understand and assimilate vocabulary. She seemed to be relying on the handouts for vocabulary and it was left up to her to make the connections between the handouts and English language instruction provided in class to bridge comprehension of the math concepts taught.

The researcher conducted the second visit the same week. On this occasion, Griselda received the same homework in Spanish and English. This appeared to be more helpful than receiving the homework in Spanish only. To understand the assigned math problems, Griselda alternated reading between the Spanish and English texts looking for vocabulary clues. Still, dissecting the key terms from the text was an inefficient strategy as it was causing her to lose track of the problems. The process seemed to cause frustration. Another factor that impeded Griselda from solving the assigned math problems independently was a combination of her lack of academic English development and a lack of understanding of the particular mathematical concepts. For example, one of the terms in the homework was “ingreso neto” (net income). At first, Griselda did not

seem to know what the concept was in either Spanish or English. Once the researcher gave her an example, she remembered the teacher giving a similar explanation in class but in English. She indicated that she understood what the teacher was saying in English during class but did not remember the term that the teacher had used. This example illustrates that the challenges are not limited to knowing English-language labels but that the challenges also include understanding content-related concepts and being able to apply these.

The homework assigned on the third visit was entirely in English. Griselda tried to read the assigned math problems but had difficulties decoding the academic text and determining the vocabulary related to the math concepts. She remembered seeing and listening the mathematics-based terms from class, but she has not yet learned them to enable her to apply the concept. In addition, not being able to decode certain math-related words also impeded her to access what she learned in class. The researcher gave her clues to determine the meaning of words. However, her lack of English proficiency added complexity to the problems. For example, when solving the following problem, she did not understand the application of the word ‘combined.’ Additionally, Griselda had to select from multiple choices to answer the problem:

Math problem: Latisha read 7 books. Adelio read 8 books. Willow read 3 times as many books as Latisha and Adelio *combined*. Which expression represents the number of books Willow read?

A.  $3 \times 7 + 8$

B.  $3(7 + 8)$

C.  $(7 + 8) / 3$

$$D. (3 \times 7) + 8.$$

In her first attempt to solve the problem, Griselda multiplied  $7 \times 3$  and added 8 because she understood Willow read three times the number of books Latisha read and then read eight more. For Griselda, the word ‘combined’ added difficulty to the problem; however, the complexity of the syntax used in the word problem also added difficulty for Griselda to solve the problem. After unpacking the problem in Spanish and guiding her to solve it in segments she arrived at the correct solution.

During the fourth session, homework was again provided only in English. Not knowing how to pronounce some of the key words again challenged Griselda from accessing what she had learned in class. She had listened to and had seen the word ‘measures’ used in the classroom before; however, she could not read it independently. It was not until she listened to the researcher saying the word that she remembered.

Researcher: ¿Sabes lo que es “measures”?

*Do you know what measures is?*

Griselda: Si, pero no sé cómo se dice en español.

*Yes, I know but I don't know how it is said in Spanish.*

This excerpt offers various issues to consider. First Griselda’s emerging second language presents difficulties in decoding English. This meant that listening to and reading content-based terms during instruction was not adequately supporting Griselda’s ability to apply them to complete homework assignments. Having to manage prior knowledge, unfamiliar academic-based concepts in her developing English language combined with an inability to decode the language overwhelmed Griselda, who continuously lost threads of thoughts, leaving her with an inability to demonstrate her

knowledge. In addition, her assessment scores depended on her ability to weave this knowledge successfully.

Once the school year had ended the researcher returned to Griselda's home for the closing interviews. Mrs. Matos indicated that Griselda had passed the reading test but not the math test. Consequently, she was going to take it again and had to attend summer school. When the researcher asked Griselda what happened with the math test she mentioned that she was challenged to understand the questions and solve the problems in the test because her test was in Spanish and all her instruction had been conducted in English.

Researcher: Y entonces, ¿qué más encontraste difícil en el examen de matemática?

*So, what else did you find difficult in the math test?*

Griselda: Nada más cuando era dividiendo y sumando y otras cosas porque como mi clase es en inglés pues la maestra lo explica en inglés y algunas cosas yo no las entiendo y ella no me las dice en español. Pues esas cosas estaban en el examen y como yo no sabía porque ella las dice en inglés pues no se me capta muy bien.

*Just when it was dividing and adding and other things since my class is in English, the teacher explains in English and I don't understand some things and she doesn't tell them to me in Spanish. So those things were in the test and since I did not know because she tells them in English, I wasn't picking up.*

In addition, she explained that in class she would sometimes get her worksheets in Spanish and sometimes in English and that the teacher on occasions would require her to

complete projects in English. The researcher asked her how this helped her with the test.

Researcher: Sí tuviste que hacer los proyectos en inglés, pero tu examen iba a ser en español. ¿Tú crees que eso te ayudó o no te ayudó teniendo que tomar el examen en español?

*You had to do the projects in English yet your test was going to be in Spanish. Do you think that this helped you or did not help you since you had to take the test in Spanish?*

Griselda: O sea, me ayudó y no me ayudó porque todos los trabajos que yo hacía en la clase, todos los papeles que le daba a los otros niños en inglés me los daba a mí en español. Y cuando habían sustitutas le dejaba el papel en español para que ella me lo diera a mí. Entonces eso me ayudaba más a mí porque el papel era en español y yo podía captar lo que estaba en el papel. Y como el examen estaba en español y los papeles eran en español pues me ayudaban a mí. Pero, algunas veces se le olvidaba pues hacer las copias en español y me lo daba en inglés. Ahí era cuando no me ayudaba porque era en inglés y mi examen era en español.

*I mean, it helped me and didn't help me because all the work that I was doing in class, all the handouts that she would give the other kids in English she would give them to me in Spanish. And when there were substitutes she would leave the handout in Spanish for me. So that would help me more because the handout was in Spanish and I could understand what was in the handout. And since the test was in Spanish and the handouts were in Spanish then that helped me. But, sometimes she would*

*forget to make the copies in Spanish and she would give them to me in English. That was when it didn't help me because it was in English and my test was in Spanish.*

The previous two excerpts emphasize how learning academic content in her weaker, developing language was hindering Griselda's access to the grade level curriculum. Furthermore, the content-specific vocabulary and syntax of mathematics generated deep challenges for Griselda. Griselda could remember the concepts being taught in class; however, she was unable to gain full command of the concept-related skills and consequently, unable to solve the problems independently when taking a test. In addition, since her test was in Spanish she was not adequately prepared to comprehend the content-specific vocabulary and syntax that she encountered in a distinct language.

Overall, Griselda's eagerness to learn English allowed her to develop emergent conversational English and language skills that granted her limited access to the grade level curriculum. However, the lack of language support in the classroom challenged Griselda learning essential concepts and completing work independently. It is also significant to discuss the role of background knowledge, which emerged as another major challenge that Griselda faced during her first year of schooling in Central Texas. The academic gaps greatly amplified the lack of language support and her emergent bilingual status.

### **Background Knowledge**

In addition to English language proficiency, one of the most recurring themes was the lack of academic background knowledge. This was more evident for math and science. Griselda expressed during the several debriefing interviews having difficulties in

these two areas because she did not learn several concepts in her previous schooling. During classroom observations in language arts, the researcher noticed that in addition to difficulties with the language Griselda was not completing work as required because of lack of academic background knowledge.

During the fourth classroom visit, Ms. Henriquez was talking about the elements of the story. There was a plot anchor chart in English posted and the students needed to complete the parts on the diagram as they were reading their books. The researcher noticed that Griselda had not completed her diagram. The researcher quickly drew a Spanish version on a card and handed it to her. She began comparing the two diagrams and drew the diagram in her notebook. However, she did not complete the task due to time constraints of the classroom schedule. Later that day during the debriefing interview the researcher asked her if she understood the concepts. The researcher proceeded to ask her reading comprehension questions about the text she had read.

Researcher: Pues entonces el ambiente ¿Cuál es?

*So which is the setting?*

Griselda: he...

*Eh...*

Researcher: ¿Es donde pasa la historia?

*Where does the story happen?*

Griselda: En "Time Square"

*In Time Square*

When the researcher used the academic term, "ambiente" (setting), she could not give her an answer but when the researcher used familiar language she was able to



answer right away. As the conversation continued, there was evidence that Griselda had a gap in literacy-based vocabulary in both languages. Gaps in academic-based background knowledge also impacted learning opportunities for Griselda in math and science.

During the debriefing after the eighth classroom visit, Griselda shared her test results on mid-year benchmark assessments. She had received a passing score of 75% in reading; however, on the science and math benchmarks, she had obtained a score of 43% and a 61%, respectively. These data were self-reported, not confirmed by the teacher or by school documents. Nonetheless, Griselda was highly aware of her progress and the factors that impacted her own performance. This is evident in the following excerpt.

Researcher: ¿Entonces tienes que practicar más ciencia y matemáticas?

*Then you need to practice more science and math?*

Griselda: Lo que pasa es que en matemáticas ya mi mamá habló con la maestra ayer que fue el día de las conferencias [de padres y maestros] y le dijo que ella sabía que yo no sabía mucho matemáticas porque allá en Puerto Rico yo siempre sacaba ‘A’ pero aquí, ya casi cuando yo me vine para acá, nada más estaban dando multiplicación y todavía yo no sabía dividir hasta que entonces llegué acá y tuve que aprender a dividir. Pero hay muchas cosas que allá en Puerto Rico en cuarto [grado] y quinto [grado] no me lo dieron. Estudiar aquí es más difícil.

*What happens is that in math my mom already talked to the teacher yesterday that was [parent-teacher] conference day and she told her that she knew that I did not know much math because there in Puerto Rico I would always get A but here, right when I was about to come, they were*

*only giving multiplication and I did not know how to divide until I got here and I had to learn to divide. But there are many things that there in Puerto Rico in fourth [grade] and fifth [grade] they did not teach me. Studying here is more difficult.*

Researcher: *¿Y entonces en matemática y en ciencias qué es lo que se te hace difícil? So what did you find difficult in Math and Science?*

Griselda: *Es que a veces no... a veces no mucho le entiendo porque es lo mismo en matemáticas que en ciencia que allá [en Puerto Rico] no hacían así como todo lo que están haciendo aquí en matemáticas.*  
*Is that sometimes... sometimes I don't understand much because it is the same in math that in science that there [in Puerto Rico] they didn't do like here like everything they are doing here in math.*

Through conversations with Mrs. Matos, the researcher learned that she had difficulties helping Griselda with math homework not just because of the language barrier but also because she did not remember the concepts or never learned them. They would spend hours completing math homework and were even left without time to work on the reading homework. While working with Griselda on her homework for four sessions it became evident that like her mother, she had knowledge gaps in mathematical concepts, which were key to fifth-grade level benchmarks.

**Comparing the home and local curriculums.** During the first home visit, there was a problem that required the use of a scatter plot graph to answer multiple math problems. Griselda did not remember from class what a scatter plot graph was and did not know how to read the graph in order to obtain the information needed to solve the

problem.

The researcher verified the fifth-grade math curriculum standards from Puerto Rico and compared it to the Texas standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). While some of the standards pertaining to graphs are similar, the Texas TEKS required students to use graphs in more complex situations such as graphing a pattern given an equation and solve two-step problems using data from a graph (see Appendix A). Additionally, there were differences in the order in which the types of graphs are introduced. For example, in the Texas TEKS scatterplot graphs appear for the first time in fifth grade whereas in the Puerto Rico standards they are introduced in the seventh grade (see Appendix B).

In addition to graphs, there were other concepts that Griselda did not have clear. For example, she had memorized some of the multiplication facts but did not really know the concept of multiplication; her knowledge was based on the memorization of facts. Consequently, anytime there was a problem involving facts that she had not memorized she was unable to solve it. Similarly, she had learned to solve operations with fractions without understanding the concept. This constrained her ability to solve more complex problems due to lack of fundamental conceptual knowledge to guide problem-solving processes.

**Length of homework assignments.** Helping Griselda develop math proficiency through these sessions was challenging. Homework was long and included a variety of concepts. On one occasion one homework packet had 31 problems and even though Griselda had completed part of the homework, it took her, with the assistance of the researcher, three hours to finish it since the process included instruction through

conversation. Furthermore, there was no evidence in the homework of trying to address Griselda's lack of prior knowledge. Being unable to solve the problems caused her frustration and convinced her of her inability to become proficient in math. Moreover, she was hesitant to solve the last problem of each homework claiming it was the hardest. "Es muy difícil" (it's too difficult) she would say without even reading it. The last problem would usually be an extension problem that required the application of more than one mathematical concept that Griselda had not learned yet.

The researcher tutored Griselda in math for three weeks prior to the math STAAR test. Still, she was unable to pass the test after two attempts. The second time that she took the test, she missed two problems more than the maximum required, which prevented her from passing the exam. During the final interview after the school year was over, she mentioned her difficulties with multiplication and division as factors that influenced her score.

Researcher: ¿Entonces que pasó en matemáticas?

*So what happened in math?*

Griselda: Sí lo entendí porque algunas veces era sumando, algunas veces multiplicando, pero más como el multiplicando y el dividiendo no se me hace tan fácil porque no me sé todas las tablas de multiplicar.

*I did understand because sometimes it was adding, sometimes multiplying but more the multiplying and dividing it is not that easy for me because I don't know all the multiplication facts.*

This excerpt illustrates how the lack of prior knowledge affected Griselda's ability to solve math without relying on rote memorization. Understanding the

multiplication concept would have given Griselda more opportunities to solve the problems involving multiplication and division. While the researcher and Griselda worked on this during the home visits, the large number of problems and the complexity and assortment of these made it virtually impossible to fill the foundational knowledge gaps Griselda had. Once again the need for homework that responds to the academic needs of students became evident.

Even though Griselda did not have background knowledge that was critical for passing the standardized assessments and transitioning to middle school, the data collected show no evidence of any attention given to this matter by her teachers. The focus was placed on making sure that Griselda learned English as fast as possible. This influenced the perception that Griselda and her family had about U.S. schooling. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### **Perceptions from home about U.S. schools**

The perceptions Griselda and her mother Mrs. Matos had about schools in the United States also emerged as a theme in this study. These perceptions included the interest that the teachers and school personnel had on Griselda's academic progress and her general wellbeing.

Before conducting the classroom observations and home visits the researcher met with Mrs. Matos to learn about Griselda's background and attitudes towards school. During the interview, Mrs. Matos expressed her concerns with Griselda's academic progress and the challenges they were having navigating the school system. Until Griselda came from Puerto Rico she was a straight 'A' student, would be recognized at school for her academic achievements, and had demonstrated a strong desire to learn.

Mrs. Matos described her as a fast learning, independent and self-motivated student. She indicated that she never needed to ask her about homework because Griselda would start doing homework as soon as she entered the door. However, since Griselda started schooling in Texas she began having difficulties keeping up with school work due to lack of resources, developing English as a second language, and now academic knowledge gaps that had become apparent during the course of this study.

While arranging the initial meeting, Mrs. Matos had told the researcher that there were no bilingual teachers in school that could provide Griselda with support, particularly in learning English. The researcher wanted to follow up with this and verify if she was aware of any services that the school had for English Language learners and/or their families.

Researcher: ¿Qué apoyo recibe ella (Griselda) en la escuela? Usted me dijo que no hay maestro bilingüe.

*What support does she (Griselda) receive at school? You told me that there is no bilingual teacher at school.*

Mrs. Matos: No  
*No*

Researcher: ¿Sabe si recibe algún servicio?  
*Do you know if she receives any services?*

Mrs. Matos: No  
*No*

Researcher: ¿Ninguno?  
*None?*

Mrs. Matos: No, ninguno porque no la ayudan en nada. No.

*No. None because they don't help her with anything. No.*

It is evident in this conversation that Mrs. Matos perceived that there is a lack of support at school. The researcher wanted to know if they had approached anyone for help. She mentioned talking on various occasions to Ms. Roldán, the school attendance clerk. She indicated that Ms. Roldán was the only one she could communicate with.

Researcher: ¿Sabe si [Griselda] ha hablado con la consejera?

*Do you know if Griselda has talked to the counselor?*

Mrs. Matos: Yo hablé con Ms. Roldán y le dije que Griselda acababa de llegar de Puerto Rico, que hablara con la maestra porque ella no entendía mucho el inglés. Que sí la podían ayudar, pero no sé qué paso.

*I talked to Ms. Roldán and told her that Griselda had just arrived from Puerto Rico, to talk to the teacher because she didn't understand much English. That if she could help her but I don't know what happened.*

Researcher: ¿Ms. Roldán es la consejera de la escuela?

*Is Ms. Roldán the school counselor?*

Mrs. Matos: Ms. Roldán es la secretaria, pero es la única que habla español, con la que yo me puedo comunicar bien y a ella es la que yo siempre llamo y le digo. Es Ms. Roldán, ella es bien buena.

*Ms. Roldán is the secretary but she is the only one that speaks Spanish, with whom I can communicate well and she is the one I always call and tell her. Is Ms. Roldán, she is very nice.*

Based on the data collected about the school context, including conversations with

the school principal, Ms. Roldán was not the only Spanish-speaking staff in school. There were several bilingual staff in the school including the counselor and the parent liaison. In addition, both of Griselda's teachers were certified in the field of bilingual education.

The fact that Mrs. Matos had no awareness of any support services or personnel at school made these resources inaccessible to her and her child. At this point she had not received feedback from her conversations with the school clerk and her perception about school is based mostly on these experiences and the written communications that she receives and is able to understand. Mrs. Matos considered that all the progress Griselda had made, particularly learning English, was due to her own and her family efforts. This is reflected in the following excerpt where Mrs. Matos explains that Griselda has made considerable progress all due to her own efforts and Griselda's interactions with her younger siblings who have been in Texas longer than Griselda.

Researcher: ¿Cómo se siente acerca del desarrollo que ella (Griselda) ha tenido en inglés? ¿Cree que está mejorando rápido?

*How do you feel about the progress that she (Griselda) has made in English? Do you think she has improved fast?*

Mrs. Matos: Está mejorando rápido si, aprendió bastante. Por su cuenta, pero... pero ha aprendido. Porque cuando estaba aquí en la [Escuela] Hernández ella rapidito... Ella a veces se pone a hablar con los nenes (los hermanos), no una oración completa, pero, si los nenes le dicen algo en inglés, ella le contesta ahí palabras, dos o tres cositas, pero pues habla y le contesta, lo único pues que una conversación no. Pero aprendió rápido porque a veces los nenes le dicen algo y ella le contesta. Lo entiende (el inglés). Y en la



televisión si están dando muñequitos en inglés y eso ella se ríe de lo que están hablando y eso. Algunas cosas si las entiende. Aprendió rápido.

*Yes, she is improving fast, she learned quite a lot. On her own but... but has learned. Because when she was in the Rosalina Hernández [School] she quickly... Sometimes she talks with the kids (her siblings), not in a complete sentence but, if the kids tell her something in English, she replies with some words, two or three things but she speaks and answers them, just not a full conversation. But she learned fast because sometimes the kids tell her something and she replies. She understands it (the English). And if there are cartoons on TV in English and so, she laughs about what they are talking and so. Some things she does understand. She learned fast.*

As previously noted, Mrs. Matos had mentioned that Griselda's always had good grades in Puerto Rico. However, she was having difficulties now. She expressed her frustration. She indicated that Griselda's change in attitude toward school is due to her frustration of not having access to instruction.

Researcher: Usted me dijo que cuando ella estaba en Puerto Rico ella era [estudiante] alto honor. O sea, ¿Siempre fue [estudiante] alto honor?

*You told me that when she was in school in Puerto Rico she was a high honor student. Was she always a high honor student?*

Mrs. Matos: Siempre, desde que... cuando pasó para primero fue alto honor y todo hasta que se vino para acá. Ahora en cuarto [grado] en mayo que le hicieron la noche de logros también salió alto honor.

*Always, since... when she passed to first grade she was high honor and until she came here. Just now in fourth [grade] in May at the award ceremony she also was high honor.*

Researcher: ¿Qué actitud tiene ella [ahora] con respecto a la escuela?

*What is her attitude towards school?*

Mrs. Matos: Le gusta. Lo que pasa es que como no puede expresarse, no le explican bien, se siente como perdida, como que se frustra y a veces no quiere ir a la escuela. Le digo - ¡No! tú tienes que ir a la escuela. Tú tienes que aprender. Tú vas a ser una niña bilingüe. Y eso te va a ayudar mucho en un futuro. Pero a veces como que se estresa un poco porque quisiera hablarlo, entenderlo, tú sabes como independiente. Ella es bien independizada, todo lo hace por su cuenta, pero ella quiere aprender más y yo le digo - ¡No! Tú tienes que seguir, seguir y seguir. Pero a veces se frustra porque imagínate en un sitio donde todo el mundo está hablando inglés que ella no entiende. Ella quiere hacer sus cosas por ella misma y no puede. ¿Entiendes? Y como no hay nadie que la ayude.

*She likes it. What happens is that since she cannot express herself, they don't explain to her well, she feels like lost, like frustrated and sometimes she doesn't want to go to school. I tell her – No! you have to go to school. You are going to learn. You are going to be a bilingual girl. And that is going to help you in the future. But sometimes she like stresses out a bit because she would like to speak it, understand it, you know like independently. She is very independent, she does everything on her own*

*but she wants to learn more and I tell her – No! You have to keep going, keep going, and keep going. But sometimes she gets frustrated because imagine in a place where everybody is speaking English that she doesn't understand. She wants to do her things on her own and she can't. You understand? And since there is no one to help her.*

Additionally, given the interview data collected from Mrs. Matos about Griselda's academic background and from the tutoring sessions, it was important to ask if Griselda had ever been identified for the gifted and talented program. Having this conversation with Mrs. Matos provided the researcher with further insight of her perceptions about the school system and the assumptions she had made regarding the role of school representatives in her child's education.

Researcher: *¿No sabe si le han hecho alguna prueba para estudiantes talentosos?*

*Do you know if she has been tested for giftedness?*

Mrs. Matos: *No. Bueno le dieron las notas y sacó todas 'A'. Que ellos deben de saber de qué ella... y las notas que yo traje de Puerto Rico eran todas es 'A', 'A', 'A', 100%. A mí a veces me molesta porque ellos no... cómo que ellos no... cómo que ellos no ven eso. Qué saben que si es una niña talentosa miren traten de ayudarla para que no baje las notas. ¿Entiendes? No sé... Como que no le dan importancia ni nada de eso. Yo pienso así, no sé. No. Well, she received the report card and got all 'A'. So they should know that she... and the grades I brought from Puerto Rico were all 'A', 'A', 'A', 100%. It bothers me sometimes because they don't... like they don't... like they don't see that. That if they know that she is a talented girl*

*then try to help her so her grades don't decline. You understand? I don't know... Like they don't give any importance to it, That's what I think, I don't know.*

This excerpt illustrates the parent's disappointment with the Texas school system. She assumed that her child would have automatically received appropriate services to ensure she would continue excelling academically.

The parent's perception was attuned with Griselda's own perception about school. After the school year ended, an additional interview session was held with Griselda to talk about her experiences during her first year in the school in Texas. The researcher began by asking her what she liked and then what she did not like. The language used by the teachers to communicate with her emerged as a perception of care. She indicated liking school in Puerto Rico better because she was able to understand everything and consequently get good grades.

Researcher: ¿Qué cosas te gustaron de estar en la escuela aquí?

*What things did you like about school here?*

Griselda: Algunas veces me gustan las maestras otras veces no.

*Sometimes I like the teachers sometimes I don't.*

Researcher: ¿Cómo qué cosas sí te gustaban de las maestras?

*Like what things did you like about the teachers?*

Griselda: Algunas veces Ms. Henríquez, que es la que tu hablabas, ella como que algunas veces decía la clase en inglés y si yo tenía dudas me las decía en español y ahora que se estaba acabando el año ella decía las cosas en inglés, pero también en frente de la clase cuando se las estaba explicando,

diciendo en inglés, me las decía a mí en español.

*Sometimes Ms. Henriquez, the one you used to talk to, she like sometimes would tell the class in English and if I had doubts she would tell me in Spanish and now that the year was coming to an end she would tell things in English but also in front of the class when she was explaining, telling in English, she would tell me in Spanish.*

Researcher: ¿Eso te gustó o no te gustó?

*Did you like that or you did not like it?*

Griselda: Eso sí me gustó.

*I did like that.*

Researcher: ¿Y la otra maestra hacía lo mismo?

*And the other teacher used to do the same?*

Griselda: Ms. Correa... o sea con Ms. Correa si me llevaba más porque ella sabe más español y me lo explicaba más bien. No Ms. Henríquez, ella no habla tanto español. "So" Ms. Correa, yo levantaba la mano y le decía que me explicara o si no cuando ella terminaba la clase y le explicaba a todos los niños, iba a donde mí y me lo explicaba en español al lado de mi "desk".  
*Ms. Correa... I mean with Ms. Correa I did get along better because she knows more Spanish and she would explain me better. Not Ms. Henriquez, she doesn't speak much Spanish. So, Ms. Correa, I would raise my hand and tell her to explain it to me or if not when she was done with the lesson and she had explained to all the kids, she would come to me and explained it to me in Spanish by my desk.*

Griselda perceived the teachers as caring because they are making sure that the student understands the lesson by using the student's native language. However, as Griselda indicated, this happened only sometimes.

When the researcher asked Griselda what she did not like, she was hesitant at first. Her grandmother was present and told her to feel free to talk. Griselda had already shared this information with her grandmother but did not feel comfortable sharing so Grandma intervened.

Grandma: Al comienzo del curso ella dice que como no hablaba inglés le hacían “bulling”.

*She says that at the beginning of the year, since she did not speak English, she was bullied.*

Researcher: ¿Quién te hacía “bulling”?

*Who bullied you?*

Griselda does not comment and exhibits a serious look.

Grandma: Que ella te lo explique.

*Have her tell you.*

Griselda's grandmother insisted on Griselda sharing her experience with acts of being bullied by peers. The data indicated that it had not only happened to Griselda but that it had also happened to her younger siblings. They had gone through a similar experience and as a consequence, they were having discipline issues. The researcher asked Griselda for further details and she clarified that it was only the first day. However, it did cause a strong, lasting emotional impression on Griselda.

Griselda: El primer día, nada más fue el primer día. El primer día que yo llegué

como la maestra Ms. Henríquez como es de mi salón hogar; ella es la maestra mía de mi salón hogar. Pues cuando yo llegué ella me hizo una pregunta, pero como yo no hablaba nada de inglés porque yo había llegado de Puerto Rico, no hablaba nada de inglés pues como yo no la supe contestar ni sabía lo que ella estaba diciendo pues ella se rio y también los compañeros de mi clase.

*The first day, it was only the first day. The first day that I arrived since the teacher Ms. Henriquez since she is from my homeroom; she is my teacher from my homeroom. So when I arrived she asked me a question and since I didn't speak any English because I had arrived from Puerto Rico, I could not speak any English so since I did not know how to reply nor I knew what she was saying thus she laughed and so did my classmates.*

This excerpt demonstrates how a classroom can become an unsafe learning environment for English language learners who are also newcomers. Given that it was not the first time that the family had gone thru this kind of experience, they now perceived that this U.S. school exhibited hostile settings where their children's emotional wellbeing was at risk on a daily basis. Moreover, their difficulties to access school personnel who can assist them and provide resolution to these and other matters have caused them frustration. The data also indicate that the family grew distant from school. The researcher tried to contact the teacher to verify this information before the end of this study but due to scheduling conflicts, this was not possible.

In an attempt to learn more about Griselda's perception about her school in Texas the researcher asked her to tell her how she liked her school in Puerto Rico better.

Researcher: A ver, ¿qué cosas te gustaban más en Puerto Rico?

*Let's see, what things did you like more in Puerto Rico?*

Griselda: Me gustaba más todo. Me gustaban las maestras, como me trataban porque hablaban español.

*I liked everything better. I liked the teachers, the way they used to treat me because they spoke Spanish.*

Researcher: Entonces, ¿qué hacían que acá las maestras no hacen?

*Then, what would they do that the teachers here don't do?*

Griselda: En Puerto Rico, yo lo entendía todo. Como me hablaban en español pues lo entendía todo y siempre pasaba mi grado con cuatro puntos de honor. Y en el cuadro de honor siempre salía, pero era porque era en español. Y me enseñaban mejor. Pero como aquí es en inglés, pues entonces es como más diferente porque te lo explican nada más en inglés. Mis maestras me lo explicaban nada más en inglés. Nada más algunas veces me lo explicaban en español, no siempre.

*In Puerto Rico, I would understand everything. Since they talked to me in Spanish I could understand everything and would pass to the next grade with honors. I was always on the honor roll but because it was in Spanish. And they taught me better. But since here is in English, then is like different because they explain everything in English only. My teachers would explain me only in English. Only sometimes they would explain to me in Spanish, Not always.*

Here again, the teachers are perceived as caring when they are ensuring that the



student understands the content and is able to excel academically.

Throughout the study, it became evident that Griselda was a very dedicated, responsible and enthusiastic student. These qualities could have potentially facilitated her adaptation process to a new school system; however, quickly she became overwhelmed and over time she and her family only grew frustrated. The positive attitude and hopes Griselda brought with her when she was finally able to join her mother and her siblings in Texas were gradually fading as they encountered the many challenges in navigating the school system. The perceptions the family has about schools in the United States have been heavily influenced by the reported data. The teachers' ideology, which is discussed in the next section, provides key insight about the priority placed on Griselda's education, which contrasted with the family's expectations and their previous schooling experiences.

### **Teachers' ideology**

The teachers' ideology also played an important role in this study since it influenced her teaching practices and approach to teaching Griselda, an ELL. The data show that Ms. Henriquez's teaching practices when Griselda joined her class. Although Griselda was only observed during language arts and social studies, her math and science teacher's ideology was reflected in the conversations with Griselda. During the first classroom visit, Ms. Henriquez clearly expressed that learning English was the focus for Griselda. She had Griselda and another Spanish-speaking student working together but she wanted them speaking English. This is reflected in the following excerpt from an informal conversation the researcher had with her during this visit. On this occasion, she was telling the researcher about the dynamics in the classroom.

Ms. Henriquez: I kind of keep an eye on them to make sure they are speaking

English and not let the other girl fall back into Spanish.

When Griselda first arrived at Ms. Henriquez classroom, she was the only student in the early stages of English language development. Griselda's peers at her table included another bilingual student and two native English speakers. By the time classroom observations in Griselda's homeroom began, Ms. Henriquez had received another Spanish-dominant speaking student from another classroom, who has been learning English longer. Ms. Henriquez idea was to accelerate Griselda's English language development by having the two students work together. However, she was concerned about the other student regressing whenever she interacted with Griselda.

After the fourth classroom observation, the researcher met with Ms. Henriquez and asked how Griselda was doing in class. Ms. Henriquez described Griselda's progress in terms of English language acquisition.

Ms. Henriquez: In general, I think she is doing excellent progress in all areas reading, speaking, writing and listening. We are trying to promote when she says something in Spanish we say it in English to her so she can hear it. You know, just for the hearing part of her growth.

While learning English was a priority for Griselda's teachers, both she and her mother were concerned with the learning of academic content as well. However, the data reflect an inclination towards using English to conduct content instruction merely to advance Griselda's English language acquisition, frequently without an emphasis placed on comprehension of the academic content. When asked about the scaffolding Griselda was receiving in class to learn the content, Ms. Henriquez indicated that she would only explain things to Griselda in Spanish once she was finished providing English language

instruction to the whole group. She believed that Griselda was able to understand instruction in English so she would only speak to Griselda in Spanish to make sure she understood and only if she perceived Griselda needed the information translated. Ms. Henriquez expressed that she did not find necessary to post any of the charts used in class in Spanish.

Ms. Henriquez: I put up a poster in English and I will talk to her about it in Spanish if we are at the small group but I don't put up double posters most of the time.

As previously indicated all the posters in the classroom were in English. After this interview, Ms. Henriquez added a Spanish word wall with high-frequency words equivalent to the English word wall in the classroom. The objective was to enable Griselda when she did not know a word in English. In spite of this visual strategy, there was still no systematic approach provided to Griselda that could support the learning of content instruction along with the associated academic vocabulary in English or Spanish. This was important since the teacher's instructional plan required that Griselda took all her assessments in Spanish. When the researcher asked Ms. Henriquez about the language resources and strategies Griselda could use in the classroom she explained that she could ask the English-speaking students seating nearby for assistance if she had questions or she could ask them for help when she wanted to communicate something in English.

Ms. Henriquez: She already has permission to use the strategy if "I don't know what to do"; "ask a partner that can communicate that to me."

This excerpt further illustrates that Ms. Henriquez priority was for Griselda to

quickly learn to speak English. During the final interview, Griselda confirmed this when she explained the researcher why Ms. Henriquez did not want her speaking Spanish.

Griselda: Bueno, Ms. Henríquez ella lo hacía porque ella quería... cuando ella no me dejaba que le hablara en español era porque ella quería que yo aprendiera inglés rápido porque la primera que semana que nos daban los papeles en español, teníamos que hacerle un cuento de lo que ella decía. Pues la primera semana me dejo que lo escribiera en español, pero ya después me dijo que todo lo escribiera en inglés.

*Well, Ms. Henriquez used to do it because she wanted... when she did not allow me to talk to her in Spanish was because she wanted me to learn English fast because the first week we got the papers in Spanish, we would have to write a story about what she said. Well, the first week she allowed me to write it in Spanish but after that, she told me to write everything in English.*

Researcher: Y eso fue antes de yo llegar o después de yo llegar [a observar]?  
*And that was before or after I came [to observe]?*

Griselda: Después de que tú te fuiste.  
*After you left.*

Researcher: ¿Después de que yo me fui te obligó a hacerlo todo en inglés otra vez?  
*After I left she made you do everything in English again?*

Griselda: Ah-ja. Pero como tú te fuiste y no llegaste más na[da], desde ahí ella me obligó a que le hablara en inglés, a que dijera todas las cosas en inglés, a que escribiera todo en inglés y todo.

*Mm-hmm. But since you left and did not come anymore, since then she made me talk to her in English, to tell her all things in English, to write everything in English and everything.*

Researcher: ¿Cómo tú te sientes cuando te obligan a hacer algo en inglés? ¿Tú piensas que puedes expresar? ¿Se te hace más difícil expresar tus ideas?  
*How do you feel when they make you do something in English? Do you think you can express yourself? Is it difficult to express your ideas?*

Griselda nods affirming.

Researcher: ¿Te causa frustración?  
*Does it frustrate you?*

Griselda: Algunas veces.  
*Sometimes.*

Griselda was aware that Ms. Henríquez wanted her to learn English quickly for her own good. Nevertheless, this situation caused Griselda frustration as it hindered her access to the curriculum. She further explained that she did not like having to ask questions only in English to the teachers and that this adversely affected her academic performance.

Researcher: Y entonces. ¿qué otras cosas no te gustaron?  
*So, what other things you did not like?*

Griselda: Primero, la primera semana, el primer mes o dos meses Ms. Henríquez y Ms. Correa me dejaban que yo le hablara en español a ellas, pero después cuando algunas veces me veían hablando inglés con mis amigas pues entonces ellas como al tercer mes ya no me dejaban que les hablara a ellas

en español. Me decía que si yo le iba a hacer una pregunta o querían que me ayudara o algo así, se lo tenía que decir en inglés y ellas me ayudaban en español.

*First, the first week, the first one or two months Ms. Henriquez and Ms. Correa allowed me to talk to them in Spanish but later when they saw me talking English with my friends then like by the third month they stop letting me talk to them in Spanish. They would tell me that if I was going to ask them a question or I wanted them to help me or something like that, I had to tell them in English and they would help me in Spanish.*

Researcher: ¿Con matemáticas tú piensas que te hubiera ayudado más si te hubiera dejado hablar en español?

*Do you think that it would have helped you more in math if they had allowed you to talk Spanish?*

Griselda: Sí.

*Yes.*

This excerpt further illustrates how Griselda's teachers thought that the social conversational English Griselda was acquiring with her classmates was enough to satisfy her learning needs. However, it was clear to Griselda that the use of Spanish would have helped her understand the content better as she would have been able to ask questions and clarify her doubts. Understanding the content was a priority for Griselda since she depended on this to pass the standardized assessments that she was going to take at the end of the school year. She knew that learning English was important so she put extra effort in learning with her friends but felt penalized for this. To be able to communicate

with her teachers, Griselda used her peers' help. This is reported in the following section.

### **Peers as Support System**

Griselda's classmates emerged as a support system for her during the course of this study. On repeated occasions, Griselda mentioned being able to communicate with the teachers and complete work thanks to her classmates' help. The following excerpts from the final interview illustrate how Griselda dealt with teachers not allowing her to speak Spanish.

Researcher: ¿Que hacías cuando no te dejaban hablar en español y tú no podías hablar en inglés?

*What did you do when you were not allowed to speak Spanish and you could not speak English?*

Griselda: Nada más lo que hacía era que le decía a mis amigas, como se decía... y ellas me lo decían y me lo escribían en un papel y yo me lo memorizaba y le decía a la maestra.

*What I used to do was just tell my friends, how to say... and they would tell me and write it for me in a paper and I would memorize it and tell the teacher.*

Asking her classmates for help allowed Griselda to use English for functional purposes. During the final interview, Griselda also pointed out how working side by side with another Spanish-speaking student helped her complete work in class because her classmate had more advanced proficiency. Being able to discuss the assigned tasks in Spanish allowed her to understand better what they needed to get done and feel more confident in the classroom.

Griselda: A mí también me ayudó porque éramos dos y no era como yo sola.  
*It also helped me that we were two and not like just me.*

Researcher: ¿Entonces te ayudaba que tuvieras una compañera con quien trabajar?  
*So it helped you to have a partner to work with?*

Griselda: Y también me ayudaba a mí porque todos los trabajos que Ms. Henríquez y Ms. Correa me daba yo los hacía con la nena que era igual que yo. Porque así podemos hablar las dos en español y podemos entender lo que vamos a hacer y todo.  
*And it also helped me because all the work that Ms. Henriquez and Ms. Correa assigned me I would do these with the girl that was like me. Because then we can both the talk in Spanish and understand what we are going to do and everything.*

This countered Ms. Henriquez perception. She believed that Griselda was helping the other student more because Griselda had more command of the concepts being taught. However, Griselda saw this partnership as a key tool in the classroom.

To close the final interview, the researcher asked Griselda what was most helpful during her first year of schooling in Central Texas.

Researcher: ¿Qué fue lo que te ayudó más en el tiempo que estuviste ahí en esa escuela?  
*What helped you the most while you were in that school?*

Griselda: Pues también me ayudó porque cuando hablaba con mis amigas, mis amigas también me lo hablaban en inglés y después me lo decían en español y después me decían como que significaba. Y cada vez me



hablaban en inglés, inglés, inglés y ahí fui como más aprendiendo. Las maestras me hablaban en inglés... so ahí como fui captando y entonces ahora se un poco inglés. No sé cómo perfecto pero...

*Well, also it helped me because when I talked to my friends, my friends also spoke it to me in English and then say it to me in Spanish like what it meant. And every time they would talk to me in English, English, English and like that, I learned more... The teachers spoke to me in English... so that way I began picking and then now I know some English. I don't know like perfect but...*

This excerpt demonstrates how the support Griselda received from her classmates through social interactions particularly in English served as critical factors that supported her adaptation process to schooling in Central Texas.

The data presented in this chapter illustrate the schooling experiences of a young Puerto Rican fifth-grade student and her family during her first year in Central Texas. These experiences included the challenges that she faced particularly in accessing the grade level curriculum, how she dealt with them, and the impact that these had on her, her family, and the classroom's teacher instructional practices. In the following chapter, the implications of these data will be discussed.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This case study explored the challenges that Griselda, a young Spanish-speaking recent newcomer from Puerto Rico, faced in her schooling journey as she adapted to a U.S. school. This study also explored how schooling and instructional practices impacted her academic success. These two areas of study guided this research. Another critical facet was examining Griselda's parent values and beliefs about her daughter's education.

In this chapter a discussion of the findings will be outlined. The data were generated by having conducted a case study that included interviews with Griselda, her mother, and her fifth-grade teacher. The reported findings presented in the previous chapter aimed to answer the research questions that guided this case study. In addition, a conclusion will be drawn from the themes generated from the data analysis of this qualitative case study. Subsequently, the limitations associated with this case study will be discussed along with the implications of the findings for future research and for teaching bilingual learners.

The data indicated that Griselda faced a series of challenges that limited her equal access to the grade level curriculum. The findings of this study bring to focus issues of historical practices of discrimination and exclusion. For over a century Puerto Ricans have migrated to different parts of the U.S. mainland. Although they are U.S. citizens, upon entering the school system, Puerto Rican students face challenges, including cultural, emotional, and linguistic, similar to the circumstance encountered by immigrant students. Along with other Spanish-speaking students, the number of Puerto Ricans in U.S. mainland continues to rise. At the same time, teachers and other school workers that include administrators and staff remain unprepared to meet the needs of students from

culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

### **Data Analysis to Address the First Research Question**

From the data associated with the first research question the challenges that young Spanish-speaking newcomer students encounter in their schooling journey as they adapt to schooling in U.S. mainland included the level of proficiency in English, lack of background knowledge, the teachers' ideology, and social distance between school and home.

**English language proficiency.** The data collected suggest that the major challenge Griselda faced upon entering school in Central Texas was her emergent English language proficiency. The data indicated that language was not only an impediment to communicate with others, but it also affected her comprehension of instruction and thereby this limited her access to the grade level curriculum. These consequences were not only associated with academic achievement, but also impacted the socio-emotional domain. This was observed both in the classroom and each time Griselda completed her assignments at home when she exhibited increased stress, anxiety, and frustration.

Although English as a second language is a required course in Puerto Rico and the influence of English in the Puerto Rican daily life is ever-present, the language variation of English in Texas added further challenges. Spanish-speaking students who migrate can face numerous challenges understanding and being understood in English due to differences in the rate, intonation, and accented speech. In addition, the majority of the students who receive English instruction at school in Puerto Rico do not learn the academic content vocabulary in English. The focus is on social, informal language. In this study, Griselda had received some English instruction in Puerto Rico. However, her

limited English proficiency did not allow her to have a smooth transition into school in Central Texas. Additionally, effective communication was also challenged despite a high concentration of Latino students, this due to language variation of the Spanish used in the region.

The data collected included two writing samples presented in the results demonstrating Griselda's early stages of learning and acquiring English. Data of the TELPAS, in contrast, show that the proficiency was at the intermediate level. This shows discrepancies between the actual and the reported data by her school. The field notes reflecting the multiple classroom observations indicated that there was no system in place to accommodate or advance Griselda's emerging English language proficiency. As a consequence, Griselda was unable to understand instructional tasks clearly, which impaired her ability to complete homework. She also felt frustrated, lost interest over time, and began excluding herself from classroom activities.

This 'sink or swim' or subtractive approach to language learning and instruction has historically proven to be ineffective in supporting the academic achievement of English language learners. According to Bartlett and García (2011) and Cummins (2000), these approaches deprive students from equal opportunities of learning and consequently achieving their full potential. Collier and Thomas (1989) proposed that it takes at a minimum five to ten years to acquire a second language for academic purposes, and this will depend on different factors such as the age of the student on arrival and previous schooling in the native language. While those with at least two years of instruction in the native language might take five to seven years, those with less than two years of instruction in the native language might require an additional two years. Collier (1995)

adds that students who participate in a proper bilingual program surpass their native speaking peers after four to seven years. Although emergent bilinguals who are immersed in English instruction in time learn English, they struggle to remain engaged learners when comprehension is abstract. The result is an inability to overcome the achievement gap that continues to increase when they are measured by the accomplishments of their native English-speaking peers. In addition, when bilingual learners feel excluded, it can have devastating effects on their self-esteem and their sense of identity (Brown, 2014).

The lack of English language proficiency by emergent bilinguals has led to overidentification of students as special education and increased drop-out rates. Sanchez et al. (2013) explain that language proficiency can be mistaken for cognitive abilities and academic achievement in bilingual students. Even when students are tested in their native language, given that they can be at any point in the bilingual continuum, the monolingual assessments typically used for screening will fail to give an accurate description of students' actual current knowledge. With respect to drop-out rates, English language learners in Texas is the group least expected to graduate from high school with a 71.5% compared to 88.8% overall for the class of 2014, according to the IDRA's Texas Public Schools Attrition Study 2014-15. The study also indicated that Hispanics had the highest attrition rate with 31% while the rate for white students was 14%.

The lack of differentiation to make instruction comprehensible as well to ensure Griselda's engagement in all learning experiences was a result of the teachers' ideology. The data showed that the teachers' ideology was based on common myths and misconceptions regarding second language development. The data also showed that once Griselda learned some conversational English the teacher thought that she was ready to

receive instruction and produce academic work in English with minimum support. In the classroom Griselda was able to understand casual conversations and some of the teachers' instructions when provided with visual and verbal cues; however, when forced to only speak English, she would reply with loose words and simple sentences. The data indicated that Griselda's early stage in English acquisition was not enough to learn and participate in the classroom activities. She was unable to ask questions or express her ideas completely in English.

Along with the five to seven years of differentiated instruction, language development and academic learning require appropriate scaffolding, teacher mediation, learning academic content in dynamic grouping arrangements to make all instruction comprehensible. Increasing the time on task in English only does not accelerate the language acquisition process. A subtractive approach to learning is detrimental since language is necessary to develop thinking skills (García, 2009). On the other hand, using the native language to support comprehension does not impede nor regress second language proficiency, as proposed by García and Wei (2014), since it positions language as a tool for learning. García and Wei also propose that this approach known as translanguaging allows students to continue learning the content while learning the second language. In addition, the flexibility of using the language or languages of preference to communicate gives emergent bilinguals the opportunity to clarify their doubts and communicate their ideas more fully, which is also fundamental to develop thinking skills. Moreover, Cummins (1979, 1982) reported that when bilingual learners can draw from prior knowledge, the first language will facilitate making pertinent connections to the content taught in English. Over time the bilingual will learn the

English vocabulary associated with the content being taught. Even when students are fluent in conversational English, it takes additional time for students to master the decontextualized aspects of language present in content areas instruction. In addition, learning academic content, completing academic work, and being able to demonstrate knowledge require the use of academic language which is more cognitively complex to learn and use than social language. The discipline-based vocabulary is specific, decontextualized, and not typically used outside of school. Therefore, assessing students' readiness to learn from an English-only curriculum solely based on oral language proficiency is misleading, and as the data indicated, detrimental to Griselda.

**Background knowledge.** The second major challenge Griselda faced during her first year of schooling in Central Texas was the lack of academic background knowledge. In her previous schooling, Griselda had not learned some of the concepts needed to readily acquire the new information contained in the fifth-grade curriculum in Texas. Consequently, she was unable to successfully complete work both in the classroom and at home. Griselda was highly aware of this and clearly expressed it during our meetings. However, she did not have access to the resources or necessary guidance to fill in these gaps efficiently or in a timely manner.

How well a student learns a new concept is highly dependent on what the student already knows about it. Chamot (2009) explains that:

All new information needs to be linked to students' relevant prior knowledge. If the link between what students already know on what day are to learn is made explicit, students will understand that they are building on knowledge frameworks through prior schooling and Life experiences, including those acquired through

another language and in a different cultural context (p. 28).

There are several factors that can cause a student to have a lack of prior knowledge upon entering a new school system. In this case, the data analysis indicated that there were differences between the curriculum of Texas and Puerto Rico. As illustrated by the example presented in the previous chapter some of the math topics in the Texas curriculum were introduced at a different time in Puerto Rico. In addition, the complexity of the students' objectives varied. Curriculum around the world can differ in order, emphasis, and students' expectations.

Additional factors that affected Griselda and typically contribute to newcomers' lack of background knowledge include cultural differences and socioeconomic status. Despite being a territory of the United States, differences between the Puerto Rican and U.S. mainland culture go beyond language. Puerto Rico's traditions, customs, and beliefs are influenced by its multiethnic heritage, which is mainly Afro-Spanish. Such influences are reflected in the curriculum and what students learn outside of school. Upon entering an unfamiliar school system, students like Griselda face difficulties when having to learn a new culture in order to understand instruction.

Griselda's family socioeconomic status further limited her background knowledge. Growing up in poverty gave her limited access to educational experiences outside of school. In addition, Griselda's mother, Mrs. Matos, lacked herself the essential knowledge to help her children with homework. Kaefer, Neuman, and Pinkham (2015) found in their study that children from low-SES backgrounds had significantly less prior knowledge than middle-SES children.

In spite of their lack of prior knowledge, students from CLD backgrounds like



Griselda bring with them an array of personal, cultural, and educational experiences that can help them understand and assimilate new knowledge. Castellano and Frazier (2011) indicate that even within the Hispanic population there can be significant differences between countries. Hence, it becomes critical for teachers to assess students' prior knowledge by researching their background, culture, and the educational system of their native country and using these as resources in the classroom.

**Teachers' ideology.** Another critical challenge to Griselda's academic achievement was her classroom teachers' ideology concerning the development of English and the importance of Griselda's prior knowledge. As mentioned previously, the teacher's ideology was based on common myths and misconceptions regarding second language development and this influenced some of the instructional decisions they made for Griselda. Bartolome (2007) indicates that ideology is often the cause of the issues that affect disadvantaged students. However, ideologies that jeopardize students' academic achievement are often unseen by educators and the education system. While Griselda was aware of the teachers' good intentions behind their decisions she also felt frustrated for not being able to learn the content due to these decisions. She began to exclude herself from the classroom activities and began to lose interest in school when classroom discussions were held in English.

A teacher's ideology can be rooted in numerous factors including policy, personal experiences, and pressure from society. In Texas, schools are test and data-driven where the emphasis is placed on test outcomes. Bilingual students are expected to perform according to the guidelines set for their monolingual counterparts. In addition, teachers are challenged by lack of time, tools, and strategies to meet the need of all their students.

Developing and carrying out appropriate plans to enable students like Griselda to learn the academic content of the grade level while learning English requires leaving aside any ideology that implies expecting them to become a monolingual English-speaking student.

**Social distance between school and home.** Another challenge indicated by the data was the social distance between school and home. There was a broken system of communication that was not allowing Griselda and her family to access the services provided by the school. Moreover, Griselda's mother had concerns regarding the education and wellbeing of her children, and she was unable to establish an effective way of communication with the teachers and other school personnel to address these concerns throughout the school year. Brown (2014) indicates that the greater the social distance or the degree to which individuals are excluded from the target culture will negatively impact the acculturation and consequently the second language acquisition process of such individuals.

### **Data Analysis to Address the Second Research Question**

To examine the second question pertaining the effective educational practices that support the academic success of young Spanish-speaking newcomers, the data analysis indicated that peer support was the most effective tool and resources in both the native and target language were helpful. However, each had specific limitation.

**Peer support.** Out of the educational practices observed during this case study, peer support emerged as the most effective educational practice in supporting Griselda during her first year of schooling in Central Texas. Griselda received support from her peers in two ways. First, she was paired with another Spanish-speaking student who was also in early stages of English language acquisition. Second, Griselda would seek help

from the other bilingual students in the classroom when she needed to say something in English.

**Bilingual peer buddies.** Ms. Henriquez original idea was to pair Griselda with another Spanish-dominant student to accelerate Griselda's English language development. However, she was concerned about the other student regressing in her use of English when they interacted with Griselda. Ms. Henriquez later thought that Griselda was helping the other student more because Griselda had more command of the academic concepts being taught. Conversely, based on the interviews data, being paired with another Spanish-speaking newcomer allowed Griselda to understand tasks better, complete work more efficiently, and feel more confident in the classroom. This corroborates that merely learning English was not supporting the academic success of either student. On the other hand, when placed together the two students were able to positively impact each other. The assumption that just because the bilingual buddy was more advanced in English than Griselda she could support Griselda's academic learning was inaccurate. In reality, the bilingual buddy had major gaps in her academic knowledge and needed assistance as well. While this interaction seemed to have evolved spontaneously, adding structure to this strategy would have potentially yielded even better outcomes. Reciprocal peer tutoring has proven to be an effective tool in the classroom even when students are at-risk (Menesses and Gresham, 2009). Thurston et al. (2009) added that training both team members is fundamental. When students are trained in their roles and responsibilities as well as on specific techniques they make better use of their time and make more valuable contributions.

***Peer tutoring in social settings.*** Griselda indicated that her bilingual peers

provided her support learning and practicing English. Anytime she needed to say something to the teachers she would ask her friends and they would translate it for her. Griselda would then write it down and memorize it. Griselda's friends also talked to her in English and then tell her the meaning of what they were saying in Spanish. In this way, the progressive use of more English enabled Griselda to acquire English in social settings, but for particular purposes that were associated with school. These informal interactions in the school yard were just as important to Griselda's English language development.

The systematic use of more advanced students in the classroom, similar to reciprocal peer tutoring, can benefit English language learners in multiple ways. Peer tutors can help newcomers keep up with classroom routines, clarify doubts about assigned work and content, and provide social-emotional support. Implementing this in the classroom would have allowed Griselda to participate more in the classroom activities and avoid feelings of isolation. Reiss (2012) explains that this interaction is beneficial to both the tutor and the tutee. While the tutee is getting additional support the tutor develops a stronger command of academic concepts.

**Bilingual resources.** Another strategy that helped Griselda, but with limited results was having text in both languages. However, this strategy was time-consuming and deviated Griselda from the main objective of the homework. Based on her early stages of English language development, this strategy was not efficient. Griselda had to use both resources to understand what the teacher said in English in class, while she was working at a frustrational level and on a complex task. She did this to complete math problems at home. This strategy would have been more helpful if it was implemented in a

more structured way or once Griselda was at more advanced stages of English language development.

### **Limitations**

This was a single case study. Consequently, the findings may not generalize to other newcomer students. The number of observations was limited. There were 10 classroom visits and four home visits. In addition, the student was observed exclusively during the language arts and social studies periods and only the teacher of these content areas provided input. Replicating this study in order to add validity to the results could be done including a larger sample, conducting additional observations over a longer period of time and during other content areas instruction, and receiving input from more content area teachers and school personnel.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have potential use for educators, school officials, and families as well. In this section, the implications associated with the data analysis of this case study are discussed.

Students and families are the agents of children's educational process. Students like Griselda who are aware of what they need to learn and how they learn it best need to actively participate in their education process and the decision making related to this. In addition, parents are the best resource educators have to learn about students' background, previous schooling and educational needs. Including them in the education process not only makes this a more efficient one but it also creates a sense of belonging.

The data revealed how the use of the native language and using flexible language practices can be a tool for learning academic content. A student's native language is a

tool that needs to be used in the classroom to ensure that students satisfy their learning needs and continue developing thinking skills while developing English language proficiency. The use of flexible language practices or translanguaging, that build on students' linguistic repertoire, validate students' cultural and linguistic identity, prepare students to academically succeed and compete in an increasingly multilingual world, and allows them to demonstrate their knowledge, perform at their actual level, and develop to their full potential. In addition, translanguaging promotes diversity and inclusion.

Moreover, the data revealed how critical it is to provide teachers with preparation on best practices that are founded on conscientization on the ideologies that negatively affect emergent bilinguals' language and academic development. Awareness of such ideologies that advocate for equitable opportunities to learn and plans to identify and correct the practices that are founded on subtractive approaches are critical and must be conducted at all levels of the education system. Equitable opportunities to learn from the curriculum must be reflected in teacher preparation programs and continuous professional development.

Griselda's schooling journey demonstrated her motivation to succeed as well as her strife, especially when she was administered exam. Assessments for emergent bilinguals should be a reflection of their actual knowledge and abilities, and they should reflect the language in which instruction was provided to ensure full benefit is provided to the learner. Attuned with the use of flexible language practices assessments should allow students to demonstrate their academic knowledge without language constraints as well as ensure that comprehension and rigor are at the core of all learning activities.

Teachers have a great amount of power in forging students' future. Teachers can

be agents of inclusion and change when their educational practice ensures that students and their families are integral parts of the school community by validating their cultural and linguistic identities, and acknowledging these as valuable contributions to the education process of all children. This will improve students' academic performance and their social-emotional development.

Lastly, learning is a social act, according to Vygotsky (1978). This means that in the classroom, the use of any form of cooperative learning, including peer tutoring activities, require a systematic implementation in order to obtain effective results that can be measured and analyzed for the language development and academic achievement of bilingual learners.

## **Conclusions**

This study provided evidence that emergent bilinguals require systematic support in the content areas and in the acquisition of English language. Learning English only and in an informal or indirect manner does not translate into academic success. Students and families need to be provided with tools of empowerment that will allow them to be in full command of their academic future. There are numerous resources that teachers can use to facilitate the language acquisition and the transition process of students into an unfamiliar school system. Making use of these resources, including the inclusion of the family in the education process will allow students to develop to their full potential. Finally, newcomer students bring with them an array of experiences that can be of cultural and linguistic enrichment to school communities. They must be valued for their contributions and encouraged to remain connected to their personal history and true identities. This way we will promote the wellbeing of these children and genuine diversity will be achieved.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Appendix A

Comparison of math standards: Using graphs in Grade 5 to solve problems

The Texas TEKS and the Puerto Rico Core Standards pertaining to understanding and applying the information presented through graphs were compared. While some of the student expectations are similar across each standard, the Texas TEKS require students to use graphs in more complex situations such as graphing a pattern when given an equation and solving two-step problems using data from a graph.

#### **Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills**

##### Grade 5

(1) Mathematical process standards. The student uses mathematical processes to acquire and demonstrate mathematical understanding. The student is expected to:

(D) communicate mathematical ideas, reasoning, and their implications using multiple representations, including symbols, diagrams, graphs, and language as appropriate;

(4) Algebraic reasoning. The student applies mathematical process standards to develop concepts of expressions and equations. The student is expected to:

(C) generate a numerical pattern when given a rule in the form  $y = ax$  or  $y = x + a$  and graph;

(D) recognize the difference between additive and multiplicative numerical patterns given in a table or graph;

(8) Geometry and measurement. The student applies mathematical process standards to identify locations on a coordinate plane. The student is expected to:



(A) describe the key attributes of the coordinate plane, including perpendicular number lines (axes) where the intersection (origin) of the two lines coincides with zero on each number line and the given point  $(0, 0)$ ; the  $x$ -coordinate, the first number in an ordered pair, indicates movement parallel to the  $x$ -axis starting at the origin; and the  $y$ -coordinate, the second number, indicates movement parallel to the  $y$ -axis starting at the origin;

(B) describe the process for graphing ordered pairs of numbers in the first quadrant of the coordinate plane; and

(C) graph in the first quadrant of the coordinate plane ordered pairs of numbers arising from mathematical and real-world problems, including those generated by number patterns or found in an input-output table.

(9) Data analysis. The student applies mathematical process standards to solve problems by collecting, organizing, displaying, and interpreting data. The student is expected to:

(A) represent categorical data with bar graphs or frequency tables and numerical data, including data sets of measurements in fractions or decimals, with dot plots or stem-and- leaf plots;

(B) represent discrete paired data on a scatterplot; and

(C) solve one- and two-step problems using data from a frequency table, dot plot, bar graph, stem-and-leaf plot, or scatterplot.

**Estándares de Contenido y Expectativas de Grado de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico  
Core Standards)**

**Grade 5**

**Algebra:** El estudiante es capaz de realizar y representar operaciones numéricas que

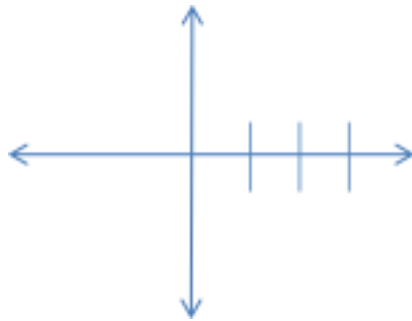
incluyen relaciones de cantidad, funciones, análisis de cambios, al emplear números, variables y signos para resolver problemas.

4.0 Representa, describe, analiza, amplía y generaliza patrones y relaciones al utilizar lenguaje matemático, variables y ecuaciones en el contexto de la solución de problemas.

5.A.4.2 Determina el patrón entre dos pares de coordenadas al aplicar la regla.

Ejemplo:

+3 +3 +3 (3,0) (6,0) (9,0)



5.A.4.3 Representa problemas de la vida diaria y problemas matemáticos al graficar puntos en el primer cuadrante del plano de coordenadas e interpreta los valores de los pares ordenados en el contexto dado.

**Análisis de datos y probabilidades:** El estudiante es capaz de aplicar diferentes métodos de recopilación, organización, interpretación y presentación de datos para describir y hacer inferencias, predicciones, llegar a conclusiones y tomar decisiones.

10.0 Representa e interpreta datos.

5. E.10.1 Representa, interpreta y compara la información de una gráfica (barra, pictórica, lineal, circular y diagrama de puntos), y tallo y hoja para contestar preguntas sobre una situación dada.

5.E.10.2 Hace un diagrama de puntos para mostrar un conjunto de datos de medidas en fracciones de unidad ( $1/2$ ,  $1/4$ ,  $1/8$ ).

5.E.10.3 Construye tablas de frecuencia, gráficas de barra y lineal, y tallo y hoja.

## Appendix B

Comparison of math standards: Using scatterplot graphs in Grade 5 to solve problems  
The Texas TEKS and the Puerto Rico Core Standards pertaining to understanding and applying the information presented through scatterplot graphs were compared. The comparison indicates that the different types of graphs are introduced at different grade levels. In Texas, scatterplot graphs are introduced in grade 5; however, in Puerto Rico, this type of graph is not introduced until grade 7.

### **Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills**

#### **Grade 5**

(9) Data analysis. The student applies mathematical process standards to solve problems by collecting, organizing, displaying, and interpreting data. The student is expected to:

(B) represent discrete paired data on a scatterplot; and

(C) solve one- and two-step problems using data from a frequency table, dot plot, bar graph, stem-and-leaf plot, or scatterplot.

### **Estándares de Contenido y Expectativas de Grado de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Core Standards)**

#### **Grade 7**

**Análisis de Datos y Probabilidades:** El estudiante es capaz de aplicar diferentes métodos de recopilación, organización, interpretación y presentación de datos para describir y hacer inferencias, predicciones, llegar a conclusiones y tomar decisiones.

14.0 Organiza y resume datos de dos variables, examina los datos de estos atributos y clasifica cada atributo como una variable categórica o numérica.

7.E.14.2 Identifica, describe y construye gráficas para representar datos de dos

variables (tablas para dos variables, diagramas de caja paralela, diagramas de árbol dobles para una variable categórica y una variable numérica; y diagramas de dispersión, con la línea de tendencia apropiada). Explica las ventajas de las diversas formas de representar datos.

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