The role of the target language in social immersion of haitian immigrants in Chile and educators’ beliefs about its teaching and learning*

El rol de la lengua meta en la inmersión social de los inmigrantes haitianos en Chile y las creencias de los educadores acerca de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje

Gloria Toledo Vega**, Karina Cerda-Oñate*** y Andrea Lizasoain****

ABSTRACT

Chile has received massive waves of immigration in a relatively short time, notably from Haiti. These migratory movements have highlighted the lack of preparation of Chilean public schools to incorporate young people from Haiti, or other non-Spanish-speaking students, into the educational system. The creation of public policies to address the teaching of Spanish as an additional language in school would help these adolescents achieve a higher level of academic and socio-cultural integration; however, there is resistance among teachers, administrators, and education scholars on this point. In this article, we aim to show how these resistances stem from a lack of consideration regarding what the teaching and learning of an additional language truly implies.

Keywords: immigrant students, public school, socio-cultural immersion, Spanish as an additional language.

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** Chilena. Doctora en Filología. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Santiago, Chile. Correo: gtoledo@uc.cl

*** Chilena. Doctora en Lingüística. Universidad de Talca. Linares, Chile. Correo: karina.cerda@utalca.cl

**** Chilena. Doctora en Lingüística. Universidad Austral de Chile. Valdivia, Chile. Correo: andrea.lizasoain@uach.cl
RESUMEN

Chile ha recibido olas masivas de migrantes en un período relativamente corto; específicamente, de migrantes haitianos. Estos movimientos migrantes han relevado la falta de preparación de las escuelas públicas chilenas en cuanto a incorporar a las personas jóvenes haitianas u otros estudiantes no hispanohablantes en el sistema escolar. La creación de políticas públicas para la enseñanza del español como lengua adicional en la escuela podría ayudar a estos adolescentes a lograr mayores logros académicos e integración sociocultural. Sin embargo, se observa resistencia entre los profesores, administradores y académicos del área de educación respecto de la enseñanza del español como lengua adicional. En esta nota, se busca evidenciar cómo esta resistencia deriva del desconocimiento acerca de lo que realmente significa la enseñanza-aprendizaje de una lengua adicional.
Introduction

In 2019, we started working on a project funded by the Chilean Agency of Research and Development (ANID) to explore the linguistic situation of Haitian immigrant students in Chilean schools. Our study was motivated by the exponential growth of Haitian immigration to Chile since 2016 (Departamento de Extranjería y Migración e Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2019), which has led to an increased number of Haitian children and adolescents entering the Chilean public school system. This situation has posed many challenges to the Chilean public school system, which is confronting for the first time a large influx of students who do not speak Spanish as a first language. Specifically, key issues include the lack of resources available at individual schools, insufficient and erratic immigration regulations, and the absence of public education policies regarding Spanish as an additional language.

When Haitian immigrants arrive in Chile, they enrol in schools close to their homes, which tend to be concentrated in socially vulnerable municipalities of Metropolitan Santiago. In the Chilean public school system, schools receive funding from their respective municipalities, so if a school is located in an impoverished area, it will obtain less funding than a comparable school in a wealthier neighbourhood. As a result, in most cases, Haitian students attend Chilean public schools with few economic resources owing to their families’ disadvantaged socioeconomic status, arriving as immigrants with scant material resources or formal education.

Non-Spanish-speaking immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in contemporary Chile, and immigration laws that might address this issue are outdated. This lack of institutional experience impacts the Chilean national curriculum as well, which does not consider speakers of languages other than Spanish. Furthermore, student placement is based on age, without considering their knowledge of disciplinary contents or degree of literacy; a portion of Haitian immigrant students do not know how to read or write at secondary levels.

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1 Due to the failure of this model in terms of segregation and quality of education, in 2017 a new law was passed to transition from a district-centered model to a state-centered educational model; this change has yet to be implemented nationwide (Ministerio de Educación de Chile [Mineduc], 2021).
The lack of experience with current migratory phenomena, an immigration law dating from the 1980s, and the absence of public policies about Spanish as an additional language\textsuperscript{2} (SAL) to facilitate the immersion of non-Spanish-speaking immigrant children and adolescents in Chilean schools have had a highly negative impact on the academic and social immersion of the Haitian immigrant community. In addition, recurring student and teacher strikes, the 2019 mass protests in Chile, and the Covid-19 pandemic have severely compounded this problem. Indeed, as a result of the latter events, Chile’s most socioeconomically vulnerable student population —of which Haitian students constitute a significant proportion— have essentially been without schooling for the last 2.5 years (school staff in Metropolitan and Los Ríos regions of Chile, personal communication, June 30, 2021). The pandemic, meanwhile, has added a formidable digital gap to the linguistic, social, and economic disparities that Haitian students already faced. These factors have resulted in poor school performance, elevated school desertion (school staff in Metropolitan and Los Ríos regions of Chile, personal communication, June 30, 2021), and the persistence of a vicious circle of social marginalisation experienced by this immigrant community.

In this scenario, in which political authorities, educational establishments, educators, teacher trainers, and linguists all play an important role, we consider it an urgent matter to review the conditions causing the segregation of Haitian children and adolescents, whose prospects for immersion in Chilean society appear increasingly adverse given the country’s current educational reality.

**Language learning, socio-cultural immersion, and language knowledge**

As scholars, teachers, and researchers in second-language acquisition, we hold that the primary tool for social immersion is language. In this vein, our study aimed to analyse Haitian high school students’ written interlanguage in Spanish and, at the same time, to learn how teachers

\textsuperscript{2} In this piece, we will use the terms additional language (AL), target language (TL), and second language (SL). We will use the term AL to highlight the Spanish learning-teaching of Spanish among Haitian students in school, since they speak Haitian Creole as an L1, French as an L2 (in many cases), and Spanish as an L3. In this way, we want to highlight the multilingual nature of these students. We will refer to TL and SL interchangeably.
evaluate these students. Since writing allows for greater planning, we chose to analyse written texts; through their analysis, we could access a broader range of the linguistic resources available to these students. At the same time, writing is linked to academic language (Cummins, 1984), contributing to academic advancement and better labour and social immersion opportunities once students have finished school (Bernstein, 1999; Christie, 1997). Our focus on adolescents in particular is largely spurred by the urgency of socio-labour immersion. Indeed, after four years of compulsory secondary education, the next stage for many will be to join the workforce, while others could access higher education.

In addition to these factors, we decided to explore the dimension of teachers’ evaluation of Haitian students because in the course of our work we have repeatedly noted teachers’ difficulties when evaluating these students. This is a pressing concern since a teacher who knows how to assess their AL learners can effectively contribute to the development of the target language. Likewise, a teacher who is not properly trained will be less effective in contributing to the development of learners’ L2.

Considering our purpose, the participants, and the context of this study, the theoretical guidelines for the project include the following: socio-cultural immersion; pedagogical knowledge of the language; and error analysis as a method of tracking L2 interlanguage development.

The relationship between second-language development and sociocultural immersion considers the fact that languages play a crucial role for social actors who come into contact with and wish to obtain access to material and symbolic resources (Baynham, 2011; Heller, 2003), including the resources available in school contexts (Thorne & Tasker, 2011, p. 487). In this context, we adhere to Moreno-Fernández (2009), whose model includes four stages of development in an L2 that lead new ethnic or social groups to share values and establish relationships of interdependence with the host culture.

The pedagogical knowledge of a language (PKL) is the knowledge of the disciplinary language in the particular context of a subject (Aalto & Tarnanen, 2015; Bunch, 2013). This expertise makes it possible to evaluate writing in an L2 by providing support to L2 users in multilingual clas-
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rooms (Aalto & Tarnanen, 2015; Bunch, 2013; Cumming, 1986; Mora, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Shulman, 1986; Weigle, 1999). A broader perspective on pedagogical knowledge also includes an understanding of the processes that occur during second-language acquisition, the conception of the language as a resource for learning to write and writing to learn (Hirvela et al., 2016), and the ability to monitor learners’ use of language (García et al., 2006; Gibbons, 2015). One way to carry out the latter is through error analysis (EA), which allows exploring learners’ interlanguage to help them develop it further. In EA, errors are identified in context, then classified and described, and, finally, explained in the form of learners’ psycholinguistic strategies to learn a new language. The sources of each error are determined, and their severity is evaluated to look for a possible solution (Corder, 1967; Fernández López, 1995). In this context, Torijano (2006) posits that “error analysis should be characterised by being able to provide a complete vision of the kind of difficulties that the student has encountered or is encountering at a given moment” (p. 157).

These three constructs—socio-cultural immersion through L2 development, pedagogical knowledge of the language, and error analysis—should be part of the education of teachers working in multilingual classrooms in order to better prepare them to teach in such contexts, which are unique in the complex challenges they present. However, these areas are not included in most Chilean initial teacher education programs and do not appear to be of interest to Chilean educational authorities.

Beliefs about the process of teaching and learning an L2 in Chile

During this study, we observed varying notions regarding what the teaching and learning of Spanish entails for Haitian adolescents in a school context (Toledo Vega, Lizasoain & Cerda-Oñate, 2022). The opinions of school authorities (school directors and financial supporters), in-service teachers, teacher educators, and linguistics scholars were recorded during open interviews. We sought to inquire about the perceptions of the different actors in the school community in terms of the incorporation of Haitian students in Chilean schools. In many cases, we noted that the various viewpoints tended to maintain the status quo regarding the precarious situation in which non-Spanish-speaking
school children and youth find themselves in public schools. We observed that teachers, especially those of the Spanish language subject, were often the ones with a more comprehensive understanding of the issue since they have been entrusted with the task of monitoring the development of non-Spanish-speaking students; the widespread assumption is that it should be their job to help Haitian students learn Spanish. However, these teachers resent the lack of training that they have received in the teaching and learning of Spanish as an L2 and the poor institutional conditions for carrying out this task. Teachers in public schools must work with numerous courses of upwards of 45 adolescents in classrooms that usually have no more than a board and several rows of seats. Teachers of other subjects, meanwhile, appear to have little involvement with the problem and resent above all their lack of an effective means to evaluate the students in question. These young people are left behind amidst the absence of preparation, conditions, or tools to support non-Spanish-speaking pupils. In this context, some of these students develop behavioural problems that teachers and authorities often attribute to cultural characteristics or cognitive issues. As a result, additional negative labels are attached to these students: they come from a foreign, underdeveloped country; they speak another language and belong to an unfamiliar ethnic group; they perform poorly at school and have behavioural problems.

We have witnessed some school authorities, teacher educators, and even linguistics colleagues expressing erroneous beliefs regarding the nature of teaching Spanish to non-Spanish-speaking schoolchildren in Chile. Bahamondes et al. (2021) refers to several of these beliefs in a Chilean Ministry of Education guide. In carrying out this study, we have come across three widespread misconceptions about the learning of Spanish as a second language:

- the idea that children are like sponges that “absorb” Spanish very quickly and that, therefore, living in Chile should be enough for them to learn Spanish;
- the belief that teaching an L2 resembles teaching the mother tongue, thus most native speakers are innately capable of teaching their language;
- the perception that the behavioural and cognitive problems these students face are an intrinsic characteristic rather than a result of
their adverse contexts, and they must be handled by experts in cognitive or behavioural disorders.

Ignoring the impact of the linguistic gap, the school authorities we interviewed declared that the teaching and learning of Spanish is not a priority. For them, the most urgent issues are immigrant students’ highly vulnerable socioeconomic situations, problems with integration into the school community, low self-esteem, and lack of parent or guardian involvement in school-related issues. However, an analysis of these problems clearly points the importance of the L2 in overcoming them: increased knowledge of and fluency in the target language can lead to greater participation in social life and improving school performance, which in turn impacts self-esteem and, eventually, the socioeconomic conditions of the group in question. The low participation of parents, meanwhile, is often linked to their own low proficiency in Spanish.

Teacher educators, meanwhile, commented that the best school environment for Haitian students would be bilingual classes (Spanish and Haitian Creole) and the utilization of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology. Though based on the up-to-date research and successful experiences of teaching in multilingual contexts, these opinions nevertheless clash with the reality of Chilean public schools. In Chile, bilingual education is offered almost exclusively in paid private schools with teachers trained in a specific L2 (English, German, French, and Italian are the most common examples), and it does not yet exist in the case of Haitian Creole. Indeed, even the acquisition of English as an L2 is deficient in the Chilean school system; after seven years of compulsory English lessons, approximately 80% of Chileans do not speak the language at a basic level (Lizasoain, 2018). Besides, there is a historical debt regarding the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in Chile (such as Mapudungun or Kunza), which should likely be prioritised over the teaching of any additional languages. From this point of view, the monoglossic tradition of Chilean public schools is largely tied to limitations of an economic nature rather than with ideologies associated with a nation-state (Park & Wee, 2017).

In academia, some linguistics colleagues have expressed the view that a paternalistic paradigm underlies the teaching of Spanish as a second language, viewing such efforts in a negative light. Such an idea is at odds with reality, however, and it does not consider the teaching
and learning of a language as a right that offers children and young people the possibility of social, academic, and labour immersion and advancement. Learning the target language does not have to detract from the use and maintenance of the mother tongue, which is the idea that seems to underlie the opinions of the interviewees in question. At the present time, none of the schools we have visited forbid speaking Haitian Creole or otherwise encourage the loss of this language among Haitian students. On the contrary, many teachers use their resources to learn Haitian Creole and better understand their students.

Considering the issues and challenges enumerated above, it is surprising that some figures in relevant academic fields would promote conceptions of language learning that question the possibility of developing an immigrant’s primary vehicle of communication. Indeed, as a result of the acquisition of the host culture’s language, these students will be more able to promote the knowledge and appreciation of their native culture. Academic discourse regarding the teaching of Spanish as an additional language in Chile seems to be coloured by the latest trends in the educational field, which come largely from Anglo-Saxon literature and studies carried out in countries with very different realities from that in question. Among other issues, this is a consequence of the primacy of English over other languages in promoting scholarly literature and should be the subject of further and deeper reflection.

Evaluation ‘for’ learning and not ‘of’ learning
Regarding the evaluation of Haitian students’ language learning, the objective of our work was to examine the way Spanish language teachers assess the written texts of their Haitian secondary students based on linguistic criteria and assessment principles. We found that sound principles of assessment (Brown, 2004) are not met, which shows the need to prepare language teachers more effectively to offer their students productive feedback that contributes to interlanguage development and better performance in school subjects (Lizasoain & Toledo Vega, 2020; Toledo Vega, Lizasoain, & Cerda-Oñate, in press). Assessment was found to be invalid because teachers assessed what they had yet not taught to Haitian students; in this scenario, assessment is not reliable because teachers cannot know whether students have learned the contents of the discipline since they cannot build meaning
in the new code. This assessment is also not authentic, because it has not been developed in a language that is familiar to speakers who are not proficient in Spanish. In sum, assessment is applied in this context in order to meet the school system’s administrative requirements (assessment of learning) rather than to foster students’ learning of any kind of knowledge (assessment for learning).

Our analyses, then, point to significant deficiencies in the use of Spanish on the part of students who need greater evaluative focus and subsequent feedback and attention in the classroom (Lizasoain & Toledo Vega, 2020; Toledo Vega, Lizasoain, & Cerda-Oñate, in press). So far, concerning initial teacher training, the Chilean Ministry of Education has not done enough regarding implementing linguistic policies to help the students in question improve their poor general academic performance (Toledo Vega, Cerda-Oñate, Lizasoain, 2022). In terms of measures of lesser impact, the Ministry has provided a guide for teachers who teach in multilingual classrooms (Bahamondes et al., 2021). This guide includes helpful criteria and guidelines, but paradoxically it does not address the basic economic, political, or professional support needed to implement the suggestions that are offered.

Situated literature to understand local phenomena
Related to the examination of perspectives on promoting multicultural classrooms, we also conducted a selective and critical literature review about the development of multicultural classrooms in the school context. Based on available information on the Chilean context, current international perspectives, the role of writing in the development of Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) competence, and the Chilean national curriculum, we concluded that it is essential to contextualise academic trends (generally Anglo-Saxon) within local contexts. We have also concluded that SFL teaching is critical for non-Spanish-speaking students if multiculturality and translingualism are to be promoted in public educational establishments (Toledo Vega, Quilodrán, Olivares, & Silva, 2020). Translingualism, from the point of view of “mobility in relation to trajectories of human emergence and ideological becoming” (Blackedge & Creese, 2017, p. 31), appears to be understood by many Chilean scholars and teachers as a practice that implies not teaching Spanish to avoid imposing this language over Haitian Creole. Never-
theless, translingualism is not incompatible with the use, teaching, learning, or promotion of any of the multilingual individual’s languages. On the contrary, the acquisition of a new language promotes further cognitive development in a multilingual person (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Wang, 2015).

Learning the target language to teach the mother culture: translanguaging

About the interlanguage of Haitian students, we investigated written samples of 36 Haitian students in Santiago, Chile, through error analysis (Toledo Vega, Lizasoain, & Mena, 2021) This analysis showed that in the three levels that we studied (lexical, grammatical, and textual), there are aspects of Spanish which are already internalised in learners’ interlanguage. One of the main features of this interlanguage reveals elements of oral language in writing. This incongruency of register is worrying, as it could translate to a limitation in access to a broader socio-cultural context for both Haitian Creole- and Spanish-speaking students.

Non literate target language learners

Finally, in the direct cases regarding non-literate Haitian students, we have witnessed that they attend public secondary education in Chile under the assumption that they know how to read and write simply because of their age. As a result, these individuals tend to abandon school as they are in effect wasting their time there. Our objective in this specific study was to present a descriptive bibliographic review that attends to cognitive, social, linguistic, and pedagogical aspects involved in acquiring an additional language by non-literate adolescents. We wanted to demonstrate the need to be attentive to late literacy and the formal learning of Spanish as an additional language in Chilean schools in adolescents. With the aforementioned in mind, we offered suggestions such as early detection of illiterate students, fostering motivation, and working with emotions in communication (Toledo Vega, Cerda-Oñate, & Quilodrán, in press).

Conclusions

Our contribution to the forum aims to reflect on the importance of supporting immigrant students’ acquisition of the target language, espe-
cially immigrant adolescents in Chilean schools. For the above, it is necessary to discard beliefs regarding the negative impact of teaching the target language to immigrant students and to understand that the literature on this subject must be adapted to the local context and culture. This will enable educators to meet the current need for multilingual schools in Chile and other countries with similar realities, which are quite different from most developed countries that receive mass immigration. Moreover, acknowledging this reality will allow teachers to get to know their non-Spanish speaking students better to provide them with meaningful feedback and evaluate them properly, including those students who are non-literate. All of the above could favour translingualism as a healthy practice without leaving these children aside and ensuring their universal right to receive quality education.

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