

PROJECT SUMMARY

1. THE IDEA

“Moving through countries and continents people often leave their families and belongings, but the things they always take for a lifelong journey are their languages and culture. As a consequence, we observe a vast increase in cultural and linguistic diversity within all nations and the expansion of bilingualism and multilingualism all over the world” (Vorobyeva, in press).

Trinidad and Tobago is no different. In this subproject we aim to investigate Spanish-English bilingual families in the country. We want to learn about Spanish as a heritage language in Trinidad and Tobago and especially:

- ✓ to what extent these children are bilingual,
- ✓ what is their use and command of their heritage language (Spanish),
- ✓ whether their vocabulary, grammar and pragmatic competence is limited to informal environments or whether they will be able to fully function in a formal environment in the future.

2. THE HOW

- ✓ A first e-questionnaire was distributed on social media groups and via emails to a total of 120 families living in Trinidad with small children where at least one of the caregivers was Spanish-speaking.
- ✓ In the second phase of the project 5 families were randomly chosen (a total of 18 interviews conducted with 5 mothers and 13 children).

3. THE RESULTS:

3.1. Their beliefs:

- ✓ The parents stated that they give great importance to their heritage language and culture.
- ✓ The children stated that, although they value the Spanish language, English is more important and it has a higher status. One of the main reasons given is that it is the formal language used at school.

3.2. Their competence in Spanish:

When children were asked to tell a story in Spanish, using cues from visual aids, it was evident that their Spanish language grammar revealed processes of simplification. We found:

- ✓ non-native phonological features,
- ✓ reduced lexicon (their knowledge of vocabulary is limited to the field of the house and childhood),

- ✓ erosion of inflexional morphology (errors in gender, number agreement or case marking),
- ✓ overuse of overt subjects in contexts where null subjects would be pragmatically more appropriate, and
- ✓ problems with complex structures like relative clauses and with the use of pronominal reference.

CONCLUSION: The children interviewed are not native or near native proficient. English has become their primary language and Spanish is now secondary to English. Spanish is used only in limited contexts.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS:

We recommend the implementation of a Saturday morning public Spanish school for heritage learners, in which Spanish is the language of instruction. There, children can learn different subjects such as History, Mathematics and Literature.

Having access to formal education in Spanish in addition to their current education in English is crucial. It is the way to prevent the deterioration of their language abilities in their heritage language. This would also allow a generation of Trinidadian children to be fully functional in both English and Spanish.