

Shifting Tongues, Shaping Selves: Language Loss and Translanguaging in North America English Spanish Classrooms

M.A. Maria Alejandra Mareco

Wake County Public School System, United States

ABSTRACT

This paper revisits a question that keeps returning in my daily work with children: what happens to a young learner's first language when school routines insist that English is the only acceptable medium? The study grows out of long-term classroom observations at Wilburn Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina, a school where Spanish, English, and several other languages mix naturally in hallways and playground conversations, even when official instruction does not fully acknowledge that diversity.

Drawing on sociolinguistic and neurolinguistic research, I examine how Spanish-speaking students gradually narrow the functional space of their home language. The evidence appears in small, almost unremarkable moments: pauses when looking for a Spanish word they once used easily, simplified grammar in writing tasks, or the switch to English whenever a task feels "serious." These moments, when read together, point toward a slow but steady process of language loss that also touches identity and confidence. Many students begin to associate Spanish with family warmth and English with academic legitimacy, a split that shapes how they see themselves as learners.

Yet the same classrooms also offer counterexamples, brief, powerful translanguaging episodes where students move across languages to explain an idea, help a classmate, or connect a concept to something heard at home. These moments reveal what becomes possible when students are not asked to choose one linguistic world over another.

I argue that schools need pedagogical models that make such practices intentional rather than occasional. A translanguaging-first approach can interrupt subtractive patterns and open a path toward additive, identity-affirming bilingual learning.

Keywords: Additive bilingualism, Identity, Language loss, Subtractive bilingualism, Translanguaging