

**TEACHING SPANISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN EDUCATIONAL
IMMERSION PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES
LA ENSEÑANZA DE ESPAÑOL COMO SEGUNDA LENGUA,
DENTRO DE PROGRAMAS DE INMERSIÓN EDUCATIVA, EN ESTADOS UNIDOS**

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Manuscript information:

Received: 31/05/24

Revised: 10/07/24

Accepted: 14/07/24

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Spanish, teaching, methodology,
projects, participation,
sociocultural learning

Spanish bilingual education programs are being implemented in the United States, but at a very slow pace. Political, social, and economic interests directly affect the implementation of these educational actions. The development of articles and research that expose the advantages and disadvantages of these educational processes for American students is the beginning to encourage educational administrations to promote them. In the globalized world in which we find ourselves, the use of languages is a very appropriate tool that opens doors for students in their future professional careers. But for them to have access to an adequate teaching of Spanish, it is necessary to create the necessary educational infrastructures and to have qualified professionals in the teaching of the language. The use of methodologies and didactic actions adapted to the real needs of the student, as well as to the different learning styles that we will encounter as teachers in the classroom, requires teachers to be in a constant process of training and adaptation. On the other hand, these programs must be given adequate social recognition, since we will be showing positive evidence in this article about the positive impact that learning Spanish as a second language has on students.

RESUMEN

Palabras clave:

español, enseñanza, metodología,
proyectos, participación,
aprendizaje sociocultural

Los programas de enseñanza bilingüe en español se están implementando en Estados Unidos, pero a una velocidad muy lenta. Los intereses políticos, sociales y económicos afectan directamente en la puesta en marcha de estas acciones educativas. El desarrollo de artículo y de investigaciones en los que se expongan las ventajas e inconvenientes que tienen estos procesos educativos en los alumnos americanos, es el inicio para animar a las administraciones educativas a la promoción de los mismos. En el mundo globalizado en el que nos encontramos, el manejo de idiomas es una herramienta muy adecuada que abre puertas a los alumnos en sus futuras carreras profesionales. Pero para que tengan a acceso a una

enseñanza adecuada del español es necesario que se creen las infraestructuras educativas necesarias y que también se cuente con profesionales cualificados en la impartición del idioma. El uso de metodologías y acciones didácticas adaptadas a las necesidades reales del alumno, así como a los diferentes estilos de aprendizaje que nos encontraremos como docentes en las aulas, exige que los docentes estén en constante proceso de formación y adaptación. Por otro lado, hay que dotar a estos programas de un reconocimiento social adecuado, ya que estaremos mostrando evidencias positivas en este artículo sobre el impacto positivo que tiene el aprendizaje del español como segundo idioma en el alumnado.

Introduction

The following article, entitled *Teaching Spanish as a Second Language in Educational Immersion Programs in the United States*, complements and implements previous research on the subject, which is more focused on the social, economic and political aspects of why these programs are not widely developed in a country with a high rate of Hispanic population. We can affirm that the current literature on the subject is mostly offering studies based on the reality of the educational situation of immersion programs in America, but it neglects the importance of promoting an educational, pedagogical and didactic component in the classroom, an action that has to be carried out by the teachers themselves in the classroom sessions.

Some entities such as the Cervantes Institute and several American universities such as Albany in the state of New York, California State University, Utah State University or the Franklin Institute, among others, are providing important quantitative and statistical research on the distribution and development of Spanish immersion teaching in different American states, and some of the researchers are also raising some of the problems such as the shortage of teachers, the problems in attracting enough students to these programs, etc.. Thanks to these investigations, and many others that are being carried out, interest is being awakened in the study of the situation of Spanish in the United States centered on the language and the aspects of Hispanic culture.

It is now necessary to take a further step forward, offering research related to the reality of the teaching methods that should be promoted in the classroom, in order to encourage the teaching of Spanish as a second language to be meaningful and appropriate to the needs. To this end, it is necessary to promote the writing of articles by professionals who are in direct contact with the teaching of Spanish in American classrooms, in which they share the strategies they are implementing, as in the case of this article. In addition to this need, the country is also facing the problem that, in many states, there is a great demand for Spanish teachers, as there is a significant shortage throughout the United States, but, above all, there is a lack of professionals who can teach Spanish with the appropriate methodological and didactic tools. Speaking and understanding Spanish is not the same as actually being able to teach Spanish. In relation to this issue, we find that many professionals who speak and understand Spanish, at a basic level, are in charge of Spanish as a second language classes, or even with classes within immersion programs. This, of course, is a serious detriment to the implementation of new programs and, in addition, it significantly harms the students, since it exposes them to a totally inappropriate language teaching-learning process, which can cause learning problems, frustration or rejection.

The teaching of Spanish in the United States faces several challenges. One of the main problems is the lack of adequate resources and support for language programs in public schools, as many programs lack funds to hire qualified Spanish teachers or to provide adequate learning materials. Another challenge is the lack of interest or motivation on the part of some students to learn Spanish, which may be due to a perception that English is more useful globally or a lack of personal connection to Spanish-speaking culture.

To address these problems, a comprehensive approach is needed that includes the allocation of more resources for language programs in schools, the development of inclusive curricula that reflect the diversity of the Spanish-speaking community in the United States, and the promotion of the importance and value of Spanish as a linguistic

and cultural resource in the country at the educational level, and therefore this article wants to contribute to this great challenge.

Method

Teaching Spanish as an opportunity for students in the U.S

Despite the fact that we are in a globalized world and that the knowledge of other languages can make a clear difference among students in terms of future job placement, we continue to encounter some reluctance to the implementation of these teachings in American schools. In contrast to other educational systems around the world, where a large number of students opt for the teaching of English and other languages, the United States continues to fall far short of these figures, despite the progress made in recent decades. On the other hand, we are surprised that in a country where there is a high rate of multiculturalism, the figures for the study and active use of other languages and the preservation of cultural heritage are scarce and are perceived as a threat and a possible problem of adaptation, rather than an opportunity.

In view of this panorama that we can read in multiple media and specialized studies, it is worth asking why language learning, especially Spanish, is so difficult to succeed in a country with a large multicultural population and a clear presence of Spanish speakers? We are going to refer to various studies and sources that bring us closer to this problem in order to subsequently endorse the need to continue implementing language immersion programs in this country as a means of preserving the culture and roots of its inhabitants. On the other hand, we want to give visibility to the importance of the inclusion of language teaching programs, since they provide a great opportunity for students in terms of possible future employment options.

A historical approach to the problem of Spanish language teaching

According to Lacomba (2023), the problem of teaching Spanish in the United States has a historical, political and social background, despite the fact that some states have a high number of Hispanic people who know the Spanish language through family tradition. According to data from the study conducted by the Cervantes Institute Observatory (2023), the four states with the highest Hispanic population are New Mexico with 50.1%, Texas with 40.2%, California with 40.2% and Arizona with 32.3%. Therefore, we would understand that the teaching of Spanish in the educational programs of these states would be remarkable, although the reality is not what we imagine, in a country with a population of 53 million Spanish speakers.

The situations of racism in the use of the language that have been documented throughout the 20th and 21st centuries indicate that the use of Spanish is associated with coming from a culture that is considered inferior or with problems in integrating into the American country and culture. These situations, as we have mentioned above, have been documented and are being disseminated, so that we can learn about the measures that were taken so that Spanish speakers would leave aside their language of origin and only focus on the use of English. For these reasons, in order to stop being singled out and favor the integration of the new generations into the new culture, many families instilled in their descendants the obligatory use of English and, therefore, the progressive abandonment of their language and culture of origin or only the strict oral use within the family nucleus took place.

We are therefore faced with a serious problem: the use of the language among the Hispanic population has decreased significantly, or in some cases has even disappeared completely, since on many occasions they suffer situations of racism, as the author Lacomba (2023) shows us in some of her research. In addition, another of the problems that must be faced in the implementation in numbers of the teaching of Spanish is the discredit associated with this language, as indicated by the Cervantes Institute itself, or the fact that it has ceased to be used due to the desire for Hispanics to integrate seamlessly into the United States. As long as this social and political perception does not change, it is difficult to implement new immersion programs that have strength and continuity over time.

Through this article we are giving visibility to the situation since, far from seeing the opportunity that learning a second language represents in future professional development, only 20% of the student body studies one of them in Devlin school stages (2018), which is a tiny number in a country with very high population rates. It is not perceived that there has to be a real need in learning because, at a social level, there is no belief in the great benefit that this study can bring in the future, despite the multiple studies of researchers who talk about how the human brain significantly improves its performance when exposed to learning and using other languages and the opportunities that learning other languages can bring in job development.

All these drawbacks that we are exposing in the article are associated with great difficulties in finding professionals who know all the necessary elements for an adequate teaching of Spanish. This problem aggravates, even more, if possible, the initiatives to implement immersion programs because, once all the social, political and economic obstacles have been overcome, it is very difficult to find educational professionals to work in the classrooms.

Problems in implementing Spanish bilingual programs in the United States

Faced with the problem of the scarcity of bilingual programs in the United States, there are several barriers that must be overcome in this process, in addition to those already mentioned in the previous section. On the one hand, according to the American Association of Teachers, one of the problems lies in the low level of funding invested in language programs in some states. This stems from the lack of popularity or past political and social situations regarding the promotion of bilingualism, which prevent the necessary support to take this step forward. On the other hand, once the necessary support is obtained to start the process, the second problem to be faced is the economic one. Funds must be found to be able to meet all the expenses derived from these programs, which are a little higher than the cost of regular schooling. Once everything is in place and the investment has been made, some school districts are faced with the problem of not having a high number of students joining after the effort involved in starting them. In addition to these, as we have already mentioned, finding professionals with the appropriate training and methodological tools is not an easy task, in addition to making an extra effort to include them in the planning of school schedules and organization.

The student: an active part in the process as a methodological strategy

The student body is the fundamental target of these teachings, so all initiatives, actions and strategies implemented must have as their main objective the progression of the Spanish language during the immersion program. We teachers are going to have to face some difficulties, so we have to be prepared, support each other within the

educational centers, count on the support of the directors and superiors and be in permanent contact with the families, whom we will also involve in the whole teaching-learning process.

To encourage students to feel competent and motivated in the face of the difficulty of learning a second language, it is important that teachers involve them as an active part of the teaching-learning process. But, in addition to this aspect, we have to look for teachers with a high knowledge of the language, but also with an adequate pedagogical and didactic training to transmit this knowledge to the students in an adequate way. This is one of the main problems facing the United States, as the lack of teachers is seriously jeopardizing the quality of education by having to hire staff who do not have the required qualifications to be able to cope with the work and management that a classroom requires. The problem is even more complex if it is possible to find people who can cope with an adequate teaching of Spanish.

In addition to the serious problem of the lack of teachers in schools, teachers must have adequate pedagogical and didactic training and competence. The selection of methods and strategies that are able to respond to the needs of all the students we have in the classroom will undoubtedly be a key and differentiating element when it comes to our students being receptive and active in order to use Spanish as a means of communication in the classroom.

Communicative competence and project-based learning in Spanish language learning

As mentioned above, the selection of appropriate didactic proposals is one of the keys to success. For this reason, we present in this research why project-based learning is approached in the teaching of Spanish as a second language, which allows the implementation of real communicative competence in class sessions.

With reference to the term project-based learning, it is difficult to provide a definition, since there is not much consensus among the scientific community, therefore, at present it is an aspect that is under development in second language learning. But reviewing the bibliography on the subject we find that the authors who have most influenced the development of this methodology are Kilpatrick (1918), and later Dewey (2004). In both cases, the need for the student to learn by doing is already indicated and reflected upon, since this aspect will favor meaningful learning, which will allow him/her to put into practice what has been acquired, with the student being the protagonist of the learning process and the teacher working from a more distant plane, guiding and supervising the process.

We are working in such a way that our students get involved in learning Spanish in an active way, starting from their own research, on diverse topics that connect with their interests, being guided at all times by the teacher. With this decision we are generating expectations and positive and intrinsic motivation in the students to work, in Spanish, on specific topics that will allow them a significant improvement in the language, in each and every one of the skills that are involved in this process. On the other hand, what we are building is a globalized language learning, so that we approach knowledge based on a wide variety of topics and of full utility to be used outside the classroom context.

We are, above all, encouraging students to actively use Spanish throughout the process of creating the project, since this aspect will be taken into account in the school's points system, so that at the end of the school year students can acquire different objects donated by families and people from the community, as a reward for their effort and the use of the language within the classroom sessions.

On the other hand, the development of these team projects is reinforcing the work focused on cooperation, since everyone will have to work to achieve a common goal, using Spanish as the vehicular communication element. In addition to all the benefits we have mentioned above, we are also creating an environment of positive interdependence in which the student takes advantage of the good working environment generated in the classroom to improve their self-esteem and feel strong in the face of the challenge of using a second language within the classroom sessions. They themselves are becoming aware that there is a great diversity within the classroom, but far from being a problem, it is a great advantage that we must take advantage of so that, as indicated by Zábrazcki (2013), they develop and acquire all the functions involved in language, so we are working from a global perspective. In addition to this, because sometimes the use of a second language can generate insecurities in the students, we are working on strengthening the sense of belonging to the group, as well as the individual's own confidence to face a new task. The student will feel at ease within the group, verifying that there are no problems when it comes to answering, participating, contributing... We are also encouraging that the relationship between the students and the teacher is adequate and that there is trust when it comes to establishing communication and asking for help in the event of difficulties.

Another of the advantages that we will be able to observe in our work in the classroom, applying the communicative methodology and project-based learning, is the integration and individualized support with students who present some type of attention to diversity. We are all collaborating to create this climate of confidence and security in the classroom, which, of course, will clearly benefit those students who have difficulties in learning a second language. By understanding and valuing that we are different, and that diversity is a positive aspect in our learning process, we are helping students who have some kind of need for help or more specific attention to feel comfortable and even ask for help from peers. All these advantages are connecting our teaching process with the need to educate for the society of the 21st century.

As the application of any methodology, we have to understand that there are a series of problems, which the teacher must face, as indicated by Zábrazcki (2013) and Tobón (2006). On the one hand, we need time, both in class sessions and in the didactic and annual programming of the subject, as well as time for the teacher to prepare the necessary materials and actions to be implemented in the classroom. Unfortunately, this point sometimes hinders the use of projects, since teachers have very limited time for this preparation process and, on the other hand, in some centers there are obstacles to innovation and to moving away from more traditional teaching, especially in certain countries. Another problem faced by the teacher is the management of classroom activity. On the one hand, we have to rely on a specific process of communication and expression within the classroom, but we also have to check how this process is going in order to give feedback to our students. For us to be able to make this point, there has to be a work to make students aware of the importance of getting the most out of the class sessions, but there also has to be a management of information gathering and processing it in an effective and relevant way. The teacher sometimes feels that the information he/she collects may not be sufficient to adopt the evaluation criteria required by the educational legislation. For this reason, we must be very clear about the elements required by educational legislation and select, using reflection and programming, the most appropriate evaluation instruments and tools: development of rubrics, development of portfolios, reflection and analysis activities, direct observation in the classroom.

The teaching of sociocultural contents and intercultural communicative competence

Another aspect that we find interesting to develop within the programming is the one linked to culture and society, since a language cannot be separated from the social and cultural characteristics where it is developed, besides the fact that this component will add an enrichment to the teaching-learning process. We cannot forget that learning a language is linked to the need to communicate and express oneself with other people, who are part of a society that has its own characteristics and is different from other societies in which Spanish is also spoken. Therefore, in this communication process, the social and cultural context will be of vital importance for interaction and the achievement of adequate intercultural and communicative competence, which is one of the basic phons to be implemented in the teaching of Spanish. Following the indications of the authors García and Rico (2019), it is essential to promote the work of communicative activities in which different registers are used, both formal and more informal. Use of activities in which different types of people are talked to, establishing the characteristics of the development of more formal and more informal communication, also taking into account the work with different social roles.

Speaking and understanding a language also implies knowledge of the cultural context in which it develops. This cultural component implies that students must understand that each cultural meaning is different and diverse and that we must work on them as part of the process of studying Spanish. If this cultural part is not brought into the classroom, it is highly probable that some cultural clashes or misunderstandings will occur, so it is vital to introduce activities that develop the intercultural component on a regular basis in the classroom sessions, as Urbina (2020) points out.

Working on project-based learning and communicative competence adapted to the sociocultural context is fundamental, since we will be approaching the culture that is rooted in Spanish, understanding the context in which it is developed. On the other hand, the use of real materials, even if they must be adapted to the learner's level of proficiency, is another fundamental aspect in order to establish a true approach to different cultural and social aspects of the language. In addition, the fact of being able to carry out exchanges with students from countries where Spanish is spoken, either by using e-mail, video conference connections or through video recordings, will undoubtedly enrich the intercultural learning process, since there will be a real cultural contact and an exchange of experiences, which will undoubtedly be enriching.

Other aspects that will help us to work on the sociocultural content is the use of literary fragments, movies, traditional music and dances, work on some aspects of customs and traditions of Spanish-speaking countries... All these contents allow students to investigate and share information about other cultural interests and concerns.

By working on sociocultural content in the Spanish classroom, you will not only be enriching your students' linguistic learning, but also promoting a deeper and more respectful understanding of diverse Spanish-speaking cultures. In addition, teachers are helping students understand the diversity within the Spanish-speaking world. This may include differences in language use, social customs and traditions. On the other hand, we are also working on intercultural awareness, that is, we are promoting respect for other cultures, recognizing and valuing the importance of diversity in the world.

Results

The work of promoting Spanish language immersion programs in the United States requires multiple aspects that are extrinsic to the teacher, but the teacher must actively collaborate in the promotion of Spanish language learning as a means to improve opportunities for students.

Spanish Immersion programs work properly if we actively involve the students, involving the families as an active and fundamental part and establishing an effective collaboration between the teachers who work in them. The learning rates of these students are incredible, as the learning they receive in different languages causes their brains to create new brain pathways and strategies different from those that occur when only one language is learned.

The work within the immersion programs, based on a communicative approach in which the student must face the task of understanding and expressing everything in an environment 100% in Spanish during half of the school day, generates a globalized learning of the language and a level in it that is not comparable to the study of a second language during isolated class sessions per week. In addition, the promotion of communicative competence will promote access to a rich culture, since Spanish is the second most spoken language in the world in terms of number of native speakers. Learning Spanish will give our students access to a wide range of literature, music, film and other forms of cultural expression. By learning a new language, we are offering students access to new job opportunities. In an increasingly globalized world, Spanish is an important asset in the labor market. We are also generating interpersonal connections, since being able to communicate in this language allows you to connect with a large number of people around the world in a direct, deep and meaningful way. We will be promoting the improvement of students' cognitive skills, as multiple studies have shown that learning a second language improves aspects such as memory, problem solving and multitasking ability. This is because the process of learning a new language exercises the brain in unique ways, creating new neural pathways.

The methodological approach based on project-based learning, which is also directly linked to the use of cooperative learning, generates an environment of security and comfort in the students that makes them feel safe in the process of teaching and learning Spanish. In addition to this fundamental aspect, the students understand that learning involves different rhythms, that each of us progresses in a different way and an atmosphere of positive interdependence is generated, in which we all work and help each other for a common goal; to learn Spanish and use this language actively in the class sessions.

To conclude this section dedicated to the results observed, we must point out the importance of the cultural component work, integrating it into classroom activities. In this way we are not only learning Spanish, but we are assimilating, in the background, the characteristics and cultural differences of the Spanish-speaking countries with respect to the American culture, which helps our students understand that there is diversity in the world and that we are very different, but we can understand each other by understanding the reason for the differences in each of the countries. We are offering students the opportunity to have enriching experiences, traveling to multiple countries where this language can be used, being able to immerse themselves in the local culture and have more authentic experiences. In addition, we are exposing our students, in an indirect way, to different ways of thinking and seeing the world. By interacting with people who have a

different culture and experiences, a deeper and more empathetic understanding of human diversity is developed.

Before concluding this section of results, we would like to emphasize that the teacher must have the ability to adopt different didactic, pedagogical and methodological resources in order to adapt the learning of Spanish to each and every one of the needs that students may present in the classroom. In addition to this, you must have adequate knowledge of the language and the process of teaching it, aspects that are complex in the United States due to the lack of professionals.

Discussion and conclusions

In this section of conclusions, we would like to point out the clear relationship between political, cultural, sociological and economic aspects with the promotion of Spanish language immersion programs in the United States, since we need to know this reality in order to understand the educational process in which we are immersed. On the other hand, thanks to this research, we are working to raise awareness of the importance for students to learn other languages for their personal and professional future, as it opens new doors to the performance of possible professions or various opportunities throughout their lives. Due to the situations that have been exposed in the article, it is necessary to implement scientific literature and research showing the advantages and opportunities that this type of educational actions provide to all students, especially to the American students who are the object of our study. With this support, it is more likely that it will be easier for school districts to obtain adequate support and funding to implement Spanish immersion programs in more states, school districts and schools.

Another aspect that we have explored in this article is the implementation of methodological and pedagogical actions that the teacher should implement in the classroom in order to improve the learning process of Spanish as a second language. All strategies must be centered on the fact that the student has to be, unavoidably, an active part of the process, since he/she is undoubtedly a guarantee of success in learning. On the other hand, the work of learning Spanish as a language within immersion programs, addressing the teacher's understanding of the diversity in the classroom, implies enabling access to training in Spanish as a second language from different and varied methodological and didactic strategies. This aspect is essential to achieve positive results in the learning process and for students to achieve different objectives during the years of language study. Following this line of work, we have advocated the use of an active methodology in which students are actively learning, at all times, being highly beneficial and showing multiple advantages in the learning of Spanish as a second language. The use of project-based learning, in which students are an active part of the search and an essential part of the learning process, is shown to be the most appropriate methodology for achieving encouraging results. In addition to this, the use of cooperative learning, through which students will work in teams with the objective of achieving a common goal, implements opportunities for success, improving students' self-confidence and self-esteem when facing the challenge of learning a second language. We will be working and reinforcing group interrelationships, positive interdependence among students and an adequate environment within the class group, aspects that will have a positive impact on the learning of Spanish.

On the other hand, we believe it is essential to work based on communication processes, working from the students' interests, encouraging research and learning

adapted to real issues of daily life and the approach of contents related to the culture of the language. All these contents will allow the student to understand that Spanish is more than the study of words, aspects of grammar or vocabulary, but that it is a learning of a globalized whole and it is something useful to be able to establish relationships with other people. Communication is a fundamental process in human beings and, taking into account this aspect, establishing communication strategies in the classroom, in all possible directions, brings encouraging results to the improvement of all the skills of Spanish as a second language. The communication process is complex and there are many skills involved such as comprehension, oral and written, and expression, oral and written. In many occasions these processes happen between people who have different levels of the language, but always exposed to real teachers, tools or materials, and the student feels the need to learn as a means of understanding with other people.

To complement the whole teaching-learning process of Spanish as a second language, we believe it is essential to work on cultural competence, since in this way the involvement of students and the possibility of globalized understanding will be much broader and more significant. To be able to understand and express oneself in a language cannot be separated from the cultural conditioning factors in which it is developed, therefore, in the work process in the class sessions we will have to include cultural activities that allow the development of this competence. Thanks to this work, we are also promoting understanding, respect and tolerance towards other cultures, understanding in a meaningful way that we are different and that, in this diversity, there is a real advantage and multiple opportunities.

The next research step that would be interesting to propose, once the difficulties of implementing Spanish immersion programs in the United States have been addressed, would be to study the data provided by standardized tests in the different districts where these study possibilities are offered. Thanks to the interpretation of these data, we will be able to see how the students' level is progressing in the four basic skills of Spanish: writing, reading, speaking and listening. In this way we will be able to draw conclusions showing the real advantages and the pace of learning this second language. This second study would undoubtedly complete this first article on the problem, since it would provide an analysis of the real results of programs in the United States.

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